Online Dating Coaches' User Evaluation Strategies

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Abstract

Users of online dating systems want to evaluate each
other to predict who they will be attracted to in-person.
Prior research into evaluation of online dating profiles
has shown how users struggle to evaluate physical
attractiveness and demographic traits because of
deception. Yet we have little knowledge about
successful user evaluation strategies, or evaluation of
other traits known to influence attraction like
personality. We addressed these gaps in knowledge
through an interview study of professional online dating
coaches (n=27) to extract their self-proclaimed
successful user evaluation strategies for 3 categories of
traits derived from attraction literature: physical
appearance, demographics & values, and personality.
We then interpreted these strategies through the lens
of theories germane to attraction—Nisbett and Wilson's
theory of introspection, Asch's theory of person
perception, and Signaling theory.

Author Keywords

Online dating; Signaling theory; Impression formation

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g.,
HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Online dating systems are now a major way for long-term romantic partners to discover each other [2]. A common objective of online dating system use is to evaluate attraction to other users online that will hopefully match evaluations of attraction in-person. There are two gaps in knowledge regarding online dating system use that we address with this late breaking work: 1) an understanding of strategies considered successful for evaluating users online that match in-person evaluations, and 2) an understanding of how personality—a prime influence on attraction—is evaluated online.

Online Dater Evaluation Strategies
Online daters utilize user-profile information and private messaging to infer traits and form impressions about potential dates [17]. Users often struggle to form impressions through these systems that are deemed accurate in-person because of deception [7, 8, 9, 13] and misinterpretation [5, 17]. The range of attraction-related traits that online dating research has studied is limited. A review of attraction literature indicates that there are three main categories of traits that may influence attraction to long-term romantic partners:
1. Physical attractiveness [1];
2. Demographic traits (e.g. age, income) and lifestyle (values and interests; e.g. religion, politics) [4]; and
3. Personality (based on the five factor model in addition to sense of humor and intelligence [6]).

Prior research about online dater evaluation has primarily focused on physical attractiveness through profile pictures and demographic traits listed in profile pages [4, 7, 8, 13], but little about personality. Other work has expanded the scope of studied traits into two overly broad categories: objective qualities called "searchable attributes" (e.g. height, religion) and subjective qualities called "experiential attributes" (e.g. sense of humor and rapport) [5, 17]. However, the categorization of these traits is debatable (e.g. religion, a searchable attribute, could be subjective depending on how religious one finds another to be), and some experiential attributes are arguably not attributes of a person at all (e.g. "rapport" [5]). Hence when prior research reports that online daters generally struggle to evaluate experiential attributes online [5, 17], it is unclear which traits these findings do or do not pertain to. Collectively, prior research leaves us with an ambiguous understanding of user evaluation across a more encompassing collection of attraction influences.

Prior findings of user-evaluation struggles are perhaps a consequence of the sampling method used. Many previous studies investigated active users of online dating systems. This choice predisposes researchers to discovering user evaluation struggles because individuals with successful strategies for finding a long-term partner would likely no longer be active users. As a result, the research world is largely unaware of successful user evaluation strategies—that result in online and in-person evaluations closely matching—and what these strategies suggest about system design. Alternative methodologies could include: directly measuring evaluation accuracy of various user-evaluation strategies; studying the strategies of former users who successfully achieved their relationship goal; or as we do here, examine the strategies put forward by online dating coaches who proclaim knowledge of user strategies that remedy frustrations with finding appropriate relationship partners (www.eflirtexpert.com). Online dating coaches are self-

proclaimed experts who sell advice on how to use online dating systems to achieve a particular relationship goal. They often have data and experience from using such systems for themselves and on behalf of multiple clients (cyberdatingexpert.com). This contrasts with typical online daters who have the experience of just one user (themselves).

Theories of Romantic Attraction
Online dating system-use strategies have most often been interpreted through Goffman's work on impression management and Walther's family of theories that explain interpersonal relationship development in CMC. Despite online dating being a process predicated on attraction, interpretation of users' evaluation strategies has largely been detached from theories regularly applied to attraction research. Such theories may lend a deeper understanding of online dating strategies that could in turn inform system design. There are three such theories that we find particularly relevant. First, Signaling theory explains how animals try to assess the reliability of information pertaining to unobservable traits [15]. Due to the mediated nature of CMC most traits are not directly observable. While Signaling theory has been applied to evaluation behavior in social networking systems [11], application to online dating is scarce. Second, Asch's 1946 theory of person perception has been integral to the understanding of impression formation of personality, and has been applied to the CHI domain in recent years [14]. This theory could lend explanatory power to personality evaluation strategies of online daters much in the same way Goffman's work has enabled an understanding of impression management motives [9, 17]. Third, prior research states that online dater evaluation is akin to a shopping experience [10], driven by conscious mate

preferences. Yet research leveraging Nisbett & Wilson's theory of introspection [12] claims that humans lack introspective awareness of their attraction triggers [4]. The tension between online daters' expected and actual attraction triggers has yet to be explored.

Method
To address the aforementioned gaps in knowledge we conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 online dating coaches about the self-proclaimed successful strategies they advocate for user evaluation in online dating systems in terms of three attraction influences— physical attractiveness, demographic and lifestyle traits, and personality.

Participants
There exists no universal directory of professional online dating coaches so we found coaches for this study through *Google* and *Youtube* searches for 10 different variations of "online dating coach" (3000 links reviewed). This yielded a list of 132 unique online dating coaches (sidebar). Interview requests were sent to all 112 coaches who advertised long-term relationship advice; 30 responded and interviews were conducted with 27 of them (26 over Skype voice/video chat, 1 in-person). Eighteen of the coaches were female and 9 were male. The coaches disseminated their advice mostly through one-on-one advice sessions, although impersonation of clients in online dating systems (e.g. making the profile page, evaluating other users, and writing messages on behalf of the client) was also common. Most coaches claimed expertise through "track records" of satisfied clients and use of online dating systems for their own relationship pursuits, as well as advanced degrees in psychology or therapy, and professional experience in

marketing. Most coaching advice was tailored to *Okcupid, Tinder, Plenty of Fish,* and *Match.com*.

Data Collection and Analysis
All interviews were recorded and transcribed (31-81 minutes). The interview guide organized questions of user evaluation around the typical system components of profile pages and messaging. Open coding was used to derive findings, with a focus on the three aforementioned categories of attraction influences.

Results
Preliminary results indicate that the coaches' advocated user evaluation strategies revolved around intentionally minimizing evaluation of potential partners online to reduce the costs of deception and likelihood of misinterpretation. Coaches advocated meeting potential partners in-person quickly based primarily on physical attractiveness and non-negotiable lifestyle choices.

DECEPTION OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IS UNAVOIDABLE
While many of the coaches advised using physical attractiveness as a primary decision point for in-person meetings, none of the coaches interviewed had developed strategies to reliably detect deception in profile pictures. Yet they considered deception of physical appearance an issue only if users invested too much time in the respective partner before meeting in-person. The coaches explained that by meeting as soon as possible, a user can disqualify potential partners sooner based on information they know is accurate and have more time to discover and meet additional users.

DEMOGRAPHIC FIELDS ARE POOR PROXIES FOR PERSONALITY
The coaches also acknowledged a lack of strategy for detecting deception of demographic traits like height

and age. They explained that mild exaggeration of these traits is not a problem as long as users do not rely on them as proxies of other traits. Many coaches discussed how their clients had exceedingly strict demographic "deal breakers," like a minimum acceptable height or income, because they were using such traits as proxies for personality (see coach 21's quote in sidebar). The coaches explained this tendency is due to information directly pertaining to personality being scarce so users rely on demographic trait information, which is almost always available, as indirect indicators. While personality traits could potentially be detected through free-text portions of profile pages or profile pictures, the coaches said such indicators are not consistent because personality expression is not intuitive in these manners (coach 17's quote in sidebar). Several coaches advocated that users relax their demographic "deal breakers" if the pictures are appealing, and use trait fields mainly to evaluate lifestyles choices and goals that have binary answers (e.g. smoking habits, desire for children). Most did not advise active evaluation of personality online.

MESSAGES ARE NOT INDICATIVE OF PERSONALITY COMPATIBILITY
The coaches tended to distinguish between information that may be indicative of a potential partner's personality, and information that may be indicative of personality compatibility (what some called "chemistry"). Some explained that while anecdotes written in free-text portions of profiles may sporadically reflect personality traits, they do little to help the evaluating user determine if their own personality will be compatible with the respective partner's in-person. When discussing messaging as a potential way to evaluate such compatibility, most of the coaches did not find it worth the time to engage in long messaging

conversations for this. They believed that users over-deliberate their message content, distorting any indications of personality. Instead, they advised using messaging primarily as a tool for arranging a date quickly and evaluating personality compatibility on the date (see coach 2 and coach 11's quotes).

Discussion

The coaches aimed to achieve "successful" user evaluations (i.e. online evaluations that match in-person evaluations) by deliberately minimizing user evaluation online. This strategy has not been exhibited so universally in other studies, yet it has merit under the lens of theories commonly applied to attraction. The coaches' advice to be less dependent on demographic trait "deal breakers" like minimum height is in line with attraction literature, rooted in Nisbett and Wilson's theory of introspection [10], showing that people lack introspective understanding of which traits will trigger their attraction in-person [4]. This suggests that the "relationshopping" approach found in prior work may not consistently predict attraction in-person [10].

The coaches advocated not trying to evaluate personality online because respective information is relatively scarce. This is in line with Asch's 1946 theory of person perception [1], which posits that "the characteristics forming the basis of an impression do not each contribute a fixed, independent meaning" (p. 268) but rather change meaning in the context of other known characteristics [1]. Under Asch's theory, the meaning of a personality trait can change depending on information available about other personality traits. A hypothetical scenario: a man writes in his profile that he meticulously organizes his desk at work, which a hypothetical female online dater takes as a signal of

conscientiousness. Yet on a date she finds that the man also wants to meticulously plan how much time they spend at each location because he is worried about being late for their dinner reservation. The female online dater still believes the man is conscientious, but the meaning of that trait has changed in light of information about his neuroticism. Online daters need multiple pieces of information about several personality traits to contextualize the meaning of even just one, but online dating systems do not consistently provide enough information to enable this contextualization. Yet as the coaches emphasized, evaluating a potential partner's personality means little if a user does not know if that personality is compatible with their own. To return to the previous scenario: our hypothetical female online dater learns of her potential partner's neurotic tendencies, but she soon finds that her own spontaneity, which spurs her to want to try a new restaurant that they spot on the street, helps her potential partner relax once he realizes that she is having fun regardless of their original plan.

Personality needs to be contextualized in relation to one's own personality to be truly understood, but online dating systems do little to facilitate evaluation of personality compatibility. Signaling theory, which originated in evolutionary biology to explain mate selection [15], lends an understanding as to why online dating systems poorly facilitate evaluation of personality compatibility. Signaling theory seeks to clarify the extent to which a piece of information is a reliable indicator (or "signal") of an unobservable quality. There are two main signal types, one being *conventional signals*, which are rather unreliable, because possession of a trait is merely stated or implied [3] (such as wearing a track suit implies

physical fitness). The other is *assessment signals*, which are inherently reliable because they require the possession of the trait for the signal to exist [3]. These signals often stem from observing the trait in action; e.g. observing a jogger run several miles is an assessment signal of their physical fitness.

Online dating systems consist predominantly of conventional signals of personality—a list of favorite books may imply intelligence, or a picture of one skydiving may imply openness to experience. On top of these conventional signals being inherently unreliable, they are poor signals of personality compatibility because they force users to imagine how the signaled traits will fit with their own personalities. Perhaps the only way for users to reliably evaluate how their personalities work together would be through assessment signals—to experience such compatibility "in action"—but there are no assessment signals of compatibility in today's online dating systems. It would be tempting to frame messaging interfaces as a facilitator of compatibility assessment. Yet text is still but a conveyer of conventional signals and, as the coaches believed and as previous work has shown [16], online daters often exploit the asynchronicity of messages to tailor their self-presentations. Messaging does not convey behavior and actions like those that users would witness on a date that allow contextualization of a partner's personality traits with their own personality traits. Similarly, matching algorithm results a la *OkCupid* may seem an assessment signal of compatibility, yet these supposed matches are conventional signals because they are based on self-report questionnaires and have no scientific support of being better than chance.

Our results suggest that system designers have a choice. They could actively stifle personality compatibility evaluation online to encourage users to meet in-person quickly (exhibited in newer online dating systems like *Grouper*, which has no interaction interface and instead schedules dates for users who have indicated mutual interest). On the contrary, designers could try to facilitate assessment signals of personality compatibility (evaluation of "us" instead of "him/her"), which will likely require new user evaluation components to supplement profiles and messaging.

Limitations and Future Work

This study presents one of the first dedicated efforts to investigate successful online dating strategies. However, the online dating coaches' strategies have not been independently validated, nor has their expertise been confirmed. Future work may engage in other methods such as controlled experiments of various user evaluation strategies to assess and compare their success rates (however "success" may be defined).

The coaches in this study advise making in-person meeting decisions quickly based predominantly on physical attractiveness, and purposely not trying to evaluate personality online. Through the lens of attraction-related theories, this strategy is borne out of an absence of assessment signals regarding personality compatibility in online dating systems. Future work may explore how online dating system design could enable assessment signals of personality compatibility. While currently rare [5], the state of online dating research can benefit from experiments that test novel evaluation tools in their ability to help users better predict in-person attraction to potential partners.

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