Annual Review of CyberTherapy and Telemedicine

LEGAL NOTICE
The publisher is not responsible for the use which might be made of the following information.

Idealization on Dating Apps: Seeing Fewer Photos of the Potential Partner Leads to Expectancy Violation and Lower Attraction

Simona SCIARA[a,1], Clelia MALIGHETTI[a], Giorgia MARTINI[b], Giuseppe RIVA[a, c], Camillo REGALIA[a]

[a] *Department of Psychology, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy.*
[b] *Faculty of Psychology, Vita-Salute San Raffaele University, Milan, Italy.*
[c] *Applied Technology for Neuro-Psychology Lab, Istituto Auxologico Italiano, Italy.*

Abstract. Online dating apps facilitate the initiation of romantic relationships by helping users connect with new partners and meet them in subsequent face-to-face appointments. However, switching from online to face-to-face dating can induce expectancy violation and diminish attraction. Drawing on expectancy violation theory, we hypothesized that seeing just a few photos of the potential partner on their dating app profile can lead to these negative effects. Users who cannot rely on many photos for forming their impression are expected to idealize the person and show, in the moving from online to offline dating, lower levels of attraction, lower pleasantness of the person's characteristics, and worse expectancies about their personality. To test this hypothesis, 57 single young adults were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: half of them viewed a dating app profile with 18 photos of the potential partner; the other half viewed the same profile but with just 4 photos. Participants then filled out a questionnaire assessing their impressions (i.e., attraction, pleasantness, and expected personality). Later, participants watched a video interview of the person and completed a new questionnaire assessing their updated impressions. Results supported our hypothesis. While participants who had seen more photos maintained their impression as positive and stable, participants who had seen fewer photos showed, after the video, lower physical attraction, lower pleasantness of the person's characteristics (e.g., gestures), and worse expected personality traits. These results have important implications for the study of romantic attraction and online behaviors.

Keywords. Idealization, Expectancy Violation, Attraction, Dating apps, Social Media

1.   Introduction

Online dating applications (apps) are social media platforms that facilitate the initiation of a new romantic relationship. Tinder, for instance, helps users connect with new potential partners and possibly meet them in subsequent face-to-face appointments [1]. Although moving from online to offline meetings can enhance some aspects of the social interaction [2], previous research found that switching from online to face-to-face dating—the so-called "modality switching"—frequently induces expectancy violation and, in turn, a reduced romantic attraction [2, 3]. In this sense, the type and the timing of the online interaction can represent relevant factors. Impressions formed through an extended period of online communication fail to match the physical reality experienced during in-person meetings and lead to expectancy violation [2].

Previous scholars tried to identify the causes of this mismatch and the consequent expectancy violation [4]. As computer-mediated communication filters out many social and affective cues associated with human interaction [5], a certain lack of information regarding the potential partner may be responsible for expectancy violation on dating apps. Some characteristics of the potential partner that normally influence how people

---

form impressions in face-to-face dating [6, 7] such as linguistic indicators (e.g., voice, vocabulary, tone, and accent) and nonverbal cues (e.g., gestures, posture, proximity), are indeed absent or strongly attenuated in online dating. The paucity of these features leads the individual to *imagine* the unknown features, thus running into a potential violation of expectancy [4]. When information is missing, people still form their impression by applying cognitive schemes [8, 9]. They can rely on "typical types" by completing what they do not know about the potential partner with typical features for that social category (e.g., stereotypical features), or "ideal types" by completing missing information with an idealized version of the unknown features [10, 11]. In intimate relationships, especially if the person already evaluates the partner as desirable and attractive, idealization of missing information is the most likely to occur [12].

The consequences of idealization on dating apps should be consistent with expectancy violation theory (EVT) [13]. According to EVT, while positive violations increase the attraction of the person who violated the expectancies, negative violations decrease the attraction of the violator. Then, since idealization is representing something as perfect or better than in reality, idealizing potential partners on dating apps because of a lack of information should produce negative violations that, in turn, will diminish romantic attraction when the dating switches from the online to the offline modality.

1.1. The Present Research

Based on EVT [13] and previous research on computer-mediated communication and online dating [2, 3, 4, 5], seeing just a few photos of a potential partner on their dating app profile should lead to idealization and, in the moving from online to face-to-face dating, expectancy violation and lower attraction. To test this hypothesis, we conducted an experiment in which participants viewed different versions of a dating app profile before seeing a video of the target person. We expected participants who viewed fewer photos to idealize the unknown features of the target and thus experience, after the video, a negative expectancy violation with (a) lower levels of attraction, (b) lower pleasantness of the person's characteristics, and (c) worse expectancies about their personality.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants, Design, and Procedure

Fifty-seven young adults (98.2% females; Mage = 24.05, SDage = 3.50) volunteered in a 2 x 2 repeated-measure experiment. All participants were single and attracted to men (inclusion criteria). The study had 80% power to detect an effect size of at least f(U) = .38 in within-between interactions (α = .05; non-centrality parameter λ = 8.13; G*Power 3.1).

After they gave their informed consent, participants completed an online survey that consisted of the following parts: some demographic questions, a section that showed the dating app profile of a target person (a young adult man) entailing the manipulation of the number of photos, the first assessment of the dependent variables (i.e., attraction, pleasantness, and expected personality), a video interview of the target person (1.5 mins) and, finally, the second assessment of the dependent variables. At the end of the survey, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

2.2. Materials

To manipulate the number of photos on the dating app profile, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. Half of them viewed a profile with 18 photos of the target person; the other half viewed the same profile but with just 4 photos including 1 headshot and 3 photos randomly extracted from the set.

After the first measurement of the dependent variables, participants watched a video of the potential partner that was intended to simulate the modality switch from online to offline dating [2]. For this reason, it purposely revealed those partner's pieces

of information that can be usually discovered during the first date such as the person's gestures, posture, voice, and attitudes in social exchanges (e.g., proximity)[1].

The dependent variables were assessed twice, both before and after the video. They included physical attraction (6 items; $\alpha = .83$), the perceived pleasantness of three objective characteristics[2] of the target person (i.e., gestures/posture, voice, social attitudes), and the expectancy that the target possesses some personality traits including positive (e.g., sociability, warmth; 7 items, $\alpha = .83$) and negative traits (i.e., jealousy, aloofness; 2 items, $r = .30$). Answers' scales ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very much*) for attraction, and from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) for all other measures.

3. Results

Results supported our hypothesis (see Table 1). As expected, we documented a between-within interaction effect of the number of photos and the modality switch on physical attraction, $F(1, 54) = 5.16$, $p = .027$, perceived pleasantness of the person's gestures/posture (marginally significant), $F(1, 53) = 3.05$, $p = .086$, and expectancy about personality, both regarding positive traits, $F(1, 53) = 7.03$, $p = .011$, and negative traits, $F(1, 53) = 6.70$, $p = .012$. Specifically, participants reported comparable impressions before the video interview, with no difference between the two manipulated conditions. Instead, after the video, participants who formed their first impressions based on fewer photos updated them with a worse evaluation of the target while other participants confirmed their impressions (Figure 1).

Against predictions, we did not find an interaction effect of the number of photos and the modality switch on the pleasantness of the target's voice, $F(1, 53) = .77$, $p = .383$. Also, perceived pleasantness of the target's social attitudes was unexpectedly affected by the number of photos already before the switch, with participants in the 'fewer photos' condition reporting lower levels of perceived pleasantness than their counterparts, $F(1, 53) = 10.81$, $p = .002$.
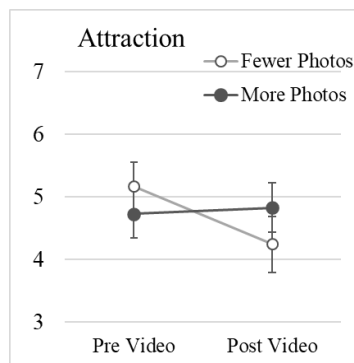

Figure 1. Participants' levels of attraction towards the potential partner before and after the video depending on how many photos they previously viewed on his dating app profile. Error bars represent *SE*s.

In sum, while participants who had seen more photos maintained their impression as positive and stable over time, participants who had seen fewer photos on the dating app profile showed, after the video, a worse impression of the target person. They reported lower physical attraction, lower perceived pleasantness of his gestures and posture, and worse expectancies about his personality (e.g., less sociability, more jealousy).

---

[1] To facilitate the identification with a real face-to-face date, the video showed the potential partner from the perspective of a young woman that was framed from behind while interacting with him spontaneously.

[2] In the first measurement of perceived pleasantness of the target person's objective features, we asked participants to first imagine some specific characteristics and then evaluate their expectations (e.g., *expected* voice). In the second measurement (i.e., after the video), we asked them to evaluate the pleasantness of the same characteristics but, this time, referring to what they actually observed in the video (e.g., *actual* voice).

Sciara et al. / Idealization on Dating Apps: Seeing Fewer Photos of the Potential Partner Leads to Expectancy Violation and Lower Attraction

88

Table 1. Participants' mean levels of physical attraction, perceived pleasantness of the target person's features, and expectancy about his personality (positive and negative traits). Standard deviations are in parentheses.

		Fewer Photos $n = 27$	**More Photos** $n = 30$
Attraction	Pre-Video	5.16 (2.10)	4.73 (2.07)
	Post-Video	4.24 (2.30)	4.83 (2.13)
Pleasantness of Gestures/Posture	Pre-Video	3.48 (.80)	3.47 (.57)
	Post-Video	3.00 (.85)	3.41 (.68)
Pleasantness of Voice	Pre-Video	3.44 (.58)	3.20 (.81)
	Post-Video	3.54 (.81)	3.62 (.86)
Pleasantness of Social Attitudes	Pre-Video	3.41 (.84)	3.80 (.55)
	Post-Video	3.27 (1.04)	3.86 (.58)
Expected Personality (Positive)	Pre-Video	3.70 (.51)	3.67 (.37)
	Post-Video	3.46 (.61)	3.73 (.44)
Expected Personality (Negative)	Pre-Video	2.39 (.58)	2.25 (.47)
	Post-Video	2.54 (.56)	2.12 (.56)

4.   Discussion

Drawing on EVT [13] and previous research on online dating [2, 3], we predicted and found that seeing just a few photos of the potential partner on their dating app profile can lead users to idealize what they do not know about the potential partner, thus risking experiencing, in moving from online to offline dating, a negative expectancy violation. Future research is encouraged to replicate and confirm the current findings, possibly extending them to other populations (e.g., people attracted by women and/or both genders) or testing the specific role of idealization in mediating the relationship between a lack of information and expectancy violation.

Our results complement previous work on idealization and disillusion in intimate relationships [12]. Since any lack of information may lead to idealization, expectancy violations as a result of a mismatch between idealized and actual features should occur in various social circumstances including traditional dating, stable relationships, and simple friendships—e.g., in the switching from dating to living together.

More broadly, our results have implications for the study of online behaviors. They add to previous research on computer-mediated communication and the effects of a lack of social cues on impression formation [4]. Also, since idealization may affect any impression formation, the proposed process should be relevant for any professionals and scholars interested in the impact of social media use, including those in the organizational field (e.g., for studying/predicting expertise recognition in online teamwork) [14].

References

[1]   LeFebvre LE. Swiping me off my feet: Explicating relationship initiation on Tinder. J Soc Pers Relat. 2008; 35(9):1205-1229. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407517706419

[2]   Ramirez A Jr, Wang Z. When Online Meets Offline: An Expectancy Violations Theory Perspective on Modality Switching. J Commun. 2008; 58:20-39. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00372.x

[3]   Antheunis ML, Schouten AP, Walther JB. The hyperpersonal effect in online dating: Effects of text-based CMC vs. videoconferencing before meeting face-to-face. Media Psychol. 2020; 23(6):820-839. https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2019.1648217

[4]   Jacobson D. Impression formation in cyberspace: Online expectations and offline experiences in text-based virtual communities. J Comput.-Mediat Comm. 1999; 5(1):JCMC511. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1999.tb00333.x

[5]   Lea M, Spears R. Paralanguage and social perception in computer-mediated communication. J Organ Comput. 1992; 2:321-341. https://doi.org/10.1080/10919399209540190

[6]   Ekman P, Keltner D. Universal facial expressions of emotion: An old controversy and new findings. In: U Segerstrale and P Molnar (Eds.), Nonverbal Communication: Where Nature Meets Culture. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 1996. p. 27–46.

[7]   Goffman E. The presentation of self in everyday life. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books; 1959.

[8]   Stangor C, Schaller M. Stereotypes as individual and collective representations. In: CN Macrae, C Stangor, M Hewstone (Eds.), Stereotypes and stereotyping. New York: The Guilford Press; 1996. p. 3-37.

[9]   Zebrowitz LA. Physical appearance as a basis of stereotyping. In: CN Macrae, C Stangor, M Hewstone (Eds.), Stereotypes and Stereotyping. New York: The Guilford Press; 1996. p. 79-120.

[10] Lakoff G. Women, fire, and dangerous things: What categories reveal about the mind. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1987.

[11] Lakoff G. Cognitive models and prototype theory. In: U Neisser (Ed.), Concepts and conceptual development: Ecological and intellectual factors in categorization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1987. p. 63-100.

[12] Niehuis S, Lee K-H, Reifman A, Swenson A, Hunsaker S. Idealization and Disillusionment in Intimate Relationships: A Review of Theory, Method, and Research. J Fam Theory Rev. 2011; 3:273-302. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2011.00100.x

[13] Burgoon JK. Interpersonal expectations, expectancy violations, and emotional communication. J Lang Soc Psychol. 1993; 12:13-21. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X93121003

[14] Bazarova NN, Yuan, YC. Expertise Recognition and Influence in Intercultural Groups: Differences Between Face-to-Face and Computer-Mediated Communication. J Comput.-Mediat Comm. 2013; 18(4):437-453. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12018