

ABSTRACT

The Not-So-Blind Date: How Online Information-Seeking Influences First Date Romantic Attraction

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With the advent of social media, individuals like never before can gather information about a potential date prior to the first date. Previous research has explored both online information-seeking and attraction, yet little is known about how online profile information might negatively influence romantic attraction on the first date. To study this, the investigator recruited 146 individuals to interact with an assigned partner with which he or she was not previously acquainted. Each of the 73 dyad partner groups were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control condition determining the amount of information received prior to the interaction. Following a 15-minute conversation, dyads were separated and instructed to complete a post-interaction questionnaire consisting of Likert-type scales. Participant responses were analyzed using statistical software to determine how the amount of information received prior to the interaction influenced attraction and the desire for a future interaction.

Keywords: information-seeking, online, attraction, first date

The Not-So-Blind Date: How Online Information-Seeking
Influences First Date Romantic Attraction

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Young adults are accustomed to operating in a highly accessible, technology-saturated world. With limitless information available through internet sources and increasingly limited boundaries between public and private life, very little personal information remains a mystery. Researchers have explored outcomes of social media use in adolescent and college student health and wellbeing (Pujazon-Zazik & Park, 2010; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006; Wang, Tchernev, & Solloway, 2012), relationship satisfaction and closeness (Ledbetter et al., 2011; Papp, Danielwicz, & Cayemberg, 2012), and jealousy (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009). Additionally, research strongly connects online profiles to physical attraction (Scott, 2014; Toma & Hancock, 2010) and social attraction (Scott, 2014; Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008; Utz, 2010; Zywica & Danowski, 2008). Researchers, however, continue to only address social media influence on attraction within the online context. Equally intriguing is how social media influence affects attraction when online profile interactions shift into face-to-face encounters.

Technology use can influence a face-to-face interaction before it begins. We know that the increase in mobile technology is reshaping the way relationships form. Researchers have found the mere presence of mobile technology negatively influences conversation quality, connection, and subsequent relationship formation in face-to-face encounters (Pryzbylski & Weinstein, 2013). This influence can begin, however, before

dating relationships even develop. Often individuals view online social media as the initial source of information about a potential dating partner of the opposite sex (Yang, Brown, & Braun, 2014). Without directly interacting with a potential dating partner individuals can privately observe online interactions, or engage in *passive* uncertainty reduction strategies to seek information, through social media websites (Antheunis, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010). This type of information allows people to learn about a potential dating partner and begin impression formation and attraction before directly interacting. Research shows people routinely engage in online information-seeking before dating relationships begin. What remains unknown, however, is exactly how online social media use prior to a first date influences attraction once the face-to-face encounter begins.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Attraction

While there are many components in the relationship development process, romantic relationships are sparked by initial attraction. In its most universal form, attraction occurs when one person shows a positive attitude toward another in thoughts, feelings, or behaviors (Lamm, Wiesmann, & Keller, 1998). Attraction can range from platonic liking to romantic love. Interpersonal scholars have found attraction to consist of three dimensions: physical, social, and task attraction (McCroskey & McCain, 1974; McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006). The three dimensions are based on social or personal qualities (social), physical features and dress (physical), and abilities and talents (task) (McCroskey & McCain, 1974).

Romantic attraction is rarely determined by one factor alone; rather, there are several potential determinants. Communication research most often highlights the relationship between similarity and attraction (AhYun, 2001; Lamm, Wiesmann, & Keller, 1998; McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006; Reid, Davis, & Green, 2013; Sprecher, 2013). Researchers differentiate between perceived and actual similarity yet, interestingly, have found both predict attraction in short-interaction contexts such as speed dating (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008; Tidwell, Eastwick, Finkel, 2013). Positive reciprocal feelings also influence attraction as well as physical features (Felmlee, 1995; Lamm, Wiesmann, & Keller, 1998). Additionally, researchers have found self-

disclosure (Vittengl & Holt, 2000), direct questioning (Antheunis et al., 2010), immediacy (Ray & Floyd, 2006), a good sense of humor (McGee & Shevlin, 2009), and even vocal pitch (Floyd & Ray, 2003; Ray & Floyd, 2006) to significantly increase attraction.

In an online setting, the type of information available to influence attraction is limited to information presented by the profile owner. When considering personality traits that might be seen as more attractive, research shows self-centered persons tend to be liked more and are assumed to like others more than they actually do (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2011). As social media is largely focused on self-presentation and promotion, online profiles are inherently self-focused, which may lead to individuals appearing more approachable than they actually are. Furthermore, an individual's likeability, or the extent that others find the person enjoyable to be around, has twice the influence on attraction than the individual's perceived competence (Duran & Kelly, 1988; Singh & Tor, 2008). In other words, attraction to a potential dating partner is likely to increase based on perceived popularity in an online context. Attraction has been found to be a significant precursor to the formation of/development of romantic relationships (Reeder, 2000), and the current study is motivated by the prevailing influence of online information-seeking on attraction.

Online Information-Seeking

Online information-seeking is pervasive across a variety of different contexts. Previous research has examined individuals' use of technology for information-seeking related to health (Eastin & Guinsler, 2006; Hu, Bell, Kravitz & Orrange, 2012; Tustin, 2010; Weaver et al., 2010), political campaigns (Cho et al., 2009; Valentino, Hutchings,

& Williams, 2004), academic research (Enyon & Malmberg, 2012; Evans, Kairam, & Pirolli, 2010; Kim 2009), and online website norms (Waite & Harrison, 2002). More recently, researchers have started to look at computer-mediated-communication in the context of college roommates. Incoming college freshman use social media to investigate and make preliminary evaluations of a future roommate (Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009). In the same study, one participant reported requesting a change in roommate assignment prior to a face-to-face meeting based on the future roommate's online profile information. After noticing differences in preferences on Facebook she immediately concluded the roommate was incompatible and would create a negative living situation. In order to avoid what she assumed would be a failed roommate assignment, she requested a change before ever meeting the roommate based on the personality portrayed in an online profile. Individuals may similarly use the internet to research a future dating partner and make a decision on attraction, yet current research is limited on how online information-seeking might influence evaluations of attraction prior to a first date.

Individuals may have several motivations for seeking out various types of information about a potential dating partner online, one of which is to assess the potential for romantic attraction. When individuals are expecting to interact, they become more aware of demographic, opinion, and preference information and consequently seek it out (Douglas, 1985). Information-seeking can be defined as, "the pursuit of desired information about a target" (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, and Sunnafrank, 2002, p.217), and computer-mediated communication (CMC) is a common component of information-seeking. Specifically, social media sites are seen as the first source of information about a new acquaintance (Yang, Brown, & Braun, 2014). Researchers identify four strategies to

obtain information online: *extracting* information from online documents found through search engines, *interacting* directly with the individual to exchange information, *actively* seeking out information from others in the individual's social network, and *passively* observing the individual's online activity and posted profile information (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011). In the online dating context, passive is the only option until individuals exchange personal information during a direct interaction, making it the most used strategy (Antheunis et al., 2010). In both online and face-to-face contexts, Facebook is the most widely used platform among acquaintances because it does not require any direct interaction (Yang, Brown, & Braun, 2014). Individuals preparing for a first date may look most to profile pages via Facebook to gather information.

According to uncertainty reduction theory, initial interactions exist to provide individuals with an opportunity to gather information in order both to reduce uncertainty and determine how to maximize individual relational outcomes (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Sunnafrank, 1990). A lack of certainty or ability to predict the value of a potential relationship leads to more information-seeking behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). More recent scholarship draws on uncertainty management theory, which argues information has the potential to either decrease or increase uncertainty (Brashers, 2001). Uncertainty management is not confined to initial interactions as is uncertainty reduction theory, but is open to interactions in various relationship types by design (Bradac, 2001). Additionally, uncertainty management posits that different situations will have varying levels of optimum uncertainty. Throughout every relationship stage, including initial attraction, individuals are constantly negotiating the dialectical tension between novelty

and predictability (Baxter, 1990). However, research shows individuals do not prefer unpredictable partners during the initial interaction stage (Douglas, 1990).

While individuals may seek information from online profiles to initially reduce uncertainty, the choice to then go on a first date might bring a new level of uncertainty as to whether or not the individual is as attractive as his/her online image suggests. Efforts to reduce uncertainty through passive online information-seeking, therefore, might actually increase feelings of uncertainty on the first date.

Online vs. Face-to-Face Attraction Development

The term initial interaction implies future interactions will follow. Assessments made during an initial conversation substantially influence long-term attraction (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Predicted outcome value judgments have been found to significantly correlate with the decision to pursue a future relationship (Houser, Horan, & Furler, 2008). More specifically, the success of an initial interaction has not been found to depend on feeling understood (Cahn, 1983), expectations of being received in a friendly and positive way (Honeycutt, 1990), or attitude similarity (AhYun, 2001). Rather, interactive information-seeking in computer-mediated initial interactions (Ramirez, 2009) and reciprocal disclosure in face-to-face initial interactions (Sprecher et al., 2013) lead to the most enjoyment and communication satisfaction (Neuliep & Grohskopf, 2000). In a study on self-presentation in initial interactions, dyad partners that engaged in self-presentational sequences were found to view the conversation less positively (Svennevig, 2014). Dyad partners who maintained conversations of mutual interest in which individuals only employed indirect self-presentation were the most pleased with the

interaction. Because both partners were able to build mutual interest and learn about each other simultaneously, they viewed both the interaction and interaction partner positively.

Although individuals might feel they are communicating in the same ways as in face-to-face interactions, research suggests differences in online communication that have a significant influence on attraction. While conversations via semi-synchronous online chat might include similar direct questioning as in face-to-face interaction, (Tidwell & Walther, 2002), impressions of attraction formed online may develop at a slower rate than those formed offline (Walther, 1993). Modality richness, or the extent to which the communication channel resembles face-to-face interaction, influences the level of uncertainty. Because text-based communication least resembles face-to-face communication of all modality types, it leads to the greatest amount of uncertainty (Ramirez & Burgoon, 2004). When compared to those who initially interact face-to-face, those who first engage through text-based communication online have a more negative perception of the interaction (Sprecher, 2014). The negative perception is due to a perceived decrease in closeness and partner responsiveness, and this is largely because of the impersonal nature of both asynchronous and synchronous online communication. As reciprocal interest and sharing significantly influence attraction, a perceived lack of attraction from the dating partner may have a negative impact on attraction.

When transitioning from the online world to a face-to-face encounter, individuals consequently adapt to a new set of norms and lessen the amount of control over the interaction and their ability to strategically control self-image presentations (Ramirez & Wang, 2008). In a study on impression management in online chat rooms, participants reported lean modality, or text, requires a greater amount of time to communicate less

information (Becker & Stamp, 2005). When dyad partners only communicate through written text, individuals are able to present a more carefully crafted self-image, which may not necessarily be accurate (Walther, DeAndrea, & Tong, 2010). While both individuals might value honesty, success of an online interaction is determined by making a positive impression. (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Further, achieving a positive impression overshadows feelings of dishonesty that might prompt a change to more accurate information.

Physical, Social, and Task Attraction On and Offline

Social media sites provide the opportunity to intentionally project a particular image to a large pool of potential dating partners. An individual might consciously or subconsciously present a self-image that promotes a desired, rather than current, self-concept in an attempt to control others' perceptions and appear more attractive (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Some researchers view self-presentation as a type of "faking behavior" along with exaggeration, reactive responding, and deceptive responding (Griffith, Lee, Peterson, & Zickar, 2011). Each of these four different categories has different motivations and strategies to achieve individual goals. Researchers identify three motivations for online self-presentation: social acceptance, relationship development and maintenance, and identity experimentation (Becker & Stamp, 2005). Additionally, self-presentation is significantly influenced by both the type of community and the individual's personal goals for participating in the social networking site (Schwammlein & Wodzicki, 2012).

In online social networking sites, young people are especially conscious of others' perceptions and are therefore strategic in determining what image is portrayed in an

online profile (Siibak, 2009). When individuals are trying to make a positive impression, they will use tactics that are self-focused and proactive (Peeters & Lievens, 2006). Those with lower self-esteem might attempt to increase popularity or self-image and those with higher self-esteem might seek to maintain a particular image (Zywica & Danowski, 2008). Regardless of individual personality types, perceived popularity online can influence both physical and social attractiveness (Scott, 2014).

Physical attraction refers to facial features and body composition as well as attire and styling (McCroskey & McCain, 1974), and is positioned at the forefront of both online and first date attraction exploration. For example, the largest area of focus in opposite sex first date research addresses sexual goals in dating interactions. Studies have linked the sex of the individual (Bartoli & Clark, 2006; Harnish, Abby, & DeBono, 1990; Mongeau & Carey, 1996; Mongeau & Johnson, 1995; Morr Serewicz & Gale, 2008), sex of the date initiator (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010; Mongeau & Carey, 1996; Mongeau, Yeazell, & Hale, 1994), past sexual experience (Bartoli & Clark, 2006), date location (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010) and alcohol consumption (Bartoli & Clark, 2006) to the expectation of intimate sexual contact on a first date. For some individuals, the absence of sexual contact may even lead to a negative perception of the entire date interaction (Bevan, 2003).

Moreover, dating has been found to have different meaning for college students than for post-college, single adults (Mongeau, Jacobsen, & Donnerstein, 2007). College students focused more on physical characteristics and the social and public aspect of dating while older single adults held a more traditional view of a first date as a one-on-one, more intimate interaction. The same study found a difference in criteria for choosing

dating partners; older single adults based choices on nonphysical characteristics such as conversational ability and caring, while college students focused on physical attractiveness and the potential for sexual contact.

Online profile content may be the initial indicator of first date physical attraction; an individual's choices of what and how to include information on physical characteristics can shape perceptions of physical attraction before any face-to-face meeting. An examination of 500 random Facebook profiles revealed women are more likely to smile, make eye contact, and include family in profile photos (Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014). Men were more likely to display outdoor activity and dress in formal attire in their profile photos. On the contrary, any lack of significant differences in online profile photos of men and women participants signaled an alternate set of social norms for what constitutes an attractive online profile photo (Hum et al., 2011).

Researchers have found physical or sexual attraction to be the most significant prerequisite for romantic attraction and a romantic relationship (Reeder, 2000). This is in line with more recent research that has found physical attractiveness and confidence lead to more first dates, second dates with the same person, and romantic relationships among young adults (Poulsen, Holman, Busby, & Carroll, 2013). In an online setting, physical attractiveness significantly correlates with how attractive the rest of the text information is perceived because the profile owner is perceived as more confident (Brand, Bonatsos, D'Orazio, & DeShong, 2012). Because physical attractiveness significantly influences first date assessments, and strong perceptions of physical attraction are formed from online profiles, there may be a greater potential for first date disappointment based on photo inconsistencies. The following hypothesis is therefore proposed:

H1: Individuals engaging in passive online information-seeking prior to a first date will report lower levels of physical attraction than individuals who make no effort to obtain information prior to meeting.

In addition to physical attraction, online profiles can serve as an indicator of social attraction by offering a glimpse into an individual's social relationships and personal liking on and offline (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). In another study, a profile photo was not only a marker of physical attractiveness but also significantly influenced perceptions of extraversion (Van Der Heide, D'Angelo, and Schumaker, 2012). This finding, however, was only true when both photographic and textual cues were present; text alone had a more significant influence than photos on social orientation assessments.

One of the influential factors is the number of social network friends. In social networking sites, the number of friends an individual has is the primary influence on perceptions of popularity (Scott, 2014 ; Utz, 2010; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). In a study focused on the relationship between social attraction and the size of an online social network, a curvilinear relationship was found between the number of Facebook friends and the perception of social attractiveness (Tong et al, 2008). While a low number of friends, (i.e., 102) was perceived as the least socially attractive, a high number, (i.e., 902) also led to a decrease in attraction. A smaller number signaled low involvement in social activity, but a larger number also implied introversion, as the individual was perceived to primarily interact with others online. The mid-range, (i.e., 302) was perceived as most socially attractive likely because this indicated a balance in online and offline social interaction. Interestingly, however, while the mid-range was most often associated with positive responses, during the debrief investigators found a majority of participants were

consciously unaware of the link between attraction and the size of a social network. The literature on social attraction and online social networking suggests that attraction toward a potential dating partner may be subconsciously influenced by profile information prior to a first date.

In addition to judgments of personality factors and extraversion and size of network factors like number of friends, online voyeurs are more likely tuned in to individual's emotional states as expressed on online social media sites. Online profile content research shows message valence to have a significant effect on social attractiveness (Antheunis & Schouten, 2011). Users are more likely to share positive rather than negative emotional experiences on Facebook so others might perceive a healthier emotional state (Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012). As positive messages are more attractive (Antheunis & Schouten, 2011), individuals are strategic in how personal information is framed in online profiles.

Generally speaking, individuals initially feel the most social attraction for those who might fit in with an existing friendship circle (Cahn, 1983). Because individuals are assumed to have similar friends, online information from and about friends is highly influential in impression formation (Utz, 2010). Research shows the attractiveness of one's friends (Antheunis & Schouten, 2011; Utz, 2010), diversity of friends' schools or locations (Zywica & Danowski, 2008), and perceived extraversion of friends (Utz, 2010) are among the strongest determining factors in online popularity. Additionally, the number of pictures posted and tagged by friends online indicates the level of involvement within the friendship circle (Scott, 2014; Zywica & Danowski, 2008). It stands to reason if the social media investigator elects to go on a first date with an individual after

exploring his/her online profile, a level of attraction has developed and the anticipation for a positive date is high. Based on social media profile information, the prospective dating partner has high romantic partner potential. Because individuals tend to display more positive information in online profiles (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006), however, the likelihood for disappointment is also higher. This prompts the following hypothesis:

H2: Individuals engaging in passive online information-seeking prior to a first date will report lower levels of social attraction than individuals who make no effort to obtain information prior to meeting.

As the third dimension of interpersonal attraction, task attraction assesses an individual's skills and talents (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). While task attraction receives the least attention in romantic attraction literature, researchers have examined this dimension of attraction in organizational, political, and educational contexts. In organizational communication, supervisors have been found to possess more task attractiveness when they use tactics to present themselves as more likeable (Johnson, 1992). Similar to individuals' self-presentation online, supervisors who consciously tried to appear pleasant were perceived as more attractive which is in line with the tactic-competence-task attraction path relationship posited by Johnson.

In the contexts of interviews, task attraction has also received attention. For example, in a recent study on college students' perceptions of job applicants, task attraction decreased when participants did not perceive the applicant to have a professional appearance (McElroy, Summers, & Moore, 2014). Specifically, those with facial piercings were immediately perceived to be less competent, less conscientious, and therefore less attractive on both social and task dimensions. In the context of political

campaigns, researchers have found candidate characteristics such as humor to significantly influence task attractiveness (McGuffee Smith & Powell, 1988). In this study, humor signaled to voters the candidate's ability to work cooperatively with others and encourage idea sharing.

Instructional communication scholars have most often highlighted the importance of task attraction in student-teacher relationships. Individuals base assessments of an instructor's task attractiveness on factors such as immediacy (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999), temperament (McCroskey, Valencic, & Richmond, 2004), and online self-disclosure (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). From the instructor's perspective, student task attractiveness is positively related to the amount of interest they express and a lack of excuse making (Weiss & Houser, 2007). Interestingly, this parallels the findings in online social network research that shows reciprocity to significantly influence attraction (Felmlee, 1995; Sprecher, 2014).

If individuals seek information about potential employees, political candidates, and future course instructors, it is likely they will pursue information about a prospective dating partner's talents and skills as well. Just as individuals selectively present information that will appear more attractive (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Antheunis & Schouten, 2011), individuals may exaggerate skills or accomplishments online and disappoint a dating partner during a face-to-face interaction. This prompts the following hypothesis:

H3: Individuals engaging in passive online information-seeking prior to a first date will report lower levels of task attraction than individuals who make no effort to obtain information prior to meeting.

CHAPTER THREE

Method

Participants

A convenience sample obtained through introductory and upper-level communication courses at a mid-sized private university in the south/central US composed this sample of young adult participants. 146 participants were recruited to form 73 dyad partner groups. Of the respondents, 49.3% were female and 49.3% were male; this was by design as each pair consisted of one male and one female participant. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 29, with an average age of 19.32 years ($SD = 1.35$); 71.9% were White, 13% were African American, 5.5% were Asian, 4.8% were Hispanic, .7% were Native American, and 2.7% marked Other. All participants were undergraduate students and were offered extra course credit for participation based on individual instructors' discretion. Of the 144 participants who reported relationship status, two did not answer, 63% considered themselves to be single and 35.6% did not consider themselves to be single.

Procedures

After making an announcement in class, individual faculty members instructed students who expressed interest in research participation to send an email to the principal investigator indicating three one-hour time slot preferences from the research schedule. Response e-mails were sent to interested individuals indicating the assigned research session; participants were also asked to complete a questionnaire containing information

commonly found in an online profile such as academic major, activities, and favorites. Participants were matched with a partner of the opposite sex based on time preferences. After returning the questionnaire, participants received an e-mail message confirming the time and location of the study.

Students not wishing to participate in the study but who still wanted to obtain extra course credit were offered an alternate assignment. In lieu of study participation, students were asked to read a popular press article on romantic date ideas for college students and write a brief 3-5 sentence response summary. This ensured participation in the study was voluntary, as students did not have to choose between gaining extra credit points and a desire not to participate. No responses from the alternate assignment were analyzed for this research project.

On the scheduled day and time, participants were met in the hall outside of the scheduled classroom and after signing in were instructed to enter the room and sit at one of four marked desks. Males were directed to one room and females to another; the four desks were arranged so that participants could not see any information given to others. Participants were read an introduction explaining they were participating in a study on social media and first impression formation. The introduction told participants they would receive personal information provided by their partners, participate in a 15-minute interaction with the assigned partner, and then complete an anonymous questionnaire asking their perceptions of the interaction. While they signed up for a one-hour time slot, participants were informed the study would take about 45 minutes to complete. Before moving forward, participants were given the name of the assigned partner and instructed to disclose to the researcher if they knew this individual; the researcher defined *knowing*

as having had one-on-one interaction with this person outside of class. In the event assigned partners knew each other they would be assigned a new partner, however, this was not the case for any of the dyad partners.

Participants were given the consent form and the researcher talked through it with them as they read it individually. Upon reaching the end of the form, participants were offered a chance to ask any questions regarding participation. During this time, participants were reminded participation was completely voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any time. Additionally, both the consent form presented at the beginning of the experiment and the cover letter for the questionnaire administered at the end restated the voluntary, at-will nature of participation. After completing the informed consent form, each participant was given a piece of paper designed to resemble a social media profile page that contained the profile information for his/her assigned research partner. The experimental condition profile resembled a more complete profile with both demographic and preference information such as favorite movies, restaurants, and music. The control condition received a profile only containing name, nickname, age, and sex; this information would be found on a profile set to a “private” setting. Randomizing software was used to assign pairs to either the experiment or control condition.

After being given four minutes to look over their partner’s profile page, participants were taken to private lab classrooms and introduced to their partners. To encourage conversation, all participants in both conditions were given the same conversation starter, which was written on the board in each room: spring break and summer plans. After 15 minutes, partners were separated and reunited with other participants of the same sex; all male participants completed the questionnaire in one

room, and all female participants completed the questionnaires a different room.

Participants completed an anonymous pen and paper questionnaire measuring perceived valence of profile information, physical attraction, social attraction, task attraction, and whether or not a second interaction was desired.

In order to maintain maximum privacy and confidentiality, perception of the interaction questionnaire and subsequent writing were anonymously recorded. Only the signed consent form and profile page contained participant identifying information, but responses were not linked back to individual participants in any way. Profile pages were immediately shredded after the study session and consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home office. Upon completion of the questionnaire, students were provided debriefing information on the purpose of the study and thanked for their participation. The participants' individual instructors were notified of participation to ensure extra credit.

Measures

General Perception of Inconsistency Scale

A modified version of the General Perception of Inconsistency Scale (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011) was used to determine whether the participant perceived the online information pertaining to his or her assigned partner as positive or negative. These four items were seven-point Likert scales and reported acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .745$). A sample item is, "Your partner's social media information was favorable." The scale measured perceived valence of the profile information provided prior to the face to face interaction.

Interpersonal Attraction Scale

The second-generation Interpersonal Attraction Scale served as the primary measure for the dependent variables of physical, social, and task attraction (McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006). The overall attraction scale ($\alpha = .95$) was divided into three sections with the 12 item social attraction ($\alpha = .90$) subset, 12 item physical attraction ($\alpha = .96$) subset, and 14 item task attraction subset ($\alpha = .92$) each reporting high reliability. The items were seven-point Likert-type scales ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. Sample social attraction items include, “I could become close friends with him/her,” and “He/she just wouldn’t fit into my circle of friends.” Sample physical attraction items include, “I find her/him attractive physically,” and “I don’t like the way he/she looks.” Sample task attraction items include, “I would enjoy working on a task with him/her,” and “I could not recommend her/him as a work partner.”

Desire for Future Interaction

The questionnaire included an additional seven-point Likert-type scale consisting of five items created for this study to assess whether or not the participant would like to interact with the assigned partner again ($\alpha = .92$). The items read, “I would like to talk more with this person,” “I would like to spend more time with this person one-on-one,” “I would like to get to know this person better,” “I would prefer not to talk with this person again,” and “I would like to see this person again one-on-one.” This scale measured the connection between attraction and a desire for a second date, or future meeting.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The main goal of this study was to explore how passive online information seeking might lower first date romantic attraction. Three hypotheses were tested using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to determine whether the amount and quality of social media profile information received prior to a face-to-face interaction influenced interpersonal attraction. No significant differences emerged for overall attraction, $F(1,134) = .015, p = .902$. Further analyses, however, did reveal a significant correlation between both perception of information quality and attraction, ($r(73) = .332, p = .004$), and attraction and desire for future meeting ($r(135) = .773, p = .000$).

Attraction

Hypothesis one predicted individuals who received social media profile information prior to a first date would experience lower levels of physical attraction than those who received limited profile information. A one-way ANOVA conducted with information received as the independent variable and physical attraction as the dependent variable revealed no significant difference, $F(1,141) = .318, p = .573$. Those that received more complete information did not differ from the group that received limited profile information in the amount of reported physical attraction. Hypothesis one was not supported.

Hypothesis two predicted individuals who received social media profile information prior to a first date would experience lower levels of social attraction

compared to those who received limited profile information. A one-way ANOVA conducted with information received as the independent variable and social attraction as the dependent variable revealed no significant difference, $F(1,142) = .031, p = .861$. Those that received more complete information did not differ from the group that received limited profile information in the amount of reported social attraction. Hypothesis two was not supported.

Hypothesis three predicted individuals who received social media profile information prior to a first date would experience lower levels of task attraction compared to those who received limited profile information. A one-way ANOVA conducted with information received as the independent variable and task attraction as the dependent variable revealed no significant difference, $F(1,135) = .200, p = .655$. Those that received more complete information did not differ from the group that received limited profile information in the amount of reported task attraction. Hypothesis three was not supported.

Information Quality

Additional testing was conducted to explore the relationship between attraction and the perceived quality of the complete profile information received by the experimental group. The analysis revealed a significant correlation between perceived information quality and overall attraction, $r(73) = .332, p = .004$; physical attraction, $r(78) = .265, p = .019$; social attraction, $r(78) = .365, p = .001$; and task attraction, $r(73) = .246, p = .036$.

Desire for Future Meeting

Further testing revealed a significant relationship between attraction and the desire for a future meeting across both the experimental and control groups. More specifically, positive relationships were discovered between the desire for a future meeting and physical attraction, $r(142) = .633, p = .000$; social attraction, $r(137) = .549, p = .000$; task attraction, $r(136) = .435, p = .000$; and overall attraction $r(135) = .773, p = .000$.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to explore the influence passive online information-seeking, or the private viewing of another individual's online profile information, had on first date romantic attraction. Specifically, three hypotheses predicted individuals who received a large amount of profile information prior to a face-to-face interaction would report lower physical, social, and task attraction compared to those who received limited profile information. Participants were randomly assigned a dyad partner of the opposite sex and either received detailed profile information or limited profile information (only name, age, and sex) prior to interacting with the partner for a 15-minute casual conversation. Participants then completed measures assessing information quality, attraction, and desire for future meeting. While the *amount* of information received did not influence attraction in this context, the perceived *quality* of the profile information received by participants in the experimental group was significantly correlated to all three dimensions of attraction. Additionally, across both the experimental and control groups, attraction was significantly related to the desire for a future meeting. Findings and implications are further discussed below, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.

Findings and Implications

Based on previous research, online social media often serves as the initial source of information about an individual prior to a first date (Yang, Brown, & Braun, 2014), and this information can lead to impression formation and perceptions of attraction prior to meeting (Langwell, & Walther, 2008; Scott, 2014; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009; Utz, 2010; Zywicki &

Danowski, 2008). Thus, the prediction was advanced that having information about a dyad partner would influence interpersonal attraction more so than having limited to no information; in the current study, however, no differences were found. Those who received complete online profile information about their partners reported similar levels of physical, social, and task attraction as those who received limited profile information. This result is in line with recent findings that those who first communicate via online text based media have an increase in negative perceptions compared to those who first interact in a face-to-face context (Sprecher, 2014). While text based information has been found to increase uncertainty (Ramirez & Burgoon, 2004), all individuals in the current study first *interacted* with their partners through face-to-face conversation. Participants passively read profile information provided to them, but did not have any interaction at all with the partner via online, text-based messages. Consistent with Sprecher's findings, the current study supports the argument that initially interacting face-to-face will yield more positive perceptions (i.e., interpersonal attraction) regardless of the amount of information received.

Whether or not participants received a full or limited profile, they likely had certain expectations based on the researcher's introduction stating the assigned dyad partners would be another student similar to themselves. Prior to any initial interaction, individuals have certain expectations for how the other will behave and communicate. Moreover, Expectancy Violation Theory argues "Expectancies exert significant influence on people's interaction patterns, on their impressions of one another, and on the outcomes of their interactions" (Burgoon, 1993, p. 41). Among factors such as the specific communicator, nature of the relationship, and context, individuals tend to rely on categorical information to make general evaluations most quickly (Kernahan, Bartholow, and Bettencourt, 2000). As all participants shared the category of undergraduate students at the same university enrolled in

communication courses, this likely allowed for categorical expectations to form prior to receiving either the limited or complete profile.

Interestingly, the expectations formed prior to an interaction have been found to remain regardless of the positive or negative nature of the face-to-face encounter. For example, a study in which a research confederate interacted with a participant in either a pleasant or unpleasant manner produced outcomes that inform the current study (Burgoon, Le Poire, and Rosenthal, 1995). In this previous study, although the participants were given information prior to the interaction that potentially would lead to either positive or negative expectations, all subjects maintained a fairly pleasant and engaged manner during the encounter. After the interaction participants' positive or negative expectations carried over to how they rated the confederate's credibility, attraction, and communication style. Participants were able to maintain positivity throughout the initial interaction, but still held on to prior expectations when forming a first impression. This potentially explains why the amount of information in the current study did not influence attraction in the way expected; participants in both groups likely maintained similar cordial and positive interactions regardless of how much information they received. The previous finding that prior expectations continued after the interaction may also explain the first of two significant relationships found in the current study.

While no differences in attraction were found between the two groups based on the amount of information they received about their dyad partners, additional analysis revealed some intriguing relationships between the variables in question. First, a strong relationship emerged between the perceived quality of the information received by the experimental group and all three dimensions of attraction. Participants reported attraction regardless of how much information they received, however, the quality of the information perceived by those who were given a complete profile was strongly associated with reported attraction.

Previous research has found similar results with the perceived quality of the information having been found to moderate the relationship between information and social attraction (Antheunis et al, 2010). This leads to the notion that participants in the current study assumed the profile information was *accurate*. Dishonesty can be just as much of a negative expectancy violation as negative information (Rycyna, Champion, & Kelly, 2009). While the perceived quality of profile information was important, participants might also have made evaluations based on the accuracy of the profile and how truthful their partners were in answering the questions regarding attraction.

In a similar vein, research on political candidate likeability among voters parallels the relationship between attraction and perceived information quality. Resembling social media, information about political candidates is directed at potential voters using advertisements (Lee & Chang, 2011). Just like individuals evaluating a potential romantic partner, voters determine their compatibility with a political candidate based on the perceived credibility of the information being presented by the candidate (Teven, 2008). The three dimensions of credibility, trustworthiness, competence, and goodwill, were predictive of whether voters believed in a candidate enough to vote for him/her. The relationship is also bidirectional; how highly a voter regards a candidate influences how the voter perceives positive and negative information (Lee & Chang, 2011). As in the current study focusing on first date attraction, it was the perception of information quality and credibility, not the amount of information that determined voter attitudes toward candidates. The perception of information quality is what prompts initial attraction, and on the other hand, resulting attraction may continue to serve as the lens through which information is viewed.

In the current study, a second relationship was found between attraction and the desire for a future meeting. Regardless of age, sex, or relationship status individuals who reported being attracted to their dyad partner also reported a desire to meet with this partner

again. This is in line with previous research stating the importance of attraction in future relationship development. Attraction was initially thought to have the most influence in the first weeks of a relationship, but additional research has found attraction may be formed in brief interactions. Sunnafrank & Ramirez (2004) reported that individuals determined the predicted outcome value of a future relationship with another individual after only 5-10 minutes. The current study not only supports these findings, as attraction formed in these 15-minute interactions was strongly related to a desire for a second meeting, but potentially extends to before the interaction began. The perceptions of profile information quality were formed prior to the brief 15-minute interaction. In this context, attraction likely becomes even more significant as individuals might determine whether or not to pursue a relationship before ever going on a date.

Limitations and Future Directions

As in any research project, the findings of the current study seem to spark more questions than answers. As such, limitations and directions for future research should be noted. First, because of this population's use of social media, the study was aimed at a post-adolescent group of undergraduate college students with an average age of 19, making this a relatively homogenous sample. A group of participants with a higher average age would offer further insight into how social media might influence romantic attraction among older populations who have been found to hold different views on dating and social media (Mongeau, Jacobsen, & Donnerstein, 2007). Because both perceived and actual similarity predict attraction in brief interactions (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008; Tidwell, Eastwick, Finkel, 2013), future research might pair individuals with more of a difference in age or race. Studying dyad partners with differing demographic characteristics might remove the expectation for similarity. Additionally, future studies might increase the time allotted for

the interaction in hopes of moving beyond the realm of speed dating. In natural date settings, conversations usually last longer than 15 minutes. By allowing more time for conversation to develop, the study would more closely resemble a real first date.

Another challenge was the difficulty in recreating the online social media experience in the experimental setting. The profile page given to participants lacked any interactive element as in real online social media sites. Additionally, profile pages lacked any photos or comments from others. Given the importance placed on profile photos and friend activity and responses (Scott, 2014; Utz, 2010) future research might arrange for participants to access their partners' actual social media profile pages or have participants create new accounts for the study. In addition to not being able to assess partner popularity among others (e.g. number of friends, pictures tagged by friends, and posted comments), which is associated with interpersonal attraction (Zywica & Danowski, 2008), participants also did not have the ability to view how others filled out the profile questionnaire prior to answering their own. In actual online settings, individuals use observations of others' profile content to determine their own choices (Wu, Chang, & Yuan, 2014). Unfortunately, this type of social learning was not possible in the current study because participants viewed only their partners' responses and were not able to go back after the fact and alter their own profiles in any way.

Participants may be accustomed to gaps in information because different people use different social media sites, however, this depends on individual personality (Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012) and not the choice of the researcher. In actual online culture, individuals may only have accounts on image-based social media such as Instagram, or sites with less straightforward profile information such as Twitter. The profile used in this study resembled information found on Facebook, however, this might no longer be the most popular networking site. Future research might either randomize the various formats used within the

study or allow participants to choose which format to use so the major platforms (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) are represented.

In regard to the face-to-face interaction context of the study, another factor potentially influencing the study's outcome was the conversational topic provided to each dyad. How much variety occurred in the conversations between participants is unknown, as is whether this had an influence on attraction and the desire for a future meeting. Additionally, fully recreating a dating scene in a lab setting is difficult. Future research might videotape conversations between participants and examine the transcripts of those who reported attraction for any similarities in what was discussed. Also, staging the interactions in a more natural setting (i.e., a coffee shop or restaurant), might increase the realism of the experimental context.

Lastly, as is the case with correlational relationships, the researcher cannot be certain of the direction of the relationship between perceived valence of the information and attraction. Previously, attractiveness has been found to affect the perceived valence of expectancy violations (Burgoon & Walther, 1990), so it is possible a similar effect might have occurred in this study. Those who found their partner attractive may have perceived the profile information more positively. Future studies might administer the information quality questionnaire immediately following the viewing of the profile, but prior to the face-to-face interaction to further explore this relationship. Additionally, open-ended questions might provide insight into perceptions of attraction and information quality. This would allow participants to explain their reasoning for their reports of attraction and how they determined whether information was positive or negative, offering valuable insight into this complex process.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Trends in social media use might change, but the dependence on online sources of information will continue. While no differences in attraction were found between groups based on the amount of information received prior to meeting, the current study makes some key contributions to the extant research on social media and online attraction. First, it is not the amount but the perceived quality of information received about a potential romantic partner that influences how attractive they are after a first date. This perception of quality and attraction is truly consequential because second, this study provides additional support for the argument of previous findings that attraction is heavily influential in the motivation to pursue a romantic relationship. Thus overall, whether or not an individual chooses to search online sources for information about a prospective dating partner may not appear to influence attraction. Rather, his/her perception of the quality of any information found would likely have an influence on attraction following the date, and this attraction will influence the desire to pursue future interaction with the partner.

Social media is a convenient source of information across a variety of relationship types. From potential romantic partners to potential voters in political campaigns, the perceived quality of information seems to matter most in determining how attractive or likeable an individual is. Just as a candidate is evaluated by his/her information prior to any face-to-face meeting or election day, it appears evaluations of a first date's attractiveness are made prior to meeting face-to-face. This attraction assessment is heavily influential when it

comes time to decide whether or not a second date is desired, completing a chain that links back to the quality of information as the likely initiator of modern romantic relationships.

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