Self-presentation and Deception in Online Dating

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Abstract

Computer-mediated social interaction differs in important ways from face-to-face communication; online dating is no exception. Though users sometimes allege that deception is pervasive in these systems, I argue here that although some willful deception occurs, much of what appears to be deception actually results from effects of the media and peculiarities of the process of self-presentation online.

Introduction

Online dating systems have shed their stigma as the refuge of the awkward to claim an important role in the social lives of millions of users around the world. These systems allow users to post personal profiles, search the profiles of others for potential dates, and contact these people through a private messaging system. All of these processes — self-presentation, interpersonal perception, and communication — take place through computer-mediated channels whose particular constraints and affordances make finding a date online substantially different from meeting a potential romantic partner in the offline world. I contend in this paper that what appears to be deceptive behavior in online dating might in fact result from social misperceptions that occur when these peculiarities of medium interact with our

assessment mechanisms and expectations, honed in the offline world, for potential romantic partners.

The presentation of self in mediated life

In his classic work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1957) describes self-presentation as a kind of performance. He distinguishes between the signals we "give" intentionally, as part of the deliberate performance, and those we "give off" unintentionally. Building on these notions and the language of signaling from biology, Donath (1999, forthcoming) portrays the online performance of self as a series of signals we give in order to convey a particular impression to others. Everything from the user name (or "handle") to the use of language or the choice of a photograph can signal certain qualities in online interaction; some signals "give" intended meaning while simultaneously "giving off" further unintended information.

In a face-to-face context, signals given off by accident, perhaps through body language, a fleeting expression, or an unbidden change in intonation, provide a great deal of information about other people. Online, however, especially in media with few channels of communication to manage and plenty of time to manage them, users can control their self-presentation to a much greater degree. That is, they can choose to give off very little. This makes it possible to present oneself more selectively than is possible face-to-face, portraying those qualities one would like to convey while concealing others. Walther (1996; also see Walther et al. 2001) suggests that this quality in conjunction with the tendency to make social inferences based on limited cues engenders "hyperpersonal" interaction — higher levels of affinity for each other than people would achieve in face-to-face interaction.

Deception in online dating: Perceptions and reality

In an online dating context, users writing their profiles have competing motivations — to present themselves as attractively as possible, in order to draw attention from potential dates, and to present themselves accurately, so that people who would find them attractive partners in real life can identify them as such online. Moreover, Fiore and Donath (2004) suggest that users might consider a certain amount of exaggeration necessary if they perceive, as per the popular conception, that everyone else is exaggerating already — then they must exaggerate as well just to remain competitive.

Stories of deception in online dating are common — the date who turns out to be 20 years older or 30 pounds heavier in person than his picture suggested, or one whose verbal charms in email vanish in a face to face meeting (e.g., Epstein 2007, Mapes 2004). Although these stories might indicate willful deception, they could also reflect disappointment in the offline reality as compared to expectations developed online, where a combination of selective self-presentation — i.e., strategic self-enhancement — and heightened levels of affinity developed through a mediated channel, which Walther's (1996) theory of hyperpersonal interaction predicts, might lead users to see as a soul-mate someone who in fact would make at best a decent tennis partner. That's not to say online daters don't tell some outright lies. Hancock and colleagues found that 81 percent of online dating users in their sample lied about their weight, height, or age. But many of these lies were small enough that it would be hard to detect the discrepancy between, e.g., claimed and actual weight face-to-face (Hancock et al. 2007). The participants in this study might have been engaging in strategic self-

enhancement, but nonetheless they kept their descriptions within a few percentage points of reality.

Ellison et al. (2006) offer other explanations for why users feel that others are presenting themselves deceptively online. First, users might be viewing themselves through a "foggy mirror" — that is, failing to perceive themselves accurately. Thus, if they report their own self-perceptions, they are not lying on purpose, even though these perceptions might not coincide with those of an outside observer. Second, users might either deliberately or subconsciously describe their "ideal selves" — who they would like to be — rather than their actual selves, making the self-presentation more aspirational than factual. As one interviewee put it: "In their profile they write about their dreams as if they are reality" (Ellison et al. 2006). Whether this is effective is uncertain, though; McKenna et al. (2002) found that those who were able to share their "true" selves online were more successful in forming close relationships through computer-mediated communication that carried over to the offline world.

Assessing the self-presentations of others
When users can self-present selectively (or aspirationally or deceptively) in their online dating profiles, it makes it difficult for viewers of the profile to be certain they have an accurate picture of what another user is like in person. If the purpose of online dating were to find partners with whom to interact online only, this would pose no problem — the online relationship would be the end goal. When the goal is to commence a face-to-face relationship, however, it can make it difficult to discern whom one will find attractive.

Ellison and colleagues (2006) describe a variety of strategies employed by online dating users to interpret the self-presentations of others accurately. The participants they interviewed made substantial inferences from small cues, lending support to Walther's (1992) theory of Social Information Processing. For example, one woman felt that people who were sitting down in their online dating profile photos were trying to disguise that they were overweight. She applied this not only to the photos she viewed, but also to her own — she ensured that she was standing in her photo so that others would not infer that she was overweight (Ellison et al. 2006).

Ambiguity presents a particular challenge to those seeking to infer qualities of a potential date from an online dating profile. These profiles provide a wealth of information about their users, but its informational content varies widely; consider the difference between "I like good music" and "I like Billy Joel." (No ill will toward Mr. Joel: the difference lies in the specificity, not the quality of the music.) The former allows the Metallica fan viewing the profile to nod in agreement, whereas the latter might leave her reaching for the Back button. The ambiguity inherent in the notion of "good music" allows the viewer to make attributions about the profile author based on the viewer's own interpretation of the phrase.

Indeed, Norton and colleagues (2007) found that even though online dating users believe they will like people better when they have more information about them, in fact more information leads to less liking. They suggest that more information gives us a better ability to assess dissimilarity. To put it another way, we can better discriminate among potential mates with more

information, so the more we know, the less we might like a person on average. But when we're presented with a highly compatible person, more information allows us to be more certain that we will like him or her. Similarly, more information will make it clear that someone who isn't well suited to us is in fact a poor choice.

Conclusion

Selecting a romantic partner, whether for life or for an evening, is one of the most important yet also most subjective decisions we make. The peculiarities of computer-mediated self-presentation, interpersonal perception, and communication might well lead users to perceive deception even in the absence of outright lies. However, this does not mean we can dismiss their concerns — even an incorrect perception of deception could lead to disappointment, anger, or sadness after an initial face-to-face meeting. Future online dating systems should give users the tools to present themselves and perceive others more accurately, with the lessons of research into media effects firmly in mind.

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