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## **Privacy and Online Dating** Brent McRae and Jessica McKnight

### **Introduction to Online Dating**

Imagine that you are one of the millions of customers who are participating in online dating sites to meet that someone special. Why did you decide to date online in the first place? There are multiple reasons given for why online dating is becoming so popular. Many online daters argue that the dangers associated with online dating are actually the same or less dangerous than those associated with conventional means of dating, such as meeting people at bars and night clubs. Some also argue that being able to preview a person's profile and personal information online makes subsequent physical dates much less stressful. Other benefits to online dating include the sheer number of singles looking for a match, the ability to meet someone from the comfort of your own home, decreased fear of rejection, and the reduction of time constraints on traditional courting. Nonetheless, the fact that online dating occurs in a virtual world does not mean that real world threats do not exist.

Take the case of Polly (name changed to protect privacy), for example. Polly is a 25-year old woman from California who, like millions, turned to Internet dating as a means of increasing her chances of meeting the "one." She began conversing with a young man, George (name changed to protect privacy), after an Internet dating site deemed that the two were compatible. At first, George seemed to really be what Polly was looking for and the two quickly began conversing online and eventually moved to daily phone calls. Despite how close they became, Polly was still cautious of what information she revealed, contending that she greatly valued her privacy. After a few days of speaking on the phone, Polly's opinion of George suddenly changed. He began disclosing to her stories of narcotics abuse, emotional instability, and an inability to get through the day without speaking to her. When Polly politely ended things between her and George, she had no idea that her nightmare was just about to begin. While asleep in the middle of the night, Polly heard a loud knock at the door. When she asked who it was, the reply was "It's me, George." Polly, shocked and confused, recalled that she had never given him her address, and that the only personal information he did have, her phone number, was unlisted.

Although Polly's case did not worsen after George showed up at her house, she did put herself in a position to incur substantial danger. This is just one case of many where a person's life and privacy was put in jeopardy as a result of an online dating site (Online Dating Experiences).

This chapter critically reviews the problems with privacy and online dating, such as the case of Polly above. The research will attempt to answer the following questions: Can certain people be more easily targeted than others? And, what makes someone a more susceptible target of potential online dating scams and predators? Revealing too much information is what makes someone susceptible to online dating problems. If this is the case, then how much information is too much? And who generally reveals an unsafe amount of information?

This chapter also focuses on observed affiliations between categories of people and the amount of information that they reveal. The effects that age, sex, and political affiliation have on a person's susceptibility to online dating calamities can be better understood by analyzing over 800 profiles from the top online dating sites (Match.com, True.com, and Yahoo! Personals).

## **Background of Online Dating**

As early as the 1960's, computers have been used to link people together by their likes, dislikes, hobbies, and turn-ons (Hamilton 83). Computer dating developed into a simpler and cheaper relationship tool in the 1990's. Since the start of Match.com in 1995, this industry has blossomed along with Internet growth. The latest Neilson/NetRating, conducted in August 2004, indicated that there are over 22 million active members on the top five online dating sites.

Today, it could not be easier to create an account on any of these Internet dating sites. All that is needed is a computer with an Internet connection and a little bit of time. The routine for viewing or joining online dating sites is very similar. On the home page the user can search for the type of man/woman you desire. Members designate ages, location, your gender, and the gender of the desired partner. Once submitted, the dating site will generate a list of profiles meeting your criteria. If your interest happens to be peaked by one of the profiles, an account must be created with this site where you will be asked to provide personal information. The personal information divulged is then used in the matchmaking process, whereas some sites will automatically match compatible profiles. The time it takes to fill out these personal surveys ranges, and common traits amongst surveys from various sites include age, location, income, occupation, education, and can include pictures of the user. Some members disclose this information without regard to privacy, while others restrict their profiles to the basics. Although this process may seem harmless, one must consider the dangers of providing Internet dating sites with such a plethora of personal information.

## **Privacy and Safety Implications of Online Dating**

When participating in online dating, there is significantly more to worry about than just trying to meet that special someone. As with other social networking sites, Internet dating services pose a great deal of threats and privacy concerns. Potential dangers include stalking (both physically and on the Internet), sexual assault, fraud, identity theft, financial losses, security, privacy ploys, and exposure to offensive material, including materials that a user may not know is being stored on their computer such as child pornography or other graphic or illegal materials.

Many Internet dating sites are free and offer no assurance as to the true identity of those using their services. Even the majority of sites that require users to pay a membership fee still do not guarantee that the identities of their users are accurately portrayed. Potential suitors on online dating sites may simply be lying about their hair color or body type while others may be lying about their gender, age, and intentions. Various up and coming online dating sites are beginning to target niche markets providing comfort for specific on-line segments. The niches range anywhere from specific professions, such as teachers or doctors, to particular sexual orientation sites, sites designed for Star Trek fanatics, as well as a site specifically designed for pet lovers. Although these sites are designed to make the user feel more comfortable and safer in meeting their potential suitors, none of these sites offer assurance that those involved in this dating network are truly who they claim to be.

Another major issue with online dating is the availability and accessibility of user information. The majority of sites that require users to pay membership fees allow any interested party to access and review user profiles and information. The range of information given in many user profiles can reveal a great deal about a person. This information includes, but is not limited to: appearance, city of residence, occupation, age, interests, income level, and other personal affects. By analyzing the information provided combined with using other public resources, Internet daters may be revealing more about themselves than they originally intended. For example, without paying for a membership, the authors of this chapter were able to quickly identify and locate people. By conducting a search within Yahoo! Personals, the authors found many profiles listing a great deal of private information. One such subject, John (name changed to protect privacy), commented that he was a junior, sociology major at the University of Colorado. This information was used to locate him on another social networking site, Facebook.com, which revealed his address, phone number, place of employment, in addition to other personal information. The authors stopped their search of information of this matter to avoid possible legal ramifications. However, this is just one case of how easy it is for potential online predators to obtain personal information about someone without their knowledge. It is clear to see that if John's personal information were to fall into the wrong hands, he could be at risk of being stalked, robbed, or worse. With all of these dangers of online dating, safety protections for Internet daters is becoming a pressing issue.

## **Current Protections for Online Daters**

Although the majority of sites are doing nothing to regulate the safety concerns associated with online dating, a few websites have initiated efforts to combat the recognized dangers of Internet dating. Two such sites are True.com and SafeDate.com. True.com offers background checks on complying members. Other members on the site can see that checks have been done, which somewhat alleviates potential online dating risks. SafeDate.com also does background checks and grants users “stamps” which they can put on any online dating site so that other users may see that they have undergone and passed a criminal background check. Although these sites are making progress towards improving the safety of online dating, the majority of the numerous dating sites remain unregulated (Links).

Just as online daters and their respective dating sites are becoming ever more guarded about the risks of Internet dating, so are state governments. Although a debate exists over whether online dating sites should simply be regulated by the websites themselves, more and more states are passing and proposing laws to protect users from criminals or predators who may wish to harm them. Over the last year, New York, California, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, Virginia, and Texas have introduced legislation regarding online dating. Some of these states mandate that criminal background checks be conducted on registered users, while others simply require the website issue a warning stating that they do not require background checks. Although background checks may eliminate some of the risks associated with online dating, the problem with requiring them is that users are giving up the anonymity that made dating sites so popular (Ramastry).

## **Current Online Dating Research**

Internet dating is a relatively new idea, but extensive research has already taken place. While this chapter focuses on the characteristics of people that are more open in disclosing their personal information, additional hypotheses have been researched. Other research projects that look at different aspects of online dating include: “Self-Presentation in Online Personals,” by Jennifer Gibbs, Nicole Ellison, and Rebecca Heino; an extensive research project being conducted at Berkley; and the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

The Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino project focuses on the role of anticipated future interaction, self-disclosure, and perceived success in Internet dating. The main hypothesis focuses on how the importance of wanting a long term face-to-face relationship that results from online dating affects honesty in self-disclosure, and how that relates to the aggressiveness and intention of those actions for successful face-to-face meeting (Ellison, et al).

Berkeley has a team of five researchers in the School of Information and the Department of Psychology working together on two tracks regarding online dating. Track one is a quantitative behavioral analysis. This research project’s goals are to answer fundamental questions which include, what predicts how many messages a given user will receive and what is the effect of having a photo on communication success? Track two examines perceptions and expectations. Track two follows on the heels of another scientific finding on online dating done by the Berkeley team, which showed that relationship success heavily

correlated to actual and perceived similarities between the two parties (Fiore, et al).

The Pew Internet and American Life Project shows the correlations between the use of online dating sites and the users' safety knowledge. The majority of the project is statistical analysis of a survey given to over 15 millions Americans. Through widespread use of online dating and through these other research initiatives, it is becoming clear that online dating is an emerging issue in our increasingly technological society (Pew). The authors of this chapter hope to shed some light on what categories of people are predisposed to revealing too much personal information, thus, making them greater targets of online dating predators. In summary, the research is aimed at proving that certain groups are at higher risk to online dangers than their counter parts.

### **Method of Data Collection**

The process for collection was simple. On dating sites, there are various search criterions that one can chose from when looking at possible profiles. Basic criterions include sex, race, age, location, and so on. For the purpose of this research, the primary targets are age, sex, and political affiliation. In order to run searches on profiles, a randomized search of conservatives and liberals was used. We picked zip codes throughout the country and put in the largest allowable location distance of 500-1000 miles. This search brought up the maximum profiles, which were randomly selected to use as our data population.

After a profile was pulled up, its data was examined, and answers were recorded to the targeted data points. In order to quantify the data, three possible codes for responses were used: 0 points for no response or a response of "I'll tell you later;" 1 point for a simple response to a pull down item menu; and, 2 points for a descriptive answer or a response that is above and beyond the pull down menu options. For example, on Match.com, there is a pull down menu of responses available for different subjects. For an occupation query, Match.com gives about 20 choices such as administrative/secretarial, medical/dental, executive/management, labor/construction, etc. The points for each subject were then totaled and used for analysis.

The three sites used for this research were Match.com, True.com, and Yahoo! Personals. Each site is slightly different but all had the primary profile questions needed for the research. Our target questions included: occupation, education, income, children, living situation, and how many pictures the profile included. We will discuss and analyze these target questions for each subject based on the demographics of sex, age, and political affiliation.

### **Explanation of Online Dating Sites**

Match.com was probably the most useful dating site, returning results with substantial data; and hence, the reason that the majority of the subjects came from this site. The set-up for the profile in Match.com is the most in-depth of the three sites used. There are four sections of each of the profiles that were used for data collection. The preview section; which includes age, race, location, and number of children, was reviewed for this basic information. The second section used was the

“More photos of me section”, which had the number of extra photos of the subject. Third, “In my own words” is a section to determine if the subject explained more about their occupation and education. This section allows the subject to type their response in sentence form. The last section used for gathering information on research subjects was “About me.” This section contains the basic pull down menus from which the following was gathered: education, occupation, income, political affiliation, and living situation.

True.com was a great site for collecting information, except it does not use political affiliation as one of its criteria, which was a large part of this research. Although it does not provide a lot of extra information similar to Match.com, it did provide useful profiles that allowed for easy recording of targeted data. It has occupation, education, and income pull downs, as well as, children, race, age, and sex. It also has a small section for a personal statement that was used to record the ‘2 point’ data.

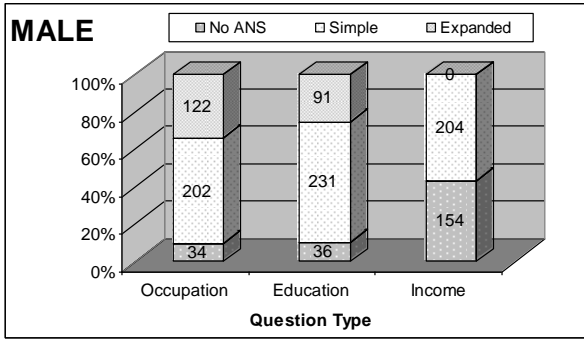
The last site used in the collection of data was Yahoo! Personals. This site had significant information right up front. The set up of Yahoo! Personals allowed the user to start by personalizing settings in order to view the precise information wanted about each chosen profile. Yahoo! Personals has all the criteria sought, including political affiliation. Yahoo! Personals also has a maximum allowance of five pictures that can be uploaded per profile. The reason for Yahoo! Personals being used less than Match.com was the limited personal response area. While Yahoo! Personals had a basic response box in order to elaborate on yourself, it did not go into as much depth as Match.com.

## Results

After the collection and analysis of the data, many interesting results presented themselves in regards to the amount of information revealed based on sex, political affiliation, and age. After interpreting the data amongst sexes, the results indicated that men are more likely to reveal personal information about themselves than women. Of the 839 total subjects, 404 of them are women and 435 are men. In regards to responses about education, occupation, and income, women were more likely to not respond to any of these questions across the three sites.

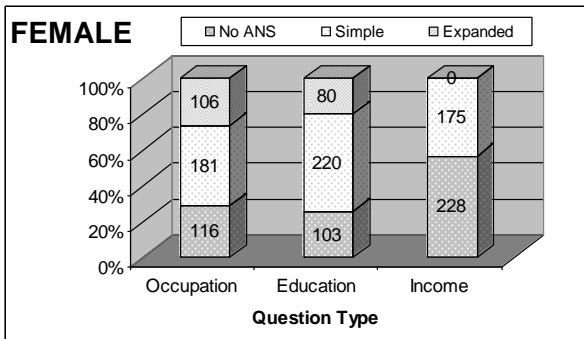
Overall, when answering questions about their occupation, women did not respond or answered “I’ll tell you later” 28.8% of the time, compared to men who answered the same way at a much lower rate of 9.5%. To the education question, 25.6% of women did not respond, whereas only 10.1% of men did not have an answer. The question of income was a little closer between men and women because the responses were only 0 or 1 point, as not one subject expanded on their income. 56.6% of women did not disclose their income level, compared to 43% of men overall. These trends were consistent on all 3 sites. Interestingly, of the men and women who did provide answers to either education and/or occupation, just over one third expanded on the simple answer (see Figures 1.A and 1.B below).

Figure 1.A.



A startling statistic was the amount of subjects that revealed their living situations, especially when it came to women. 75% of women on Match.com put on their profile if they either lived alone or with someone. This number increases to over 95% for profiles on Yahoo! Personals. Of the 268 that answered their living situation on Yahoo!

Figure 1.B.



Personals and Match.com, 119 or 44% said they lived alone. The actual number of women living alone is probably higher considering the number of women who live alone and decided not to answer the question. The staggering number of women who reveal to complete strangers that they may live alone has obvious privacy and security issues, considering it is an easy assumption to make a potential link between income and living alone. Those who reveal that they live alone also were more likely to disclose their income and thus could be considered the best targets for criminal activity.

Another issue involved in the research was whether liberals were more likely to divulge information about their personal lives than conservatives. Overall, there was not much discrepancy between the two groups. 17% of both conservatives and liberals did not reveal their occupation. 17% and 18% of conservatives and liberals, respectively, did not reveal their education. The only disparity between conservatives and liberals was income level. 54% of liberals did not

respond to the question whereas only 46% of conservatives refrained from answering. When you divide the two political groups by sex, the responses become more revealing. Female conservatives were more willing to give up information on education, income, and occupation (see Figure 2), but less willing to explain their living situation. Only 21% of liberals did not explain their living situations compared to 28% of conservatives that would not mention whether they lived alone or with someone.

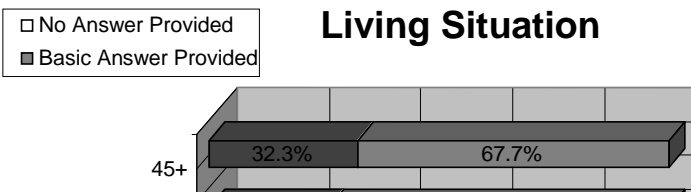
**Figure 2.**

Female Liberals (151)				Female Conservatives (165)		
	Occupation	Education	Income	Occupation	Education	Income
No Reply	29.80%	29.8%	60.9%	23.64%	23.03%	55.2%
Basic	43.71%	47.7%	39.1%	45.45%	97%	44.8%
Expanded	26.49%	22.5%	n/a	30.91%	00%	n/a

When looking at the conservative male versus liberal male subjects, a reversal of trends occurred. Male conservatives were less likely to tell people about themselves. 18% of the tested Yahoo! Personals profiles did not give a response for their occupation. Just 9% of liberals within Yahoo! Personals chose not to respond. This remains constant with Match.com with about twice as many conservatives withholding occupation and education. Oddly, male and female percentages switched with regards to income. As conservative males were giving less information about occupation and education, conservative females were more willing to reveal their income level. This occurrence could be explained by the perception that to get a date or find a match, a user must disclose something personal. So, instead of revealing data, after not providing much information on occupation or education, they give their income, which they might feel to be less invasive than the other two topics, or possibly make them believe that their respective income is more appealing to women.

Once gender, political affiliation and the revealing of personal information had been reviewed, a question arose as to whether one's age also plays a factor on how conservative a user is with their information on online data sites. Interestingly, the younger the subject was the more likely to conceal personal data. 33% of subjects under the age of 45 did not reveal their occupation while just 17% of those over 45 years old left their occupation unknown. This trend continues with education and income, but when asked to reveal their living situation, the older age group shied away. 33% of the 45+ subjects did not answer whether they lived alone, with family or with roommates. This was almost four times greater than the younger under 29 year olds (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.**





What is the reason behind the inverted trend between income, occupation, and education, when compared to the living situation? One explanation is the different aspects of safety pertinent to the older generation. Since the 45+ generation spent a smaller part of their life with the Internet, its members may be naïve when it comes to security issues on the Internet. They might also be embarrassed to admit living with roommates or family. Alternatively, they may simply be wise enough to know when revealing certain personal information can be dangerous. This could easily be seen as the exact opposite with the Generation Y and Generation X respondents. This age group grew up with computers and the Internet, and was taught beginning in junior high school that what they are looking at on the Web is being monitored. Therefore, this age group may be more reluctant to let someone know where they went to school or their place of employment. However, these respondents are young enough to believe letting someone know you live alone looks impressive and might attract a better match.

## **Possible Problems with Data Collection**

As with most research, flaws exist in the data collection. The first and most important flaw is the subjectivity of the researchers. There has to be a human decision made when deciding if a written response is worth 1 or 2 points. As explained earlier, a 1 point response is a basic answer provided from a pull down response tool. If there is a section that allows users to respond on their answers, this creates a problem for the examiner. For example, a common response found was, "I work in the medical profession and I love helping people." Does this response warrant 1 point, because it does not give more information than just answering the medical/dental field on the pull down choice list, or does satisfy the conditions for a 2 point response? The real dilemma is whether any response above the pull down menu gets 2 points, or should the 2 points be reserved for those that have added something additional to the 1 point pull down menu response?

A solution to this bias may be found by creating a standard method with various levels of responses that go with either category. Also, more response levels could be created. This expansion could be created with a rubric. For example, a 5 point response would be one that reveals an employer name, location, job title, and length of time employed. Each level would be one piece of information lower. So, if they gave just four of the labeled information parts it would be a 4 point

response, and so on.

Another problem with the research is the persuasion to provide more information on sites such as Match.com. With Yahoo! Personals and True.com, only one box is provided for a person to tell potential matches more about themselves. However, Match.com provides an almost unlimited amount of space for each profile, including an "about me" section that has space to answer questions like, for fun, my job, my ethnicity, my education, favorite things, etc. With these responses being asked by Match.com the user is enticed to provide additional information about the specific question than they would be in a section entitled "me," like with Yahoo! Personals.

The final obvious problem is the authenticity of the data collected. The researchers had to face the following questions: Was every profile legitimate? Did each person tell the truth about themselves? Or, did the subject lie to make them sound better? This leads to more questions of whether the information provided by subjects is real personal information, or simply fabricated. So, if a person provided extra information on their occupation that was not true, would they have put the truth even if they were not lying? Or knowing they hypothetically had to tell the truth, would they choose then not to answer? The counter-argument for this is the fact that it is a dating site and people inherently go onto these sites to find someone in common with them. This is saying that they would not lie about themselves because they really do want to find someone like themselves, and if they lied, then they are not going to find a compatible match, which is ultimately the goal of online dating.

## **Conclusion**

When it comes to privacy and online dating, it appears that everyone is at an equal risk of being targeted by online dating predators. Many contradictions became apparent during the analysis of this research. For example, just when the authors came to believe that women might be at less risk to online dating hazards because they revealed less information when it came to occupation, education, and income, it was discovered that they were less reluctant to hold back their living situation. While the younger generation, who should know a great deal about Internet threats, was the front runner for the safest age group using these sites, they too revealed more information in other parts of their profiles. While this research serves as a starting point at identifying what factors may increase or decrease your chances of being targeted by Internet predators, nothing can definitively prevent someone from the threats that exist in using Internet dating sites. While Internet dating sites are gaining popularity and praise, the dangers that exist in using one will be ever present. So the message that this research may point to is that no matter who you are, male, female, old, young, liberal, or conservative, the risks of online dating exist, are not going away soon, and the only measure that might serve as protection from the apparent dangers is self discretion in online dating endeavors.

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