Social media and online self-presentation: Effects on how we see ourselves and our bodies

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Chapter 5

Idealized Self-Presentation Online: Relationships Among Anticipated Online vs. Offline Interaction, Self-Presentational Efficacy, Self-Presentation, and Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Prospective daters may be aware that online chat prior to a date can extend their opportunities for idealized self-presentation, whereas meeting in person constrains opportunities to idealize oneself to others. This experiment investigated how mode of anticipated interaction affects idealized self-presentation. Ninety-two heterosexual women constructed a dating profile while anticipating meeting a date either face-to-face or through text-based chat. When they anticipated computer-mediated (as opposed to face-to-face) interaction, they experienced greater self-presentational efficacy, that is, the degree to which they expected their profile would make a positive impression on a potential date, and they presented themselves more positively in their profiles. This idealization of profiles predicted positive changes in romantic self-esteem. In this way the mode of anticipated future interaction was shown to affect romantic self-esteem as mediated by self-presentational efficacy and idealized self-presentation.
Chapter 5

One of the most interesting and controversial aspects of internet communication is how it affects the way we present ourselves to others. Whether the internet invites us to construct veracious self-presentations or whether it seduces us to create personae little resembling our offline selves occupies a central role in research (see for review Albright & Simmens, in press; Whitty & Joinson, 2009) and public interest (see, e.g. Jarecki et al., 2010). This controversy is especially pertinent in the study of how people construct online dating profiles. Several studies have shown that online daters tend to present themselves in an idealized way on their online profile, possibly even deceptively, in order to lure prospective dates (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hancock & Toma, 2009).

Research on self-presentation in online dating often presumes that certain affordances of computer-mediated communication (CMC) offer daters more opportunity to convey a more positive impression than they have offline (Toma & Hancock, 2011). Research in this area, however, has offered only descriptive statistics about the magnitude and pervasiveness of misrepresentation in dating profiles generally (e.g., Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008), or what kinds of individuals are more likely to misrepresent various attributes (e.g., Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010). To date, we know little about the specific factors that systematically cause daters either to distort their online profiles, or to limit the construction of idealized self-presentations. Research has yet to demonstrate what psychological or contextual factors affect prospective daters’ decisions and behavior regarding how they present themselves to others in online dating profiles.

One factor that may offer a meaningful and theoretical connection to online self-presentation processes pertains to the modes through which people expect to communicate in the future. Although the ultimate goal of online dating is generally to instigate an offline relationship, an offline meeting with a prospective date usually follows a series of computer-mediated exchanges (e.g., instant messaging on the dating platform, or e-mail within or outside the dating site) (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). Researchers have suggested that the anticipation of such a period with continued CMC interaction may lead to more idealized profile construction, whereas the anticipation of an immediate face-to-face date constrains idealized self-presentation in the creation of one’s online profile (e.g., Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). However, such an impact of the mode in which transitional conversations are likely to transpire on daters’ idealized self-presentation has not been studied systematically.
Online Self-Presentation, Efficacy, and Self-Esteem

Research has suggested that people limit the extent of their idealized online self-presentations out of apparent concern with appearing deceitful in subsequent face-to-face meetings with a partner (Toma et al., 2008). In other words, when people expect that they will interact with a person through CMC they are believed to feel more able to make a positive impression than when they anticipate face-to-face interaction. This perceived ability to impress a partner is called self-presentational efficacy. Anticipated mode of future interaction may thus influence self-presentational efficacy, a notion which has not yet been tested. Self-presentational efficacy may, in turn, affect what individuals communicate about themselves in their online profiles, and the degree of idealization of the self in them. Daters who feel more able to make a positive impression on their date will be more likely to construct a more idealized image of themselves on their profile.

In addition to their prospective effects on a potential dating partner, the nature of daters’ self-presentations may also affect the daters who are building the profiles themselves. Research has suggested that we make inferences about who we are from how we present ourselves online (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Therefore, how positive or idealized online self-presentations are is likely to impact the presenter’s self-esteem. The goal of the current research was to investigate how anticipated mode of future interaction (face-to-face vs. online) affects prospective daters’ self-presentational efficacy, the degree of idealization they exhibit in their online profile, as well as the joint effects of these factors on their romantic self-esteem.

The Two-Component Model of Impression Management

Scholars have extensively studied cognitive and behavioral components of self-presentation in its offline form and developed models explaining and predicting self-presentation behavior, or impression management, as the two terms are generally used interchangeably (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The two-component model of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), in particular, offers nuanced theoretical propositions describing motivations for engaging in impression management, and factors that promote, limit, and/or shape individuals’ self-presentation strategies. Although this model has been applied to self-presentation in online dating before (Toma & Hancock, 2010), its framework can be extended to explain how factors such as anticipated future interaction impact one’s self-presentational efficacy, the degree of idealization one exhibits in a dating profile, and the presenter’s self-esteem.
The two-component model describes two distinct components of impression management: impression motivation and impression construction. Impression motivation is the degree to which people wish to control the impression others have of them. Impression construction comes into play once individuals are motivated to control the impression they may make. In the latter process, individuals decide about the self-presentational strategies to employ in order to affect others’ impressions of them. When online daters construct an online dating profile, they are likely to be highly motivated to control the impressions this profile conveys in order to attract a desirable romantic partner. As a result, online daters will engage in impression construction when they make their dating profile (see Ellison et al., 2006).

According to the two-component model, people will attempt to only make impressions which they believe they can live up to in successive encounters with the same individuals. Making an impression that cannot be sustained is not desirable because deviations between an initial and a subsequent self-presentation can be perceived as inconsistent or dishonest (see, e.g., DeAndrea & Walther, 2011). Expectations about future meetings thus affect initial impression construction behaviors. One factor which may impact one’s ability to make and sustain a positive impression is the mode of interaction, for reasons outlined in the hyperpersonal model of CMC (Walther, 1996; Walther 2007).

Computer-Mediated Communication and Impression Construction

According to the hyperpersonal model of CMC (Walther, 1996), CMC facilitates the presentation of one’s chosen impression by enhancing control over the messages one constructs about the self (Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007). As a result, individuals can strategically display more positive, desirable versions of themselves online than in face-to-face interaction (see for review Walther, 2011). A number of sociotechnical affordances of CMC facilitate this process, in both the construction of a dating profile as well as in subsequent CMC (Walther, 1996). By affordances of CMC we mean the properties of CMC which enable, invite, and facilitate certain behavioral strategies, in this case for self-presentation. The hyperpersonal model offers four such affordances. First, online self-presentations are editable. One can more readily adjust a self-presentation message by re-writing it until it appears how one most wants it. Second, the asynchronous nature of CMC affords users more time to think about and deliberately create a desired self-presentation than more spontaneous face-to-face self-presentation.
Third, CMC offers reduced cues relative to face-to-face communication. Through their choices of content and style, individuals can maximize desired qualities that they prefer to make salient and minimize undesired qualities that would be salient in offline encounters. For example, one may select the most desirable photograph to display, diminishing the presence and/or salience of unflattering appearance qualities (Toma & Hancock, 2010). Fourth, editability and asynchronicity in CMC facilitate the allocation of greater cognitive resources to impression construction. In face-to-face self-presentation, a presenter needs to divide attention between controlling non-verbal and verbal self-presentation behavior as well as monitoring the responses of others. In contrast, CMC separates sender from receiver, allowing its user to focus entirely on message construction. Research has substantiated that the more mindfully individuals make use of these affordances, the more they edit their messages, which subsequently become more appealing to others (Walther, 2007).

The hyperpersonal model has been used to predict that in online dating, singles construct highly desirable impressions, or even distorted ones, because impression motivation is high and the affordances of CMC offer great control over self-presentations (Toma & Hancock, 2010). Daters believe that CMC offers the means to create more alluring impressions than face-to-face communication (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012). The belief that one can delay face-to-face encounters, while sustaining desirable impressions through CMC, even prompts knowingly inaccurate profile construction (Ellison et al., 2012). The imminence of an eventual face-to-face encounter, however, may limit the degree to which individuals exploit the hyperpersonal affordances of CMC to construct idealized self-presentations.

Anticipated Future Interaction – A Constraint on Impression Construction

Both the notions that daters aim to construct a highly desirable self-presentation online, and that expectations about future interaction can constrain the degree to which they will exploit the affordances of CMC to construct an idealized dating profile, are consistent with the two-component model. As successful online dating will consist of consecutive interactions, online daters are expected to only communicate self-presentations that they believe they will be able to sustain in future encounters. Inconsistencies in self-presentations may lead to derision or deprecation by others, and obviate the social benefits of having made a desirable impression at all. The desirability that online daters try to convey through their
dating profiles should therefore depend on their expectations about their ability to live up to such idealized images in subsequent interactions with potential dates.

The projected likelihood that, in future interactions, one can live up to an idealized impression afforded by CMC may depend on the degree to which the mode of future interaction enhances or constrains one’s ability to maintain the initial impression. Due to the affordances of CMC for conveying more idealized impressions, the presenter is likely to apprehend that she can sustain an idealized impression that she initially presents on an online profile during subsequent CMC interaction. As a result, profile makers who anticipate continued CMC interaction may feel licensed to idealize their self-presentations in the first place anticipating that they may continue to do so in the second place.

Face-to-face interactions, in contrast, afford less control over self-presentation. As a result, the presenter is likely to apprehend that a highly controlled and idealized impression that is initially presented on an online profile cannot be sustained through subsequent face-to-face interaction. As a result, she may moderate the idealization of the initial self-presentation she communicates through the dating profile if she anticipates face-to-face interaction. Anticipated face-to-face interaction thus reduces the degree to which a dater feels able to sustain an idealized impression that she can convey through a dating profile. In conclusion, one’s decisions about self-presentational strategies can be expected to be based on the perceived potential to achieve self-presentational goals. The mode of further communication affects the probability of success of a more idealized, or a more muted, initial impression.

**Anticipated Future Interaction, Self-Efficacy, and Self-Presentation Content**

The degree to which we feel we can make the desired impression on others can be conceptualized as self-presentational efficacy (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). This construct is derived from the term self-efficacy, which is the evaluation of one’s own ability to succeed in a particular action to produce a desired outcome (Bandura, 1977). According to Bandura, self-efficacy is a domain-specific construct. Self-presentational efficacy represents the extent to which people believe that they can successfully produce impression-relevant reactions in general (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Schlenker & Leary, 1982) or in specific situations (e.g., exercise; Martin & Brawley, 2002).
The present study deals with self-presentational efficacy regarding online self-presentation on a dating profile. The defining characteristic of self-presentational efficacy during dating profile construction is whether the dater believes that her dating profile will successfully convey the impression to a prospective date that she is an attractive partner. Based on the preceding discussion, the degree of self-presentational efficacy in profile construction should depend on the degree to which the mode in which future interaction is expected to take place affords sustaining this desired impression. As continued CMC interaction offers greater affordances for impression management than anticipated face-to-face communication, we hypothesized:

H1: Anticipated future CMC interaction results in greater self-presentational efficacy than anticipated CMC interaction.

The degree to which an individual expects that she can convey a desirable impression should lead to behaviors reflecting these expectations. The CMC literature provides several examples of contexts and behaviors in which users who seek to gain favor with others employ language and content strategies to do so, including systematic differences in goal-directed language content and style marshaled to achieve interpersonal goals (e.g., Thomson, Murachver, & Green, 2001; Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005; Walther, Van Der Heide, Tong, Carr, & Atkin, 2010). Thus, if online daters have high self-presentational efficacy when constructing their profile, this should affect the content they select and the degree of idealization they display in their profile. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Self-presentational efficacy is positively related to the idealization of self-presentation content.

Self-Presentation Effects on Self-Esteem

The two-component model of impression management not only describes factors that affect impression construction. It also outlines effects of the impressions individuals construct on their own self-esteem. The two-component model suggests that people’s self-esteem is enhanced when they perceive themselves as making a good impression on others. Leary and Kowalski (1990) argue that the way one presents the self to others becomes integrated into the identity of the presenter. As a result, positive self-presentations increase self-esteem, whereas negative self-presentations decrease self-esteem, as experimental evidence has shown (Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981).
The relationship between online self-presentation behaviors and subsequent self-images has received some attention in CMC research. For example, individuals who were asked to present themselves as more or less extraverted in a publically-accessible online venue later rated themselves as being more extraverted or less extraverted, respectively (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). Furthermore, in a study in which participants were asked to gain favor or disfavor with an online conversational partner, the more agreement and positivity individuals expressed to their partners the more positively their own attitudes and perceptions became (Walther et al., 2010). Conversely, the more CMC users expressed disagreement, opinion differences, and rejection of their partners’ preference, the more the CMC users shifted their own opinions about the conversation topic. These patterns suggest that, in the present context, describing the self as a desirable romantic partner on a dating profile affects the degree to which the dating person sees herself as a desirable romantic partner. Seeing oneself as a desirable romantic partner is usually defined as romantic self-esteem (Harter, 1988). Therefore, we expected:

H3: The idealization of self-presentational content is positively related to romantic self-esteem.

The theoretical relationships specified, as well as the interrelations between the variables that the three hypotheses imply, lead to the following hypothesis:

H4: Anticipated future CMC interaction, as opposed to anticipated future face-to-face interaction, exerts a positive indirect effect on self-esteem through self-presentational efficacy and idealized self-presentation.

Method

Our study involved a randomized experiment in which heterosexual female participants constructed an online dating profile and were asked several questions about this profile. Participants were told that they would converse, in the future, with a prospective male date either via CMC or face to face.

The experiment was originally based on a 2 (anticipated future interaction: face-to-face vs. CMC) x 2 (forewarning measurement height and weight: yes vs. no) between-subjects design. The second factor was manipulated for purposes outside the scope of the current study: Participants were either told or not told that their weight and height would be measured after they finished constructing their profiles. The forewarning condition was included as a covariate in the analyses reported below, but did not have any effects on outcomes relevant to this investigation (self-presentational efficacy, idealized self-presentation or romantic self-esteem). The factor also did not moderate the relationships between the different variables.
Participants

One hundred single, heterosexual women participated in the experiment. Due to differences in how women and men present themselves on dating profiles, as well as the different impressions they desire to make (e.g., Hall et al., 2010), it was not possible to conduct the experiment with both men and women using the same measures of idealized self-presentation. We therefore chose to conduct the current study among heterosexual women only. Participants were rewarded with 5 euro or course credit. Five participants’ data were excluded from the final sample because they were suspicious of the goal of the study, or did not meet screening criteria. Three others’ withdrawals indirectly reinforced the plausibility of the ostensible purpose of the research: One reported that she would not be able to meet a date in person because she would be away the next few months, and another two said they were not interested in meeting a potential date. The final sample thus consisted of \( N = 92 \) female participants, which offers sufficient power (.80) to detect a medium effect size at a significance level of .05 (Cohen, 1992).

Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 41 (\( M = 21.8, \ SD = 3.4 \)). In terms of ethnicity/race, a majority (81.5%) labeled themselves as “white.” Most participants (78.3%) reported no experience with online dating, 9.8% had made a profile but never had any interaction with people through a dating site, 3.3% had interacted online with a prospective date but had not been on a date face-to-face, and 8.7% had been on a face-to-face date with someone they met through online dating.

Procedure

Participants reported to a research lab individually. After obtaining their informed consent, a researcher randomly assigned participants to one of the experimental conditions. The experimenter provided the participants with the following information verbally:

We are interested in the process of online dating. In the current study, we ask you to make a dating profile. This profile contains a description of the man who you may potentially like to meet and some information about you, such as your age, study program, height, weight, hobbies, interests and personality.\(^2\) In three to six weeks, our computer program will make a match between our male and female participants. If a match has been made, which will usually be the case, we will exchange the dating profiles between you and your match and will organize a

\(^2\) In the forewarning of measurement of height and weight condition a scale and measuring tape were present and participants were also told “at the end of the session, your height and weight will be verified.”
(face-to-face or online chat session) so that you can get to know each other (face-to-face or via chat).

Participants used a laptop computer to complete a dating profile consisting of a range of open- and closed-ended questions. These questions resembled the profile components of a popular online dating site in the country where this research took place. After completing the profile, participants responded to questions about the profile content they had generated in order to measure their self-presentational efficacy. Participants then completed a measure of romantic self-esteem, and summoned the experimenter when they were finished. The experimenter subsequently asked participants to fill out a final form containing a manipulation check, a probe for suspicion, and demographic questions. The researchers debriefed participants collectively, through e-mail, when all data collection was complete. Procedures were approved by the human subjects research ethics committee of the university where the study was conducted.

**Measures**

**Manipulation check.** A manipulation check verified whether participants anticipated a CMC or face-to-face meeting with a prospective date congruent with the condition to which they were assigned. It asked participants to select among three options to complete the following sentence: “If the computer finds a match between me and a man (a) a face-to-face meeting will take place, (b) a chat session will take place, or (c) I wasn’t told.”

**Idealized self-presentation.** As part of building their dating profile, participants completed items that asked them to rate themselves on thirteen specific attributes. For each attribute, participants were asked to complete the sentence “in comparison to other women my age I am...” These attributes included four items related to physical qualities (e.g., sexy, pretty, attractive) and nine items reflecting personal qualities (e.g., intelligent, caring, adventurous). The response options ranged from 1 (a lot less than others) to 10 (a lot more than others). Because these items each represented positive qualities, higher mean scores on these characteristics, as a composite, reflected greater idealization. Factor analysis indicated that these items comprised a single dimension which explained 42.4% of the variance, with a Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$ for the items as a set, $M = 6.71, SD = 0.90$.

**Self-presentational efficacy.** The research employed a 13-item measure to assess self-presentational efficacy. This measure was constructed especially for the purpose of the current study following procedures outlined by Bandura (2006).
as, to our knowledge, no adequate measure existed. Participants rated how they thought a potential match would see them with respect to each of the 13 positive traits they had previously used to describe themselves on their profile (“When a potential match sees my profile, I think he will see me as…”). Responses could vary between 1 (not at all) and 10 (very much). Higher mean scores on these positive characteristics, as a composite, reflected greater self-presentational efficacy. The measure led to a Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$, $M = 6.11$, $SD = 1.10$. Factor analysis indicated that these items comprised a single dimension which explained 51.4% of the variance.

**Romantic self-esteem.** To measure romantic self-esteem, we asked participants to complete a shortened, four-item version of the romantic appeal subscale of Harter’s (1988) self-perception profile, as translated and adapted by Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006). An example of an item is “Others fall in love with me easily,” to which responses could range from 1 (disagree entirely) to 5 (agree entirely). Higher scores reflected greater romantic self-esteem, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .71$, $M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.66$. Factor analysis indicated a unidimensional scale which explained 54.6% of the variance.

**Results**

Before testing the hypotheses, we examined whether there were any differences between the four conditions of the original experimental design (see Footnote 1) regarding participants’ background characteristics. Chi-square analyses showed that the conditions did not differ significantly with regard to race/ethnicity, $\chi^2(6, N = 92) = 6.054$, $p = .417$, or dating experience, $\chi^2(9, N = 92) = 6.308$, $p = .709$, of the participants. All participants correctly indicated the mode of future interaction they expected on the manipulation check, therefore the manipulation was deemed successful. In addition, we calculated zero-order correlations among self-presentational efficacy and idealized self-presentation, $r = .737$, $p < .001$, self-presentational efficacy and romantic self-esteem, $r = .504$, $p < .001$, and idealized self-presentation and romantic self-esteem, $r = .541$, $p < .001$. The significance of these correlations provides some initial support for the hypotheses.

Due to the continuous nature of the outcome variables, and the mix of continuous and categorical predictor and control variables, a series of regression analyses tested the hypotheses.$^3$ Hypothesis 1 predicted that individuals would

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$^3$ Forewarning of weight condition was included as a control variable in each analysis.
experience more self-presentational efficacy when they anticipated a subsequent CMC conversation as opposed to a face-to-face conversation. A regression analysis tested the difference on this outcome due to the two conditions. Anticipated future CMC interaction resulted in significantly more self-presentational efficacy relative to anticipated face-to-face interaction, $\beta = .415$, $B = .907$, $SE = .212$, $p < .001$. Results supported H1.

The second hypothesis predicted that greater self-presentational efficacy would lead dating profile creators to exhibit more idealized self-presentation in their depiction of themselves in comparison to creators who reported less self-presentational efficacy. Regression analysis was conducted using mode of anticipated future interaction as a control variable. Results confirmed the positive relationship between more idealized self-presentation and greater self-presentational efficacy, $\beta = .805$, $B = .659$, $SE = .138$, $p < .001$. The second hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the more idealized an individual’s self-presentation was, the higher her romantic self-esteem would be. Regression analysis again controlled for anticipated mode of interaction, and the results confirmed the hypothesized positive relationship between idealized self-presentation and romantic self-esteem, $\beta = .513$, $B = .376$, $SE = .118$, $p < .001$, supporting H3.

The fourth hypothesis specified an indirect effect of anticipated mode of interaction on romantic self-esteem through self-presentational efficacy and idealized self-presentation. The tests of indirect effects employed PROCESS for SPSS model 6 with 10000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes, 2012). The indirect effect of anticipated CMC conversation, through self-presentational efficacy and idealized self-presentation (respectively), on self-esteem was positive and significant, $B = .178$, $SE = .072$ (Bt bca 95% CI: .344/.061). The total effect was also significant, $B = .334$, $SE = .136$, $p = .017$. There was no additional direct effect of anticipated future interaction mode on romantic self-esteem, $B = .156$, $SE = .136$, $p = .254$.

In addition, we tested an alternative mediational model of mode of anticipated interaction on romantic self-esteem, in which the order of the two mediators was reversed. In this way, we tested if the effect of mode of anticipated interaction affected romantic self-esteem through idealized self-presentation first and then through self-presentational efficacy instead of the other way around as hypothesized. This indirect effect of mode of anticipated future interaction through idealized self-presentation and self-presentational efficacy (respectively) was not significant, $B = .024$, $SE = .033$ (Bt bca 95% CI: .135/.012), offering further support for H4.
Online Self-Presentation, Efficacy, and Self-Esteem

Discussion

Research on self-presentation in online dating has speculated on the effects that users’ anticipation of a face-to-face meeting has on the degree of idealization on their dating profiles (e.g., Toma et al., 2008). Descriptive research about online self-presentation has assumed that the anticipation of future face-to-face interaction limits idealization whereas continued CMC interaction increases the degree to which people present themselves in an idealized way (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2006). Research has not, however, systematically investigated the actual effect of the anticipation of continued online interaction versus immediate face-to-face interaction on daters’ prospects for impression management.

The results of the current study indicate that the expectation about the mode in which future interaction will take place influences individuals’ perceptions of the potential to make more positive impressions in an initial online self-presentation. When anticipating CMC, as opposed to face-to-face interaction, women reported greater self-presentational efficacy, which in turn led them to communicate a more idealized self-presentation. This is assumed to occur as a result of users’ implicit understanding of the differences between these two modes and their affordances for continued impression construction. When individuals anticipate the use of CMC’s affordances to enhance self-presentations in subsequent interactions, they experience more liberty to construct an idealized initial self-presentation on a dating profile than when they anticipate face-to-face interaction. The results also show that the differences in the way individuals communicate about themselves in their profiles, in turn, affect their sense of their own desirability as a date. Relative to the anticipation of face-to-face interaction, the anticipation of CMC interaction increases romantic self-esteem by enhancing self-presentational efficacy and increasing idealized self-presentation.

The current study extends our understanding of online self-presentation in several ways. The study shows systematic effects of the mode of anticipated future interaction on the idealization of daters’ self-presentations. Rarely have previous studies directly investigated the impact of mode alternatives on self-presentational patterns. Other researchers have also suggested that individuals’ beliefs about their abilities to sustain an idealized self-presentation affect online self-presentation, or, more specifically, deception in online dating (e.g., Ellison et al., 2012). Support for those claims has remained speculative, however, based on
users’ retrospective explanations (Ellison et al., 2012) that may be rationalizations for having lied (see DeAndrea, Tong, Liang, Levine, & Walther, 2012).

Much of the dating deception research has proceeded as though a face-to-face date is the next step after seeing an appealing profile and making some initial connection with a prospective partner. Of course this need not be the case, and our experimental conditions only begin to capture the alternatives that some dating sites provide to subscribers for their transitional communication. The possibilities, according to one recent review, include asynchronous CMC, synchronous CMC, video chat, and even avatars (Finkel et al., 2012). Exploring the implications of these different alternatives for self-presentation processes and effects is an interesting venue for further research.

This study also adds nuances to our understanding about anticipated future interaction in CMC, and the growing literature on mixed-mode interactions. Although anticipation of future interaction within a single mode (CMC or face-to-face) has significant positive effects on relational communication (Walther, 1994), the effects of progression from one mode to another has seldom been studied. The limited research on how mode-switching affects interpersonal impressions and relational communication (Ramirez & Wang, 2008; Ramirez & Zhang, 2007) has not examined whether effects may have been set into motion by participants’ anticipation of the mode to which they knew they would switch. The present study suggests that the impressions individuals convey in mode-switching situations may be affected as much by the anticipated mode of interaction as by the mode in which they take place. The results show that, at least for heterosexual women who constructed an online dating profile, an anticipated mode-switch to face-to-face interaction leads to less self-presentational efficacy and less idealization in initial online dating profiles, relative to the anticipation of using CMC for future interaction.

As has been described previously, CMC between two persons can increase their liking and idealization of one another under certain conditions (Walther, 2011). The current study extends these findings by showing that the expectation of prolonged CMC, in comparison to switching directly from online to face-to-face communication, leads to idealized impression construction. This raises the question whether one dater’s profile, imbued with elements of an idealized impression construction, also leads to idealized impression formation among daters who may view the idealized self-presentation. Whether such encounters trigger reciprocation or skepticism would have important implications for relationships.
between individuals who get to know each other online. Online dating research seems to suggest that reciprocal idealization seems to be quite common: In Albright’s (2001) study of daters who initially met via CMC and whose face-to-face impressions did not match the ones they formed online, a majority of respondents reported that they had idealized, or “‘filled in the blanks’ incorrectly” (p. 152). The remainder indicated that their partners had misrepresented something or withheld something important about themselves.

Although these results may have mixed implications for the well-being of the relationship, they more clearly benefit the well-being of the individuals who develop more idealized profiles: Communicating a more idealized self-presentation to others increases one’s romantic self-esteem. Given that self-esteem is an important predictor of well-being (Schimmack & Diener, 2003), further investigation of the impact of online self-presentation on self-esteem is warranted. Dating is a social situation fraught with potential threats to self-esteem (or “face,” in the language of politeness theory; see Johnson, Roloff, & Riffee, 2004; Tong & Walther, 2011) due to potential rejection. Therefore, a more gradual switching from CMC may bolster the potential self-esteem-reducing effects of a disappointing face-to-face mismatch, although this possibility, too, warrants additional study.

The results of this study, like other recent research (Toma & Hancock, 2010), suggest that further research on online self-presentation may benefit from applying the two-component model of impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and the hyperpersonal model of CMC (Walther, 1996). The present study shows that some tenets of these two approaches, and their combination, can be applied to self-presentation on dating sites. The current application of these frameworks into theoretically and empirically inter-related aspects of cognition, behavior, and self-perception extends these frameworks beyond those in previous efforts. Like other studies, however, this research presented the anticipation of either CMC chat or face-to-face interaction as gestalt channels to the participants. As a consequence, we still do not know which specific affordances of anticipated CMC are most salient to the prospective daters who exploited the self-presentational potential in constructing their profiles. Was it the additional control over future message construction? Or was it the continued ability to mask certain qualities and maximize others? Investigating the impact of imagined and actual sociotechnological affordances of the different modes on self-presentational efficacy and the resulting self-presentation messages would be an interesting venue for further research.
The current study also indicates that self-presentational efficacy—the belief that one can make a desired impression on others—is an important predictor of self-presentation content. This finding is both consistent with and extends previous research on predictors of self-presentation content. For example, self-presentation content was formerly predicted by a more global assessment of self-presentational efficacy, that is, an individual's belief in his or her capability of making a positive impression on others across situations, as an individual difference characteristic (Krämer & Winter, 2008). The current study shows that self-presentational efficacy is subject to systematic situational influences, including the mode of anticipated future interaction. Examining which other factors impact self-presentational efficacy would be an interesting venue for further research which may improve our understanding of why different individuals present themselves differently in different situations.

The current study was conducted in the context of heterosexual, single, relatively young women constructing online dating profiles. The theoretical framework described could also be applied to other contexts of online self-presentation and other populations. For example, similar processes and effects may occur among adolescents constructing social network site profiles, professionals in search of a job on a professional online network, and many other situations. The current study may thus offer both new ideas and a theoretical framework for research about the influences on, effects of, and processes underlying online self-presentation in face-to-face, CMC, and mixed-mode interactions.
Online Self-Presentation, Efficacy, and Self-Esteem

References


Chapter 5


