

Nature of online  
dating and  
relationships  
psychology essay



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Early research on Internet self-efficacy focused on the performance of specific tasks such as entering World-Wide Web addresses, creating folders and bookmarks, mailing pages, using File Transfer Protocol (FTP) and telnet, constructing a hypertext index, and moving bookmarks (Nahl, 1996, 1997). Ren (1999) reported a measure of self-efficacy specific to searching for government information sources. Results were consistent with previous self-efficacy literature, with self-efficacy perceptions positively related to task performance (Nahl, 1996, 1997) and the amount of use (Ren, 1999).

The prior studies did not yield a measure of self-efficacy suitable for studying overall Internet usage, and reported no information about reliability and validity. In Nahl (1997), scale items confounded distinct behaviors; a single item asked about e-mail, hypertext mark-up language (HTML) scripting, telnet, and file transfer protocol. Nahl's measure referred to specific subsidiary tasks (e. g., creating bookmarks) instead of overall attainments (e. g., obtaining useful information) and thus did not properly reflect the constructive definition of self-efficacy. Ren (1999) operationalized self-efficacy in a manner more consistent with its conceptual definition (e. g., search the Internet by yourself), but a single item measure was employed so its reliability could not be determined. Ren's measure applied to a specific behavioral domain (i. e., seeking government information) rather than overall Internet use, limiting its future application.

In an effort to further understand psychological aspects of the Digital Divide, the present study builds on past research to develop a new measure of Internet self-efficacy. It assesses reliability and analyzes the construct validity of Internet self-efficacy by comparing it to measures of other

constructs thought to be positively related, negative related or unrelated on theoretical grounds (Anastasi, 1988).

## **Nature of online dating and relationships**

Within the popular press and scholarly literature, online dating is referred to as cyber relationships (Joinson, 2003), online romantic relationships (Anderson, 2005; Bonebrake, 2002; Levine, 2000), digital dating (Merkle & Richardson, 2000) and Internet relationships (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). Other terms include computer-mediated relationships (Scharlott & Christ, 1995; Whitty & Gavin, 2001), Internet dating (Hardey, 2002), online personals and mixed mode relationships (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison & Heino, 2006) and personal relationships online (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Looking at the myriad of terms referring to online dating or online relationships, it is fundamental to elucidate and define the latter. Traditional social psychological definitions and interpretations of relationships may contribute to the current understanding of online relationships. Schlenker (1984) believes that the existence of a relationship is a result of the interrelation of identities. More specifically, one develops a specific identity within each relationship with exclusive thought and behavioural patterns, which will, with relationship growth, lead to similarity and closeness.

Contemporary research pertaining to online relationships presents several interpretations of online dating. First, online matchmaking defines both online dating and online dating service (Houran, 2006). Second, online dating pertains to relationships of a romantic or friendship nature formed online by using online communication (Whitty & Gavin, 2002). Third, online

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relationships refer to relationships initiated and maintained online (Wright, 2004). Fourth, online relationships refer to mixed mode relationships, therefore online relationships develop and migrate to other environments such as the face-to-face environment (Ellison et al., 2006). Taken together, online dating pertains to an intentional, mediated search, meeting and relationship development with a preferred significant other using computer-mediated communication. Having defined online relationships, the focus of the following section is to consider the background of online dating.

As noted earlier, conclusions about online relationships in the popular press and scholarly literature are ambiguous. As such, one can expect the same ambiguity pertaining to the nature of online relationships. This section provides a brief outline of the nature of online relationships rather than a comprehensive discussion.

Researchers, theorists and academics are still pondering the nature of online dating. Two opposing schools of thought seem to have emerged: those deeming online relations as superficial, distant, unemotional and unsocial, and others classifying online relations as personal, unconventional, and a new alternative (Parks & Floyd, 1996). For example, online dating has been referred to as an audition for a real date (Barnes, 2001) and a relevant platform for relationship formation, although insubstantial for online relations (Civin, 2000; Hardey, 2002; Hills & Argyle, 2003; Utz, 2000). It is clear that the significance of online relationships is queried rather than the formation of online relationships. Evidence supporting such claims seems marginal.

Opposing such claims, some researchers regard online relationships as interpersonal (Barnes, 2001; Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Parks & Floyd, 1996; <https://assignbuster.com/nature-of-online-dating-and-relationships-psychology-essay/>

Sherman, 2001; Walther, 1995), more significant (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Wallace, 1999; Yum & Hara, 2005), exciting (Gwinnell, 1998) and real (Houran, 2006; Houran & Lange, 2004; Yum & Hara, 2005). Furthermore, online relationships are described as solid (Sherman, 2001) in which trust and commitment are commonly shared (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). Subsequently, one can assume that interpersonal online relationships are interactive and personal relations between two individuals.

Focussing on people's expectations and self-presentation, Gibbs et al. (2006) propose a model of perceived success of online relationships in their investigation of online dating relationships that migrate to face-to-face contexts (figure 1 illustrates this model).

Figure 1: Perception of successful online relationships model (Gibbs et al., 2006)

This model proposes that the perceived success of online relationships depends on the successful use of certain self-presentation strategies online. Three interacting processes contribute to the success of an online relationship:

(a) relationship goals – these goals include growth and relationship migration

(b) self-disclosure – pertains to the quantity, the positive or negative nature thereof, future intention and honesty in revealing personal information,

(c) online dating experience – describes online dating behaviour in terms of the magnitude of relationships initiated online and learning ability (namely, a <https://assignbuster.com/nature-of-online-dating-and-relationships-psychology-essay/>

person's ability to learn from previous experiences and then draw on this information in future online relations).

(d) Perception of success, Successful presentation of the self and strategic success.

Thus, successful online relationships that migrate to a face-to-face context may be achieved by fostering long-term goals, deliberately disclosing positive and additional personal information, and learning from previous online dating experiences (Gibbs et al., 2006).

Research suggests that online relationships are mostly heterogeneous with a romantic or friendship-like nature (Hardey, 2004; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Whitty & Gavin, 2002; Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2002; Yum & Hara, 2005). Furthermore, online relationships typically progress to other environments such as telephone and face-to-face contact (McKenna et al., 2002; Parks et al., 1996; Sveningsson, 2002). More recently, Wright (2004) identified two types of online relationships, namely primarily Internet-based relationships, that is relationships that are initiated in a face-to-face setting and maintained online, and exclusively Internet-based relationships, referring to relationships initiated and maintained entirely online. Online relationships may migrate to other environments or remain and develop online. This may be an important consideration in investigating the online persona. Ben-Ze'ev (2004) explains the nature of online relations as contradictory, firstly because of the geographical distance between those involved versus the immediacy of online communication.

Secondly, online communication is rich in meaning because of the high level of self-disclosure, but impoverished in terms of a lack of visual cues. Thirdly, despite the higher level of self-disclosure, participants stay anonymous. Fourthly, online relations are emotionally continuous and discontinuous because communication takes place with intervals at any time. Lastly, the intellectual and emotional input by far surpasses the physical effort. In summary, the broad characteristics of online relations include, but are not necessarily limited to, anonymity, self-disclosure and attraction, which include proximity and similarity. An understanding of these characteristics is needed to comprehend the online persona, which follows later.

Because two people disclose and share personal information, build trust and interdependence, and develop emotional closeness prior to physical attraction, these online relationships seem interpersonal. Therefore, in uncovering the online dating persona it is important to consider online relationships, specifically their formation, maintenance and success. Subsequently, the discussion turns its focus to online relationship formation.

## **Theoretical perspectives**

Face-to-face relationship formation has received a great deal of attention from theorists and researchers. In contrast, online relationship formation lacks empirical enquiry, with investigations into this field being very new and recent. This section reviews traditional and contemporary theories pertaining specifically to the formation of interpersonal relationships. In addition, this section examines contemporary research findings pertaining to online relationship formation compared to face-to-face relationships. To

conceptualise the formation of close interpersonal relationships within a <https://assignbuster.com/nature-of-online-dating-and-relationships-psychology-essay/>

face-to-face environment, the approach of Chelune, Robison and Kommor (1984) seems comprehensive. This traditional approach regards close interpersonal relationship formation as a mutual process of development. First, this approach assumes that the increased disclosure of personal information facilitates learning about a significant other. Second, continued interaction permits the mutual sharing of personal information, resulting in an enhanced sense of familiarity between those interacting. Third, the reciprocal interrelation of dependence, support and understanding builds a structure of future dependency. Fourth, with the acceptance and anticipation of the indefinite continuation of the relationship, this structure allows for behaviour alterations and develops to include mutual care, affection and trust (Chelune et al., 1984). This approach assumes the stages of face-to-face relationship formation to be self-disclosure, followed by familiarity, interdependence and closeness. These stages mirror those in the formation of online relationships; however, the developmental sequence differs.

The relational theory of development (Parks, 1997) is relevant in examining the formation of online relationships. Based on traditional social psychological theories pertaining to social relationships such as the social exchange theory and uncertainty reduction theory, Parks (1997) developed the relational theory of development.

This theory specifically addresses online relationship formation with the premise that online relationships either grow or deteriorate on a continuum ranging from impersonal to personal dimensions (Parks & Floyd, 1996).

Below is a description of each dimension along this continuum (Parks & Floyd, 1996):

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- (a) Dimension 1: Interdependence pertains to the mutual influence that increases with relationship growth, thus building a relationship embedded in mutual trust;
- (b) Dimension 2: Breadth explicates the increasing frequency of communication and social interaction;
- (c) Dimension 3: Depth refers to the increasing level of self-disclosure that facilitates familiarity and closeness;
- (d) Dimension 4: Commitment concerns the future predictions regarding the success or failure of the online relationship in accordance with the individuals' goals and attitude;
- (e) Dimension 5: Predictability and understanding pertains to the mutual agreement and understanding of a unique set of rules of preferred, acceptable and desired behaviour and interaction.
- (f) Dimension 6: Code change pertains to the development of a unique set of cultural and linguistic codes, referring to how the individuals express themselves and communicate, for example, with the use of emoticons.
- (g) Dimension 7: Online network convergence refers to the snowball effect of the social circle, whereby the relationship continuously expands to significant others and migrates to other communication channels such as telephonic communication.

Evidently, this theory captures the core features of online relational formation as a progressive process from the initial meeting, to maintenance

and termination or migration to other contexts. Several studies findings support the relational theory of development (e. g., Anderson, 2005; Gibbs et al., 2006; Soukup, 1999; Whitty & Gavin, 2001; Wolak et al., 2002; Wright, 2004).

### **1. It is easy to be fooled by inaccurate signals online.**

According to Binazir (2011), there are several pitfalls in online dating. If one thinks of him/herself as beautiful. ? What most people call “ beauty” is actually evolution’s very thorough system of broadcasting our suitability as a mate. Clear skin, good posture, broad shoulders, sonorous voice, bright eyes, shiny hair, graceful movements, pleasant aroma, facial symmetry, articulate speech: evolution has engineered features such as these into us to signal health, fertility, strength and intelligence.

When one goes online, instead of seeing a person up-close, hearing him speak and watching her move, what one gets is a blurry, postage-stamp size series of static photos which cannot be heard, felt, or smelt.

Most important of the missing signals may very well be smell, which some scientists believe underlies most of male-female attraction — what literally constitutes sexual chemistry. Studies show that we sense immune compatibility through smell — one way in which evolution decides whether two people should have kids together or not. This compatibility is vital to the viability of offspring, so it’s bypassed at our peril.

So when you go online, you’re subverting a process that has worked just fine for propagating the human species for the past 3 million years. Add to that

the fact that pictures can easily lie about age, complexion and physique, and you've got yourself a lot of inaccurate signals to go on (Binazir, 2011).

## **2. You can waste a lot of time online chasing what you don't want.**

Here's the timeline of a typical online courtship for a guy: He sees a profile of a woman he likes. He writes her. A day or two later, he gets a response. An online correspondence ensues. If she's receptive, the conversation moves to email after a few exchanges.

Binazir (2011) succinctly put it thus,

If her interest continues, they speak on the phone, and begin to plan a meeting. A week or two later, after anywhere from three to 10 or more points of online- and phone contact, they meet in person. And it turns out that she has bad skin (which didn't show in the flatteringly lit photos) or her butt is gigantic (which didn't show in her waist-up photos), or he's 6 inches shorter than advertised — or some other insurmountable shortcoming that could have been ascertained in the first 30 milliseconds of an in-person encounter.

In an instant, all those hours spent on witty emails, all of that effort to be charming on the phone, learning all about him or impressing her go whoosh! down the toilet.

In short, it pays to stop chasing shadows.

### **3. Deception in online dating**

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

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

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

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

#### **4. Online sites present an unhelpful excess of choice.**

When one logs into a dating website, the site presents one with several faces of prospective clients seeking being patronized. This is referred to as pot of fish (POF).

Schwartz (2003) in his book *The Paradox of Choice: Why Less is More* explained that more choice does not make us happier. More choice actually makes us more miserable.

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A typical online dating yields thousand of participants who seem to match our choice. Yet, it is not so easy to choose. One ends up been confused.

### **5. Irrelevant information presented out of context can preempt a good match.**

Binazir (2011) observed that since we are inundated with floods of people beckoning to us on a dating website with amorous smiles there is great chance that we keep up a dating game with a prospective lover with the readiness to do away such opportunity for another one at any flimsy excuse.

### **6. People online behave more rudely than they do in person.**

Have you noticed how much sheer hatred and incivility there is online?

Under the mask of e-anonymity, people feel they can behave anyhow because to a great extent they are untouchable.

As a result, it becomes easy to dismiss summarily a message that an admirer has invested time, effort and emotion to craft in fervent hopes of gaining your attention. A man who would never be ignored in person can be blown off hundreds of times online. And, as the authors of the book *Freakonomics* pointed out, over 90 percent of men on dating sites never end up meeting a woman.

### **7. Strangers with low accountability can get away with antisocial behavior.**

In his book *The Tao of Dating: The Smart Woman's Guide to Being Irresistible*, Binazir (2011) emphasized that women should only date men who are embedded within their social network — a friend of a friend at the

very least. That social accountability reduces the chances of their being axe murderers or other ungentlemanly tendencies.

When you go online, there's no guarantee of anyone having a back-connection into your social network. Especially in a big city, people will do bizarre, rude things under the cover of unaccountability. Stories abound about the girl who ordered everything on the menu at an expensive restaurant, or the guy who showed up to the date already drunk and proceeded to hit on the waitress — or far worse.

The statements above are straight from heart as the world is full of mentally deranged individuals who get thrilled with cyber stalking and playing on people's emotion. There is need to extremely carefully.

Even though they make great stories in retrospect, these are not experiences that you need to have even once per lifetime. Going out with people whom you implicitly know and trust keeps you safe and reduces the chances of weird shit happening to you.