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Running Head: PERSONALITY AND INTERNET DATING

Finding Love Across the Wires

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Dr. Judy Caldwell, Instructor

Camosun College

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Finding Love Across the Wires

What type of Internet websites were more than five million people worldwide using on a regular basis in December 2000?

While most answers would probably range from pornography sites to home-shopping sites, Media Metrix reported that on-line

dating services, such as Matchmaker.com and SocialNet.com,

were the sites boasting these high regular users as the end of the

year approached in 2000 (Stone, Rogers, & Platt, 2001). One

may suggest these numbers appear inflated; yet, research

suggests that those that meet significant others on the Internet are

hesitant to tell family members and friends how they met their

partners (P. L. Ng, personal communication, April, 5, 2002). Be

it lack of physical contact or the safety concerns surrounding it,

the Internet remains a taboo method to meet a romantic partner.

This paper examines the types of people that fall in love on the

Internet using four personality theories (Trait, Cognitive,

Behaviour/Social Learning, and Humanistic) as a basis. In

addition, this paper will provide reasons to explain why a

growing number of people are using the Internet in search of

love, while others remain hesitant and firmly against Internet

relationships (IR). As will be demonstrated, however, no one

theory can accurately describe the "type" of people that are

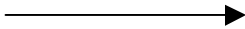
involved in IRs.

A rapid increase in the number of Internet-users seeking love on the Internet has generated mass amounts of research within the past few years. Psychologists are specifically interested in who is engaging in romantic relationships over the Internet and why.

Because research in this area is fairly recent, this paper will proceed on the premise that some people are more likely to engage in IR's than others. One is then confronted by the question: How does one describe this "type" of person and their motives? Thus, this paper begins with the trait theory approach, which tends to be the most descriptive of the four theories discussed in this paper. Trait theories view personality as a combination of traits, where a trait is a stable internal characteristic that people display consistently over time. Traits make people unique, identifiable and generally predictable (Burger, 2000; Newell & Anderson, 1982; Robins, 1989).

Eysenck (1997), a prominent trait theorist, developed a model that proposes three major personality dimensions: extraversion (E), introversion (I), neuroticism (N), and psychoticism (P). These dimensions, particularly E, I, and N, have been used to characterize the type of people who engage in IRs. People who score high on E are sociable, impulsive, active and optimistic, whereas people who score high on I are passive, quiet, careful, reserved (Burger, 2000). People with high scores on N are anxious, depressive, shy, and

List two or more works by different authors within the same parentheses in alphabetical order by the first author



moody, whereas people with low scores on N are stable, calm, even-tempered, and reliable (Burger, 2000; Peris, 2002). Peris (2002) carried out an exploratory study of personality profiles of Internet users, using Eysenck's Personality model (Peris, 2002). The main findings suggest that no distinctive personality profile of people in IRs exists. Conversely, Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox (2002) found that E and N were strongly correlated with a person's definition of their "real me" on the Internet ($E, r = -.045, p < 0.01$; $N, r = .33, p < 0.05$). They concluded that I and N people express their "true selves" on the Internet, while Es and nonneurotic people express their "true selves" in the "real world" (Amichai-Hamburger, et al., 2002). These findings have several implications. The study supports the theory that IRs, who are often too shy or anxious to initiate new social relationships, especially romantic ones, use the Internet to practice social skills and to build self confidence; however, this study fails to account for Es and Ps who are high sensations seekers (Burger, 2000; Robins, 1989; Zuckerman, 1994). The Internet may provide an additional source of stimulation to meet E's and P's high demands. Furthermore, Es being sociable and having low levels of social anxiety would predictably use any method of meeting a potential partner, including the Internet.

Trait theory researchers have also examined other areas regarding attributes and preferences of people who are in IRs including;

2000). Half of the population has experienced anxiety related to a social encounter, which often leads to feelings of awkwardness, self-consciousness, and inadequacy (Zimbardo, 1977). Because the underlying cause of social anxiety is believed to be evaluation apprehension (Burger, 2000), one may suggest that the Internet is providing shy and socially anxious people a new means to meet people. Meeting people online provides a safe social atmosphere where socially anxious people can interact with each other without the ominous physical presence and proximity of others (Amichai-Hamburger, et al., 2002). Furthermore, people in IRs are able to rewrite what they wish to say, which provides socially anxious people with valuable time to gather their thoughts and control their racing emotions. Overall, the Internet may actually help reduce social anxiety for some people. Knox, Daniels, Sturdivant, and Zusman (2001) report that 50% of respondents felt “less shy on the Internet than face to face,” while Amichai-Hamburger, et al. (2002) noted that the Internet allows people to take smaller steps in relationships, than in the “real world.” People in IRs often prefer the privacy that the Internet offers, especially during adolescence when peer group gossip and judgment often interfere with a potential romantic encounter. Finally, people in IRs tend to be empathetic and value close, genuine relationships, and know exactly what they are looking for

in their potential mates. Honesty, true love, dependability, and monogamy remain the characteristics most valued by both people in IRs and those seeking an IR (Knox, et al., 2001).

While attempting to define the “type” of person that engages in IRs, researchers are examining from a cognitive approach the self-schemas that people have, and the types of attributions that people make. Self-schemas are generalizations that one forms about themselves, based on past experiences (Burger, 2000). A person incorporates trait concepts and aspects of their behaviours that are most important to them in their self-schemas. A person who has had very negative experiences with romantic partners may find engaging in another relationship petrifying and make many negative attributions. For example, a person who has had a series of unsuccessful relationships may make internal and stable attributions that they will never find a partner. However, as research by McKenna, Green, and Smith (2001) suggests, the Internet provides people who have destructive self-schemas and tendencies toward making negative intrinsic attributions, with an environment to safely explore and reorganize one’s self. In addition, people with identities that have social stigmas or stereotypes attached, may choose to engage in IRs to minimize the threats and embarrassment that often accompany such personalities in the “real world.”

Rotter, a Social Learning Theorist, developed a model to

predict a person's behaviour potential involving the following variables; perception, expectancy, and values (Burger, 2000). A researcher could use Rotter's model to predict what type of people engage in IRs compared to "real world" relationships. For example, if the person who had a series of unsuccessful relationships had the option to go on a date with someone, there would be a high expectancy of being rejected, with a low value and thus low behaviour potential. Although Rotter would argue that this person's expectancy would generalize to meeting someone online, research suggests that the Internet provides a comfortable outlet for people to learn appropriate social skills. Armed with these social skills, a significant number of people develop close relationships on the Internet that eventually move into the "real world" (McKenna, et al., 2001). Thus, the Internet provides a stepping-stone for socially unskilled people and those who have had negative past experiences.

Human psychologists generally emphasize personal responsibility, living in the now, phenomenology of the individual, and personal growth (Burger, 2000). Two prominent psychologists are highly regarded for their work in personality psychology from a humanistic approach; Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Rogers (1951) explored the observable difference between a person's "ideal" and "real" selves, whereas Maslow (1971) arranged five

arranged five basic needs (physiology, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization) into a hierarchy of needs known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Recent research reports that people who have difficulty merging their "ideal and "real" selves in the traditional methods, often have increased success on the Internet (Amichai-Hamburger, et al., 2002; McKenna, et al., 2001).

Consequently, one could hypothesize that people in IRs tend to develop more fulfilling relationships on the Internet because they are the types of people whose "real" selves are more accurately expressed in an environment that minimizes social anxiety, such as the Internet.

Rogers (1951) argued that a healthy person must be able to explore and express their true self in order to achieve personal satisfaction. As the world moves into a more technologically based social system, research by Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2000) suggest that Roger's theory has retained its importance into the twenty-first century. They found that neurotics and introverts were more likely to identify and explore their "real" self on the Internet, which often allowed the "ideal" and "real" selves to slowly merge. Extensive research by McKenna, et al. (2001) explores the sexual aspect of IRs, self, and identity. People who have marginalized sexual desires may discover that the Internet is a haven where they

can express and explore their sexual identity without fear of being chastised by the ones they care about. This allows a person to incorporate previously unaccepted aspects of their identity into their self-concept. Because people have innate belongingness, love, esteem, and self-actualization needs that are fulfilled through social interactions and close relationships, as illustrated, the Internet attracts people that have difficulties satisfying Maslow's hierarchy of needs through traditional means.

The majority of research suggests that a distinct type of person in IRs is emerging (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000; Merkle & Richardson, 2000; Peris, 2002). The category includes people that are in IRs because they are vulnerable to loneliness and find self-disclosure in face-to-face interactions difficult. Ironically, self-disclosure in IRs tends to be more straightforward, intimate, and richer (Merkle, et al., 2000). The difference in degree of self-disclosure between face-to-face relationships and IRs may be accounted for by the necessity to overcome the lack of physical contact in IRs. However, IRs provide the social satisfaction of face-to-face encounters that are necessary to combat loneliness, independent of the lack of physical contact. of aging on memory. Extensive research by McKenna, et al. (2001) explores the sexual aspect of IRs, self, and identity. People who have marginalized sexual desires may discover that the Internet is a haven where they

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and wires, people are able to logoff when they want to discontinue a relationship, which may make ending relationships easier. The ramification of this worries some researchers, who fear that individuals will “focus on conflict avoidance instead of negotiation and reconciliation” (Merkle, et al., 2000, p. 114). Because this is a fairly recent area of study, the amount of research is limited and subsequent research is needed to further explore these avenues. As this paper has demonstrated, an eclectic theory that openly encompasses all research is necessary if researchers want to describe the type of people that find love on the Internet and why they do so.

References:

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- works with the same first author and with different additional authors are ordered by the name of the second author

Note: never change the order of authorship within a reference!

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Types of References:

Journal article →

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