

A Second Chance to Make a First Impression: Factors Affecting the Longevity of Online Dating Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Because romantic partners who meet online usually have relatively well-formed impressions of one another before their first "real date," it is likely that they are sometimes disappointed and other times pleasantly surprised when they meet face-to-face. **The goal of the current research was to investigate how impressions of one's partner change as relationships that are begun online transition to offline dating and, specifically, how those changes affect relationship longevity.**

Additionally, we were interested in whether changing impressions of one's partner on *specific dimensions* might be especially associated with relationship longevity. **We expected changing impressions of physical attractiveness to be particularly important** because we have previously found that physical attractiveness plays a major role in attraction to and selection of romantic partners in online dating contexts (Fiore & Donath 2005; Fiore et al. 2008; Shaw Taylor et al. in prep). Also, social psychological theories of romantic attraction have long noted the central role physical attractiveness plays in attraction.

However, for a relationship to succeed in the long term, factors other than physical attractiveness must gain importance. Thus, in the current research, we also examined online daters' impressions of their partners' personalities, along with other more global judgments of their partners, as they transitioned from online to offline relationships.

METHOD

Participants:

Participants were 682 active users of a major U.S. online dating site whom we recruited via a pop-up ad. The sample was predominantly female ($n = 408$), early middle-aged ($M = 45.1$ years), and European American ($n = 558$), and was comprised of experienced online daters.

Procedure:

When respondents clicked on the pop-up ad and consented to participate, they were directed to the questionnaire, which asked them to rate someone whom they had met through the site and with whom they had subsequently gone on at least one face-to-face date.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. In the first, we asked participants to think back to when they were talking to their dates online, before they met face-to-face, and to rate their impressions of their dates at that point in the relationship (see tables below for items). Next, we asked participants to think about how they felt about their dates after their first face-to-face meeting. They then completed the same items, worded to refer to this later time point. Participants also reported on how many additional dates they had gone with their partners and whether they were still dating at the time of the study.

Research question: Did participants' impressions of their partners change during the online-to-offline transition? (Post-date minus pre-date ratings)

Items (Rating made on 0-6 scale)	Mean difference
On the whole, how attracted were you to ___?	-.21 (1.70)
How much did you think you had in common with ___?	-.29 (1.61)
How close did you think ___ was to your ideal partner?	-.43 (1.76)
How much did ___'s personality appeal to you?	-.31 (1.53)
How much did ___'s physical appearance appeal to you?	-.21 (1.47)
How well had you gotten to know ___?	.42 (1.93)

On most dimensions, including judgments of physical attractiveness, ratings became significantly less positive after meeting face-to-face (all $ps < .001$).

But participants said they knew their partners significantly better after meeting face-to-face

Hypothesis 2: Changing impressions of partners' physical appearance will be the strongest predictor of relationship longevity.

Standardized betas from multiple regression with all change scores entered simultaneously to predict the **number of subsequent dates**

Overall attraction:	.04
Have in common:	.05
Close to ideal:	.21***
Personality appeal:	.02
Appearance appeal:	-.04
Got to know well:	.33 ***

No! Appeal of partners' appearance did not predict relationship length, controlling for other factors.

Independent samples t-tests comparing change scores among couples who were versus were not still dating

	Mean (SD), terminated relationships	Mean (SD), ongoing relationships	<i>t</i>
Overall attraction:	-.30 (1.77)	.39 (1.13)	4.11 ***
Have in common:	-.38 (1.66)	.42 (1.07)	5.06 ***
Close to ideal:	-.57 (1.79)	.58 (1.21)	6.47 ***
Personality appeal:	-.39 (1.58)	.30 (0.76)	5.72 ***
Appearance appeal:	-.25 (1.49)	.20 (1.28)	2.16*
Got to know well:	.32 (1.94)	1.18 (1.53)	3.93 ***

Successful couple experienced more positive changes than unsuccessful couples on all dimension, but the magnitude of the difference was smallest for appearance.

Hypothesis 1: Having more positive impressions of one's partner after meeting face-to-face would be associated with longer relationships, and vice versa for more negative impressions.

Correlation between changing impressions (post-date minus pre-date ratings) & number of subsequent dates:	Overall attraction:	.37
	Have in common:	.38
	Close to ideal:	.43
	Personality appeal:	.32
	Appearance appeal:	.24
	Got to know well:	.49

Yes!

As predicted, all correlations were positive and significant ($ps < .001$).

But note that the smallest correlation was with the appeal of physical attractiveness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- Unlike in popular media portrayals, online daters were not especially likely to be disappointed (or pleasantly surprised) by their dates' physical appearance, compared to other dimensions. Participants tended to have more favorable impressions of their dates before meeting face-to-face on most dimensions we measured.
- Contrary to our hypothesis, changing impressions of physical attractiveness were not the most important predictor of whether relationships survived the online-to-offline transition. In fact, our data suggest that physical attractiveness was perhaps the *least* important predictor of relationship longevity.
- These findings suggest that physical attractiveness, though probably an important determinant of *initial* attraction and the decision about whether or not to contact someone online, quickly loses importance as the relationship progresses. Probably by the time they meet face-to-face, partners have passed the "attractiveness test."

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