Online Dating Behaviors of Persons With Social Anxiety

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Research Rationale

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Literature Review

The process of initializing and forming new kinds of relationships with strangers can be an intense experience for some people, especially when the other person is a potential romantic interest. The early stages of first interacting and getting to know a person is focused on reducing the feelings of the uncertain and unknown by seeking information about the other person (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Reducing uncertainty requires the willingness to disclose information about oneself, and this mutual vulnerability is essential to building intimate relationships (Reis & Patrick, 1996). But for some people who struggle with social anxiety, engaging in this process face-to-face ranges from uncomfortable to nearly impossible to do. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) defines social anxiety disorder as a condition where one consistently avoids and fears situations where they may feel scrutinized and ridiculed by other people. In the process of dating, a potential irrational fear becomes the reality; and those with social anxiety may look to indirect methods such as online dating to find companionship.

Online Dating as Adaptive Strategy

Early theoretical research into media usage and effects in this instance can be traced to Katz, Blumer, and Gurevitch's work on the uses and gratifications theory, which argues that audiences make active choices in the types of media they engage with and presumes that this behavior is done to fulfill a need or desire (Katz et al., 1973). It stands to reason that people who struggle with managing their anxiety by placing themselves in unsettling face-to-face social situations may consciously choose methods of communication that can both fulfill their desire for companionship and interaction but also provide a sense of control over one's surroundings and other intrapersonal or interpersonal variables that may cause distress.

This behavior of leveraging technology to fulfill social needs has been named POSI, or "preference for online social interaction" (Caplan, 2003). In Scott Caplan's research on online social interaction, he hypothesizes that there is a positive relationship between POSI behaviors and negative mental health states such as loneliness and depression (Caplan, 2003); Expanding on these findings there are also positive relationships between social anxiety and POSI behaviors (Coduto et al., 2020). This appears to be consistent with the assumption that POSI is an adaptive behavior of socially anxious people aimed to fulfill needs while avoiding in-person interaction (Coduto et al., 2020). Both studies focus on measuring the quantitative data of usage frequencies of online dating apps in individuals with mental health issues but does not address how online dating behaviors might differ based on intensity of social anxiety. The prior research also does not address if levels of social anxiety and communication apprehension would change over time. Is it possible that repeated exposure to social interaction via online dating will impact perceptions of anxiety? This study aims to examine the relationships between the usage of dating apps among people with varying levels of social anxiety and if those levels of anxiety change over time with regular use of dating apps.

Managing Relationships Through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

One of the most lucrative draws for socially anxious online daters is that online dating platforms offer both the opportunity to engage with people who are simultaneously close but still at a distance (Chan, 2017). This close-yet-far dynamic of CMC likely may prove beneficial to people who struggle with social anxiety in trying to balance the contradicting needs for connection and intimacy while preserving personal safety and control. Joseph Walther's work on social information processing theory (1992) presents the argument that the amount of information exchanged through CMC is at a lower rate than information that is exchanged

through face-to-face interaction. This limit on the amount and speed of information transmitted in CMC may provide opportunities for socially anxious people to better control their presentation of face. Without the fear of unintentional non-verbal messages such as facial expressions, speech disfluencies, and pressure to perform on cue the anxious person can gain a sense of empowerment in being able to think about and express themselves on their own terms. Removing the immediacy from communication in the form of initial dating interactions via text messaging exclusively appears to increase initial perceptions of social attractiveness (Antheunis et al., 2020). While there has been research done on social media and online dating usage in relation to mental health especially in terms of studying psychological effects and usage behaviors, there appears to be a lack of research in comparing how socially anxious people engage with dating apps compared to people who do not have social anxiety. Additionally, much of the research around dating and social anxiety do not address gender as a consideration. This study aims to examine if the asynchronous nature of online dating impacts levels of engagement with other people similar to those who are not socially anxious, as well as examining if gender plays a role in the process of online dating with social anxiety; Thus, this study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the differences, if any, between dating app usage behaviors between people with and without social anxiety?

RQ2: What, if any, are the differences in usage behaviors between male and female participants?

RQ3: Will there be any change in anxiety levels for people who commit to using dating apps after a period of six months?

Method

Participants

Recruitment of participants ($N = 300$) are done through two Facebook advertisements targeting people aged 18-35 in the United States who are not currently in a relationship and are currently using some form of online dating. This broad group is an ideal range for this study due to the likelihood that many people in this age range are both seeking some form of relationship and are likely to use online dating apps as a dating strategy. The first advertisement will offer participants a chance to win a $5-100 USD online gift card to Starbucks for taking short online surveys regarding anxiety and dating. The second ad published at five months into the study will only offer the opportunity to win a $5 USD Starbucks online gift card.

Participants are notified that their contact information as well as their consent to continue participating in the survey is required to qualify for the gift card and that their answers are only used for this study and are safely destroyed at the end of the experiment. Because this study is examining relationships and differences between genders and anxiety levels, using a quota sampling strategy is best suited for ensuring all the necessary categories are filled and minimize skewing of findings by an imbalance in gender or anxiety levels. Applicant surveys will continue to be accepted until the necessary quotas are fulfilled with participants that consent to continue in the experiment. Redundant submissions are destroyed to protect the privacy of the submitter.

Procedures

At the start of the experiment all potential applicants to the study that respond to the Facebook advertisement and consent to continue participating will take a survey that has two components: first is the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale or LSAS-SR (1987) that will assess a

participant's level of social anxiety, followed by a series of 50 questions that will assess participant's attitudes, feelings, behaviors, and experiences with online dating. These surveys will take about 15-20 minutes to complete and are designed using Qualtrics software that has both desktop and mobile interfaces to ensure ease of use and accessibility for all participants that may not have access to a desktop computer.

Participants will be sorted by quota into four groups: Groups A and B will be male and female treatment groups respectively; Groups C and D will be male and female control groups, respectively. Within each group there are three groups of 25 people who scored low (*LSAS-SR score: 0-33*), moderate (*LSAS-SR score: 34-66*), and high (*LSAS-SR score: 67-99*) scores of social anxiety. Participants in the treatment groups are asked to use their preferred online dating app at least once a week for at least 15 minutes for six months. At three months into the study and at the end of the study period participants will be asked to fill out the same survey including the LSAS-SR again, but questions will be switched around to avoid answering from memory. The control groups will be recruited at five months into the experiment and will only fill out the survey and LSAS-SR one time with no further requests. At the end of the study all participants in the four groups will receive a $5 USD Starbucks online gift card through email. All participants in the initial treatment group will be assigned a number that will be selected at random by computer to receive the $100 USD Starbucks online gift card.

Measures

Social anxiety. The LSAS-SR (1987), will be used to measure levels of social anxiety in participants throughout the study. LSAS-SR employs the use of dual semantic differential scales (0 = *none, 3 = severe*). The scale asks participants to consider a social situation and rate individually their feelings of *anxiety/fear* and *avoidance*. Scenarios for evaluation from

participants range from *going to a party*, to *urinating in a public bathroom*. Since the scale is designed to evaluate behaviors within the recent past, it provides insight to tracking anxiety levels over time. This scale is also used for initial categorization of participants based on their base anxiety level.

Speed of engagement. Measuring how quickly a participant will engage with a potential partner on a dating app will be measured by first asking if participants have *received any messages from potential matches in the past three months*, *searched and found a potential match within the past three months*, or *matched with someone in the past three months*. Additional questions seek clarification on how long participants waited to either respond or initialize contact with a desirable potential partner (*immediately, within a couple of days, within a week, not responded at all*).

Frequency of engagement. This measure seeks information on how often a participant interacts with people on dating apps which includes questions such as *have you logged in at least once the past three days (yes or no)* or *how many interactions with new people have you had the past three months (none, 1-3, 4-7, 9 or more)*. Survey questions for this measure aim to gauge how often participants are actively engaging with the dating app and if they are making attempts to connect with other people.

Conversion. This measure seeks to obtain data related to the process of converting the online-only dynamic between the participant and a potential partner. Participants will be asked for ratio data such as the *number of new dates in the past three months from online dating* to 5-point Likert scale questions (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) about their experiences in transitioning to in person meetings; for example, asking if participants *felt comfortable on this date*.

Communication comfort. This measure uses 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) questions to gain insight into the feelings of participants over their beliefs, feelings, and attitudes about specific communicative acts in online dating. Questions will address issues such as *feeling comfortable with sending a message to a potential date* to *I feel anxious about meeting this person for the first time*.

Gender. Participants will be asked to indicate what gender they identify as (*female/male*).

Data Analysis

With consideration that all the data collected in this experiment through ratio data, Likert scales, and semantic differential scales are all forms of continuous data. The ideal way to begin analysis of the data is to employ descriptive data techniques through calculating the mean and standard deviation of all the values in each variable. The data can then be visualized as a spread of data points to see how close or far the participants are from an overall mean of the entire group or within their own subgroup of gender or anxiety level.

With these calculations the data can be separated based on variables such as social anxiety levels and gender to address the first two research questions that asked if there were usage behavior differences between social anxiety levels or gender identification. By comparing the variance of the data measuring social anxiety from each observation point, levels of social anxiety in the group can be traced over time to address the third research question of whether online dating apps would influence social anxiety levels over the period of six months of the study. The result of this study also lends well to bivariate analysis to further study the role that gender plays in social anxiety and how that influences behaviors online.

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