Stranger Danger? Women's Self-Protection Intent and the Continuing Stigma of Online Dating

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Abstract

The present study examines the stigma associated with online relationship initiation and its relation to women's self-protective behavior. Self-protective behaviors are those an individual engages in to avoid becoming a victim of dating violence. Female participants from a Midwestern university ($N = 82$) were asked to read scenarios describing a hypothetical date. In one scenario, the prospective date was only previously known through an online social networking site, while in the other scenario, the date was previously known through brief face-to-face interaction. After reading the scenario, participants rated the importance of engaging in self-protection behaviors if they were in the date situation being described. As we predicted, participants assigned greater importance to self-protective behavior after reading the online meeting scenario than the face-to-face scenario. This tendency was especially strong among participants who had never been on a date with someone they had met online.

Introduction

Since online dating entered the mainstream public consciousness in the 1990s, a stigma is presumed to have been attached to using the Internet to form romantic relationships.[1] Online daters have been thought of as shy, anxious, incapable of maintaining "normal" interpersonal interactions, or interested primarily in sexual activity.[2] Online daters have also been perceived as desperate, using the Internet as a "last resort" for finding relationships because more traditional social interaction failed for them.[3] Further, individuals who meet potential relationship partners online may have concerns that the individuals they met online are misrepresenting aspects of their personality or their physical appearance.[4] At worst, an individual might be afraid that the people he or she meets online could be dangerous.[1]

Although these concerns have been present among people who use the Internet in various ways, meeting people via social networking and online dating Web sites has become more commonplace over the past two decades.[5] Virtually no couples met online prior to 1990, but research has shown that online dating is now one of the most common ways to meet romantic partners.[6,7] In fact, there is evidence that the Internet is replacing other more traditional ways individuals meet romantic partners (e.g., meeting through family, meeting at a bar).[7] There is also evidence that attitudes about online dating have shifted as well. Surveys have shown that 61% of romantically unattached Internet users agree that online dating is good for finding a mate.[8] Among online dating users, 79% reported that it is a good way to meet people. Further, only 30% of Internet users believe that those who use the Internet for dating are in "dire straits."[8] Thus, as using the Internet in many areas of life has become more normalized over time, acceptance of its use as a way of forming social connections and romantic partnerships may have increased as well.

Recent academic studies have also failed to provide evidence that the negative stereotype associated with online daters is accurate. Contrary to the idea that online daters are anxious, research has shown that individuals who are low in dating anxiety are those who are more likely to use the Internet for dating, seeing it as just another mechanism for meeting people.[9] Internet dating site users are often people who use the Internet in other capacities (e.g., job searches) and feel comfortable using the Internet in other areas of their lives.[10] People who are considered sociable are more likely to make use of Internet dating services than people who are less sociable.[11] Other research has demonstrated that although individuals may misrepresent themselves online, the nature and magnitude of these misrepresentations is frequently small.[12]

Recently, some have gone as far as to state that online dating has lost whatever stigma it originally had.[5] Others claim that despite its seeming acceptance as an appropriate avenue for meeting romantic partners and the lack of empirical support for the negative stereotypes of online daters, a stigma still remains.[13] One thing that is not clear is how

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relationships initiated online may be viewed differently from relationships that begin in a more "traditional," face-to-face manner. People may have become more accepting of relationships initiated online than they were 20 years ago, but these relationships may still be viewed as less desirable compared to those initiated in person. Thus, the stigma attached to online dating may be more apparent when it is directly compared with something more traditional. The present study was designed to examine this by looking specifically at date-related self-protection behaviors.

Self-protection is defined as the act of exhibiting behaviors intended to prevent oneself from being the victim of dating violence.[14] When women are cognizant of potential danger, it follows that they will be more likely to think about specific ways to protect themselves from getting into dangerous situations. Although academic research on online-initiated relationships has not supported the veracity of the associated negative stigma,[1,2,4] it is our contention that this stigma still influences individuals' dating-related thoughts and behaviors. There are many times when individuals may find themselves going on a date with another person who is not well known to them, but will they approach that date differently when the relationship was initiated online due to the negative stigma that may still linger?

Hypotheses

We predicted that the stigma that still surrounds online-initiated relationships would motivate women to think more about self-protective behavior when considering a date with an individual they have only previously known online compared to an individual they have met, even briefly, face-to-face (H1). Previous studies have suggested that online dating stigma is likely to be stronger among people who have little or no experience dating people that they have met online.[15] Therefore, we also predicted that women who have never dated someone they had met online would be more likely to emphasize self-protection than women with prior online dating experience (H2).

We also explored whether these predicted differences are affected by participants' age. Research has shown that younger people may have more favorable attitudes about online-initiated relationships than older people.[8] Additionally, it is possible that college-aged women are more familiar with the Internet and with social networking sites (SNS) than adult women and, as a result, may not find it as threatening or dangerous to go out on a date with someone only previously known to them online. Therefore, they may not show as large a difference in self-protection intent when their date was previously known to them online versus face to face. We predicted that college-aged and adult women would show similar self-protection intent when their date was someone they had met face-to-face, but that college-aged women would report lower self-protection intent than adult women when they had met their date online (H3).

Method

Participants

We collected data from 83 women at a private Midwestern university. Preliminary examination of the data revealed that one participant was an outlier on several measures (scores from three to six standard deviations from the mean), and consequently data from this individual was not used in any of the analyses reported in the paper. Our final sample consisted of 82 participants.

The participants were between the ages of 18 and 36 years ($M = 24.36$; $SD = 4.73$). Forty-seven of the participants described themselves as white, 19 described themselves as African-American, 5 as Asian-American, and 4 used the term "other" to describe their racial background. Seven of the participants identified as Hispanic. Forty-four participants were of traditional college age (18–23 years). Participants received either extra credit or entry into a raffle for a $40 Visa gift card in exchange for their participation.

Measures

Dating scenarios.   Participants were assigned to one of two conditions of the study based on the month in which they were born. This method of condition assignment was selected due to the functionality of the online survey software used for the study. Participants were presented with scenarios about hypothetical first date situations. One scenario (online meeting) described a situation in which the participant met someone on Facebook with whom she was interested in going on a date. We chose to use Facebook as the online meeting facilitator because its use is fairly common among college students, with more than 50 million individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 having Facebook accounts.[16] Online dating Web sites (e.g., Match.com, eHarmony.com) may not be used as frequently by college students because these individuals are in social situations that put them in regular contact with potential relationship partners.[7,13] The online meeting scenario read as follows:

> You have been corresponding with someone on Facebook and have exchanged comments and e-mails a few times. He is a mutual friend that you met on the site whom you do not know much about and have not met in person. You like his profile information and find him attractive. He asks you to go on a date with him and meet him for the first time in person. You are currently not in a relationship and are excited about meeting him.

The second scenario (face-to-face meeting) described a situation in which the participant met someone whom she was interested in dating from one of her classes:

> You have been talking with one of your classmates from school. You only know him from being in your class and from a few brief conversations you have had before and after class. You like him and find him attractive. He asks you to go on a date with him and see him for the first time outside of school. You are currently not in a relationship and are excited about meeting with him.

In both the online and face-to-face meeting scenarios, the two people going on the date shared a common social network but had minimal personal interactions.

Dating Self-Protection Against Rape Scale.   Participants' intent to engage in self-protective behavior was measured using the Dating Self-Protection Against Rape Scale (DSPARS) developed by Moore and Waterman.[14] On this measure, respondents are asked to report how important safety-related behaviors (e.g., letting a friend or family

member know where you are; meeting in a private place instead of a public place) would be when going out on a date with the person described in the scenario. The unidimensional measure consists of 15 items on a Likert-type scale from 1 = "not at all important" to 6 = "very important," with higher scores indicating greater self-protection intent. Moore and Waterman's study demonstrated a high level of internal consistency for the DSPARS ($\alpha = 0.82$).[14] Strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.86$) as well as convergent validity of the measure have been demonstrated by other scholars.[17]

Dating background and Internet usage questionnaire. A dating background questionnaire was created to gather information about the participants' previous and current dating experiences. Participants were asked to report whether or not they were presently in a relationship, how many different people they estimated they had gone on dates with in the past, how frequently they went on dates, and how appealing Internet dating seemed to them. Participants were asked whether they had ever met someone in person who they had only known previously online, and those who answered affirmatively were asked to indicate whether they had met the individual for a date. Finally, participants were asked to estimate the number of hours per week they spent on Facebook.

Procedure

The measures were presented to participants using web-based survey software. After providing consent, the participants were presented with one of the two dating scenarios. After reading the scenario, participants filled out the items on the DSPARS to measure their intent to self-protect if they were in that situation. Afterward, participants completed the dating background and demographic questionnaires. They were then debriefed regarding the purposes of the study.

Results

Dating background, Internet usage, and self-protection

The sample included 49 participants who were in a relationship at the time of the study, and 33 participants who were not. Twenty-six participants (31.7%) had gone on a date with someone they had only previously interacted with online. This percentage is consistent with previous research.[15,18] Participants' responses to the 15 items on the DSPARS ($\alpha = 0.82$) were averaged to create an overall DSPARS score. Self-protection intent, as measured by the DSPARS, was not affected by whether participants were in a relationship. Participants' self-protection intent was negatively correlated with how appealing they found Internet dating, but this relationship did not achieve statistical significance ($r = -0.17$, $p = 0.14$). The correlation between the number of hours participants spent on Facebook and self-protection intent was not significant ($r = -0.08$, $p = $ns).

Face-to-face versus online meeting scenarios

It was predicted that participants would report greater intent to engage in self-protective behaviors after reading the online meeting scenario than after reading the face-to-face (FTF) meeting scenario (H1). It was also predicted that this effect would be stronger among those who had not previously had a date with someone they had met online (H2). A 2×2 (FTF vs. online meeting × online dating experience: yes or no) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on participants' DSPARS scores.

The results showed a marginally significant main effect for meeting the condition on self-protection intent. As predicted, participants reported greater self-protection intent for the online meeting scenario ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.62$) than they reported for the FTF meeting scenario ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.52$), $F(1, 78) = 3.76$, $p < 0.06$. This result, while marginally significant, is in the predicted direction, and provides some support for H1. However, this main effect is qualified by a significant interaction between meeting type and online dating experience, $F(1, 78) = 4.31$, $p < 0.05$. Participants who had experience going on a date with someone they had met online did not show a significant difference ($t < 1$, $p = $ns) in self-protection intent for the online and FTF meeting scenarios (see Table 1 for means). Participants who had never gone on a date with someone they had met online did show a significant difference in self-protection intent ($t(54) = 3.56$, $p < 0.01$). These participants reported greater intent to self-protect for the online meeting than they did for the FTF meeting (see Table 1 for means). These results support H2.

Age and self-protection intent

Two groups were created to examine further differences in self-protection intent between women of different ages. The first group consisted of traditional college-aged participants (age 18–23 years). The second group consisted of adult participants who, although in college classes, were older than traditional college undergraduate students (age 24–36 years). A 2×2 (online vs. FTF meeting × college-age vs. adult) ANOVA was performed with the same covariates as were used in the previously described analyses. In addition to replicating the main effect for meeting type described above, a significant main effect for age group on self-protection intent was found, $F(1, 78) = 4.92$, $p < 0.05$. College-aged participants reported lower self-protection intent ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.59$) than did adult participants ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.57$). The interaction between meeting type and age group was not significant ($F < 1$, $p = $ns). College-aged participants were just as likely as adult participants to report greater self-protection intent for the online meeting scenario than for the FTF meeting. This finding failed to support H3.

TABLE 1. INTENT TO SELF-PROTECT FOR DATES MET FACE-TO-FACE AND ONLINE AMONG THOSE WITH OR WITHOUT ONLINE DATING EXPERIENCE

		Face-to-face meeting		Online meeting	
		n	M (SD)	n	M (SD)
Online dating experience	No	30	4.30 (0.50)[a]	26	4.84 (0.62)[b]
	Yes	14	4.62 (0.50)[a]	12	4.60 (0.61)[a]

Note. Means in the same row that are significantly different from each other are noted with different superscript letters.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the continuing prevalence of online dating stigma in the context of women's self-protective behaviors. We hypothesized that participants would report more intent to engage in self-protective behavior when a hypothetical date was only previously known to them through online interactions than when a hypothetical date was someone they had met and briefly interacted with in person. The data supported this hypothesis. Women thought self-protective behaviors would be more important when going on a date with someone they met on Facebook than with someone they met at school. This effect was found among college-aged and adult women, and was stronger among individuals who had no prior experience dating someone they had met online.

Even though online dating is more normative now than it was 20 years ago,[3,5,7,8] it seems that some negative ideas about online relationship initiation still influence individuals' judgments. Although many women are comfortable with the Internet and SNS, the idea of meeting romantic partners online may trigger concerns over dealing with awkward, socially maladjusted people or fears of misrepresentation that make self-protective behaviors seem more important. Although there is not reliable evidence that these individuals pose greater threats than individuals one could meet through face-to-face interactions,[11,12] the results of this study show that there is still some stigma attached to meeting potential romantic partners online. Future studies should also investigate whether the stigma surrounding online-initiated relationships is stronger when online dating Web sites (e.g., Match.com, Eharmony.com) are considered rather than more general SNS like Facebook. It is possible that people would be more anxious about meeting individuals from an online dating Web site because of the pressure those individuals might feel to make themselves desirable to potential romantic partners. With that pressure might come more incentive to be dishonest. It is also possible that online dating sites trigger more concerns about online predators than SNS that could be used for a wider variety of purposes.

While we believe that this study provides evidence for the stigma of online dating, there were limitations to the current study that could be addressed in future research. First, we only included one measure of self-protection intent. It is possible that the stigma of online dating leads women to engage in some forms of self-protection more than others, which could give greater insight into what it is specifically that they fear about men they meet online. Second, the current study focused exclusively on women's self-protection concerns in online and traditional dating situations. Future research should investigate how men are affected by online dating stigma, whether in the context of self-protection or in some other context. Finally, future studies can be conducted with larger samples to enhance the reliability of the statistical analyses. Studies should also be conducted outside of a university setting to extend the generalizability of the current findings.

In conclusion, people might have more concerns about trusting individuals they meet online compared to those they meet face to face, but many of those concerns may be unfounded. As long as the stigma attached to online relationship initiation continues, people may needlessly limit their options for finding partners and miss out on opportunities for satisfying relationships.

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