
Impression Management through Communication in Online Dating

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Abstract

People use online dating systems to form and create impressions of potential romantic partners. While there is a wealth of research on the use of profile pages for impression management in online dating systems, there is little work on how other forms of communication in these systems are used for impression management. This paper reports preliminary results from a qualitative study with users of a popular online dating system. Early findings from 24 in-depth interviews indicate that primary frustrations with online dating stem from inadequate feedback about conveyed impressions and perceived limitations in forming impressions of others. We discuss the implications of these findings for improving the design of online dating systems.

Author Keywords

Online dating; impression management, interaction

ACM Classification Keywords

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

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Finding 1: Frustrations stem from inadequate feedback about conveyed impressions

Elizabeth, 28: *"Most of these guys can't take a hint. They message me over and over again until I tell them to stop. I tell them why I'm not attracted, and then they want to argue with my reasons!"*

Barry, 24: *"I used to send long paragraphs, but now I send short messages where I try to make fun of the girls. Honestly, I have no idea what's working, I just don't want them to think I'm insecure."*

Ariel, 27: *"This one guy called me fat and messaged me with a diet plan. I guess he thought it was funny? It made me feel horrible about myself. I didn't log in for a couple weeks because of that."*

Isaac, 37: *"I'm putting a lot of time into these messages, you know? And then the girls just stop responding in the middle of it!"*

Introduction

Today one in three marriages begins online [8]. This burgeoning phenomenon is facilitated by online dating systems, led by names such as eHarmony, OKCupid, and Grindr [8]. Most online dating systems have three common attributes: matching/recommendation capabilities, public profile pages for users, and communication capabilities such as "poking," instant messaging, and e-mailing. There is a wealth of literature on matching algorithms and methods for improving user recommendations in an online dating context [1, 7]. Equally extensive is research investigating impression management—how users self-present themselves and how they develop impressions of others [2, 4, 5, 6]. However, impression management research in online dating is largely restricted to the role of users' public profile pages, with little attention towards other forms of communication between users [2, 4, 7]. While some research has examined communication in online dating, this work has predominantly featured studies where the subjects were not necessarily online dating system users, profile pages used were artificially constructed, or methods of communication investigated were limited to pre-written generic messages [1, 2, 6, 9]. As a result, we have a limited understanding of how real world impression formation is influenced by interpersonal communication in online dating systems. In this study we aim to understand the role of communication in the online dating process. Specifically, our research questions look at the interplay between public profile pages and other forms of communication in 1) self-presentation and 2) impression formation of others.

Method

This study has so far collected 24 in-depth interviews with users of a popular, free online dating system,

between the ages of 19 and 37, and who have been members of the system for 2 months to 5 years. The chosen online dating system offers four different communication methods to its users: asynchronous messaging akin to e-mail (referred to here as "site-native e-mail"), instant messaging, ratings (similar to a Facebook "poke"), and a feature that sets up two random users for a blind date. The system allows for a search of users based on specific demographic criteria. This feature was used to find and message 96 users each week within a 25-mile radius of the lead researcher of this study for an interview—6 men and 6 women from each of the 8 ethnicity categories on the site. Of the 480 users messaged over 5 weeks, 32 responded to message requests for an interview (17 men and 15 women), and 24 of those resulted in interviews (12 men and 12 women). Twenty were conducted in person at public locations such as coffee houses, and four through Skype. The interviews lasted between 28 and 72 minutes. Interviews were recorded and analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

Findings

1. The primary frustrations with online dating stem from inadequate feedback about conveyed impressions.

All female participants received site-native e-mails from men they had discontinued conversation with, asking why they did not respond or what they thought of them (see quote from Elizabeth in the sidebar). Female participants frequently recounted leaving the system for extended periods of time because of these excessive messages, and male participants often lessened their time spent on the system because they thought the

Finding 2: Conversation through site-native communication is an essential step in deciding whether to meet another user in-person

Jason, 32: *"I'm more interested in what the message is, and then what the person looks like and says in their profile."*

Jonathan, 30: *"The profile only helps me in the beginning, but yeah, it's our conversation that makes me want to meet him—or run away."*

Harold, 24: *"I usually ask them about their passions. Like this one girl had pictures [in her profile] of her traveling, so I asked her about it more because travel is a passion of mine too."*

Jennifer, 24: *"[E-mail] Messaging is so important because I want them to understand my lifestyle. I focus on parts I think the guy might have problems with."*

women were "bots" that never respond. Even though participants actively used site-native e-mail to convey impressions, the vast majority of participants said they were completely unaware of how they were being perceived by the person receiving the e-mails. These participants also admitted to frequently changing their messaging behavior because they were unsure if impressions were being formed as intended (see Barry and Ariel's quotes in the sidebar on the previous page). Participants explicitly expressed frustrations when a communication partner stopped responding to them without giving a reason (see quote from Isaac in the sidebar on the previous page).

2. Conversation through site-native e-mail is an essential step in deciding whether to meet another user in-person.

We found no evidence of profile information on its own leading directly to the exchange of contact information and an in-person meeting. Instead, all participants required a conversation through site-native e-mail before meeting a user in-person. Twenty two out of twenty four participants said that the content of site-native e-mail messages received was more important than information available on a public profile page when deciding 1) whether to respond to an initial message received and 2) whether to meet a user in-person (see quotes from Jason and Jonathan in the sidebar). They explained that through e-mailing they could ask probing questions about elements of the user's profile or bring up conversation topics that were requisite to their deciding if the user is a suitable romantic partner (See quote from Harold in the sidebar). Participants also valued site-native e-mail for its self-presentation capabilities because they felt they could tailor their self-presentation

to a specific user of interest by bringing up similarities, drawing attention to their good qualities, or stressing important parts of their lifestyle (see quote from Jennifer). Participants unanimously preferred site-native e-mail for communication over other methods such as ratings, instant messaging, and the blind date feature. Participants had unfavorable views of the ratings feature, calling it "too impersonal." They also expressed distaste for the blind date matching feature, citing discomfort with meeting a person in real life before having a conversation with them.

3. Users feel limited by existing online dating communication methods in forming meaningful impressions.

Most participants said they had taken their communication with a user off the online dating system faster than they would have liked, to avenues such as phone calls or Skype video chats. They felt that communication methods native to the online dating system limited how fast and how much information they could convey about themselves as well as gather to form impressions of others (see quote from Amanda in the sidebar on the next page). This sentiment is corroborated further by 19 participants saying that their primary purpose for in-person meetings was to validate an impression formed on the system or to develop more detailed impressions (see quote from Rebecca in the sidebar on the next page). Most of the participants had met at least one user in real life. A majority of their in-person meetings did not result in a second meeting. This was viewed as normal because participants believed that the first meeting in person was simply a step towards forming and validating an impression (see quote from Malcolm in the sidebar on this page). In addition, most

Finding 3: Users feel limited by existing communication methods

Amanda, 29: "Email is very artificial, and they can take the time to craft their persona. Now I make them do a Skype video chat. I want to see their conversation skills."

Rebecca, 23: "I try not to form impressions too much on the site because guys are always different on the site than in real life."

Malcolm, 25: "I've met seven girls. None have gone to a second date, but I was only genuinely excited about meeting one of them. It's normal because sometimes you meet just to get more information. Is there chemistry, you know?"

Katherine, 27: "My most recent date was so awkward. He sounded adventurous when we were messaging, but he wasn't very open-minded when we met at a restaurant."

participants admitted to forming impressions of partners that they felt turned out to be incorrect when they met in real life (see quote from Katherine in the sidebar on this page). Participants said they tended to form incorrect impressions online more often than correct ones.

Discussion and Future Work

As Goffman [5] suggests, impression management is actively pursued in all facets of communication. However, this study reveals that primary frustrations with online dating stem from users having inadequate feedback about conveyed impressions and inadequate information to form meaningful impressions of others.

The design of online dating systems can in part address these challenges through the development of feedback mechanisms and richer communication channels. Online dating system design could promote more consistent and formal feedback so that users can make more informed changes to their communication content and style. This can help users reduce wrong impressions and prevent the sending of repeated messages unknowingly to parties not interested in them. Online dating systems can also add additional rich communication methods [3] for users to gather more information essential to forming impressions that are currently gathered through means outside of the online dating system. As we continue this study and expand it to other online dating systems, we hope to gather further support for these design implications and develop additional guidelines for enhancing user experience on these systems.

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