Casual dates on the internet

Who Looks for Casual Dates on the Internet?

A Test of the Compensation and the Recreation Hypothesis

by

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ABSTRACT: Existing research has dealt with the consequences of seeking casual partners online, but has been silent about its antecedents. To address this research gap, this study puts forward and empirically tests two hypotheses. The compensation hypothesis states that people high in dating anxiety and low in physical self-esteem seek casual dates online because the features of online communication (e.g., reduced cues, anonymity, controllability) allow them to compensate for deficits they experience in offline dating. The recreation hypothesis proposes that sexually permissive people and high sensation seekers will look for casual partners online because they value the anonymity of the internet. Multivariate analyses of a survey of 729 Dutch adults, aged 18 to 60, supported the recreation hypothesis, but not the compensation hypothesis. Sexually permissive people and high sensation seekers looked for casual partners online more frequently than sexually restrictive people and low sensation seekers. Dating anxiety and physical self-esteem, in contrast, were unrelated to the seeking of casual partners online. The associations between personality characteristics and the importance attached to reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication confirmed our expectations.

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As the internet has turned into a social medium, people increasingly look for casual, potentially sexual, dates online (Bull and McFarlane, 2000). By casual and potentially sexual dates we mean personal contacts without further strings attached, which may, but do not have to, be sexual. Several medical studies have recently found that individuals who seek casual partners online may be more likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases than individuals who seek casual partners offline (e.g., Benotsch et al., 2002; Klausner et al., 2000; McFarlane et al., 2000, 2002). However, the disconcerting description of the potentially adverse consequences of online dating has not yet led to more elaborate research on the antecedents of people’s online search for casual partners. The existing medical studies have understandably not focused much on personality characteristics of individuals who look for casual dates online. But only if we are able to sketch the personality of such at-risk users of the internet, can we more precisely define target groups for intervention programs. Therefore, this study will focus on the personality characteristics of people who look for casual dates online.

A study on why people seek casual partners on the internet cannot ignore the features of online communication that so clearly distinguish online interactions from face-to-face interactions. Theoretically, at least three features of online communication have been linked to the wide-spread use of the internet for partner seeking. First, online communication contains fewer visual and auditory cues than face-to-face communication (Walther and Parks, 2002). As a consequence, physical attractiveness is less important in online communication than in face-to-face interaction (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997). Second, the reduced visual and auditory cues of online communication are often complemented by a lack of identifying information about an individual, such as his/her real name or address. The resulting relative anonymity of online communication may stimulate people to talk about sensitive issues, such as sexual desires or casual contacts, without the awkwardness that may typify face-to-face interactions about such issues (Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Cooper and Sportolari, 1997).
Third, because online communication is largely text-based, people have more time to reflect about how and what they say (McKenna and Bargh, 2000; Walther, 1996). As a consequence, they can easily control how they present themselves. In addition, they can maintain their personal space and retreat from undesirable interactions more comfortably than in face-to-face situations (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997; Levine, 2000).

Reduced visual and auditory cues, anonymity, and controllability are all plausible explanations of how the features of online communication may facilitate partner seeking. However, theoretical approaches to online dating often implicitly treat these features as undisputed constants of online dating rather than as researchable variables. In other words, reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication are assumed to appeal equally to different types of people. However, empirical research on media use has abundantly demonstrated that people may differ in how important they consider a given feature of mediated communication (for review, see Ruggiero, 2000). As a consequence, people may vary in terms of the importance they attach to features of online communication, such as reduced cues, anonymity, and control.

In conclusion, we need to formulate and empirically test sets of hypotheses that address three aspects. First, the hypotheses need to specify how personality characteristics are related to people’s search for casual dates on the internet. Second, the hypotheses have to address how personality characteristics influence the extent to which people consider the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication important. Finally, the hypotheses need to explain how the interplay between personality characteristics and the features of online communication deemed important may affect people’s search for casual partners on the internet. Testing these sets of hypotheses will help us to fill the research gap regarding the antecedents of seeking casual partners online. Furthermore, we will see whether the theoretical assumptions about which features of online communication influence online
partner seeking are empirically tenable. These insights will eventually advance our understanding of online dating in particular and of internet use in general.

The Compensation and the Recreation Hypothesis

This study puts forward two sets of hypotheses, which we conveniently call the compensation and the recreation hypothesis. The compensation hypothesis states that people with high dating anxiety and low physical self-esteem more often seek casual partners on the internet than people with low dating anxiety and high physical self-esteem. It is assumed that the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication allow these people to compensate for deficits they encounter in casual dating offline. The recreation hypothesis proposes that sexually permissive people and high sensation seekers will look for casual partners on the internet more often than sexually restrictive people and low sensation seekers because they value the anonymity of online communication. As will be outlined later, both the compensation and the recreation hypothesis predict that the influence of personality characteristics on the online search for casual dates will not to be direct, but mediated by how important people consider the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication.

The predictions of the recreation hypothesis are not in diametrical opposition to those of the compensation hypothesis. For example, the recreation hypothesis does not suggest that individuals with low physical self-esteem look less often for casual partners online than individuals with high physical self-esteem (which would be opposed to what the compensation hypothesis proposes). However, the focus of the proposed explanations and the assigned role of the internet differ. The compensation hypothesis emphasizes that people can overcome deficits online; for them, the internet is a compensatory outlet. The recreation hypothesis, in contrast, proposes that individuals can develop their proclivities also on the internet; for them, the internet is just an alternative outlet.
Both the compensation and the recreation hypothesis rest on the assumption that people are utilitarian in their choice of seeking casual partners on the internet. If the search for casual partners requires less effort on the internet than in face-to-face situations, then people will more frequently turn to online partner seeking than to offline partner seeking. Whether it is less effortful for people to seek partners online than offline, depends on the extent to which features of online communication correspond with people’s personality characteristics. For example, the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication may appeal more strongly to those with high face-to-face dating anxiety than to those low in that trait. Because, on the internet, these individuals may feel less exposed to a potential partner and more in control of the situation, the effort it takes them to overcome their inhibitions may be lower on the internet than in a face-to-face situation. For these people, seeking a partner on the internet is less effortful than seeking a partner in a face-to-face situation. Consequently, a person high in dating anxiety may look for partners online more often than a person low in dating anxiety.

*The Compensation Hypothesis*

The compensation hypothesis links deficits that people may experience in offline dating with attempts that people may make online to compensate for these deficits. Scholars have investigated a related idea with respect to how socially anxious (or introverted) people use the internet. Because of the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication, socially anxious (or introverted) people were thought to use the internet more frequently than their non-socially anxious (or extraverted) counterparts. Empirical findings were inconsistent. Some studies confirmed the compensation idea (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002; McKenna et al., 2002); others obtained opposing results (Kraut et al., 2002; Peter et al., 2005; Waestlund et al., 2001); and a third group found no relationships (Amichai-Hamburger and Ben-Artzi, 2003; Scealy et al., 2002). However, the inconsistent findings may not
necessarily refute the general compensation idea. The studies dealt with online activities that
greatly differ in their social character, ranging from downloading entertainment (e.g., Scealy
et al., 2002) to the use of chat rooms (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002). In addition,
social anxiety (or the related concept of introversion) may not be equally suitable to predict
social behavior on the internet as diverse as participation in discussion groups (e.g., Amichai-
Hamburger and Ben-Artzi, 2003) and self-disclosure in online communication (e.g.,
McKenna et al., 2002). Therefore, we focus on a clearly social online activity, namely the
seeking of casual partners online. Furthermore, we deal with personality characteristics that
seem tightly linked to this activity, namely dating anxiety and physical self-esteem.

_Dating anxiety._ Dating anxiety refers to discomfort and distress in dating situations, for
example the fear of making a bad impression or of embarrassing oneself (e.g., Calvert et al.,
1987; Glickman and La Greca, 2004). This anxiety may also occur when people seek casual
partners: Casual dating, potentially with sexual consequences, is often considered a sensitive
issue, if not a socially undesirable activity (McFarlane et al., 2002). The reduced cues,
anonymity, and controllability of online communication may diminish fears of embarrassing
oneself or making a bad impression (Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Cooper and Sportolari,
1997; McKenna and Bargh, 2000). As a consequence, these features of online communication
may be more important to individuals high in dating anxiety than to those low in dating
anxiety.

Furthermore, dating anxious people may seek casual partners online more frequently
than people who are not fearful of dating. However, the influence of dating anxiety on
whether people seek casual partners online may not be direct. If people attach more
importance to reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability, then they may also be more likely
to seek partners online. In addition, if dating anxiety increases the importance people attach to
reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability, then this attached importance may transmit the
effect from dating anxiety to people’s search of casual dates on the internet. As a consequence, the influence of dating anxiety on whether people seek casual dates online may be mediated by the importance people attach to reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability.

*Physical self-esteem.* Physical self-esteem can be defined as the degree or level of positive cognitions and feelings a person holds about his/her physical self. Because physical attractiveness positively influences evaluations, emotions, and behaviors in initial encounters (for a review, see e.g. Berscheid and Reis, 1998), individuals with low physical self-esteem may feel more uncomfortable in dating situations than individuals with high physical self-esteem. In online communication, reduced cues and anonymity may lessen the importance of physical attractiveness, at least at the early stages of dating (Levine, 2000; McKenna and Bargh, 2000). In addition, the controllability of online communication may enable people to enhance their self-presentation, for example by crafting favorable self-descriptions or selecting more appealing photos (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997). Therefore, individuals with low physical self-esteem may consider reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability more important than those with high physical self-esteem. Hence, individuals who are not confident about their body may be particularly likely to look for casual partners online. Again, we do not expect the latter influence do be direct, but mediated by the importance that people with low physical self-esteem attach to the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication. Our reasoning is identical to that presented above for the mediation of dating anxiety and does not need to be repeated here.

In summary, the sub-hypotheses of the compensation hypothesis set read:

H1: Individuals (a) high in dating anxiety and (b) low in physical self-esteem will look more often for casual dates online than individuals low in dating anxiety and high in physical self-esteem.
H2: Individuals (a) high in dating anxiety and (b) low in physical self-esteem will attach more importance to the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication than individuals low in dating anxiety and high in physical self-esteem.

H3: When we investigate the effect of (a) dating anxiety and (b) physical self-esteem on the online search for casual partners simultaneously with the effect of the importance that people attach to reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability (the mediators), only the importance attachments will have a significant impact.

The Recreation Hypothesis

The recreation hypothesis centers upon sexual permissiveness and sensation seeking. Sexual permissiveness refers to the belief that expressions of sexuality should be open, free, and unrestrained (e.g., Feldman and Cauffman, 1999). We use the concept to address the potentially sexual implications of seeking casual partners online. Sensation seeking can be defined as “the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 10). We also use this concept to study the non-sexual implications of seeking casual dates on the internet.

*Sexual permissiveness.* Sexually permissive people hold more tolerant attitudes towards casual sex than the sexually restrictive (Seal et al., 1994). Compared with sexually restrictive people, they also engage more frequently in casual sex, for example in extra-dyadic affairs (e.g., Barta and Kiene, 2005; Feldman and Cauffman, 1999; Hansen, 1987). In light of the recreation hypothesis, sexually permissive people may consequently also look for casual dates online more often than sexually restrictive people do.

Currently, no studies exist that would support the notion that more sexually permissive individuals attach more importance to the reduced cues or controllability of online communication than sexually restrictive individuals do. However, recent research has
demonstrated that sexually permissive people use sexually explicit material online more often than sexually restrictive people (Lo and Wei, 2005). Cooper (1998) has argued that the anonymity of sexually explicit material online largely constitutes the material’s attractiveness. Therefore, if sexually permissive people may be assumed to value the anonymous access to online sexually explicit material more than sexually restrictive people, they may also attach more importance to the anonymity of online communication than their counterparts when it comes to seeking casual partners online.

We outlined above that individuals may be more likely to look for casual dates on the internet depending on the importance they give to features of online communication, such as its relative anonymity. If, as argued in the previous paragraph, sexually permissive people attach more importance to the anonymity of online communication, then the impact of sexual permissiveness on people’s online search for casual dates will be mediated by the importance individuals attach to the anonymity of online communication.

Sensation seeking. Compared with low sensation seekers, high sensation seekers date more frequently (Seto et al., 1995); have more casual sex partners (Hoyle et al., 2000; Kalichman et al., 1994); are more often involved in extra-dyadic relationships (Wiederman and Hurd, 1999); have a broader range of sexually risky activities (Hoyle et al., 2000); wait less time between getting to know a person and having sex with him/her (Seto et al., 1995); and are more willing to go on a date with people described in online dating ads and have unprotected sex with them (Henderson et al., 2005). These findings also suggest that high sensation seekers may more often look for casual dates on the internet than low sensation seekers.

High sensation seekers look more often for sexually explicit online material than low sensation seekers (Weisskirch and Murphy, 2004; Peter and Valkenburg, 2006). Similar to sexually permissive people, sensation seekers may consequently be assumed to value the
anonymity of access to sexually explicit material on the internet, again given the significance of anonymous access for the use of such material (Cooper, 1998). As a result, we expect that high sensation seekers may also attach more importance to the anonymity of online communication than low sensation seekers. Current research on sensation seeking and internet use does not permit the specification of hypotheses on the importance that sensation seekers attach to the reduced cues and the controllability of online communication.

Similar to the expected mediated influence of sexual permissiveness on the search for casual dates online, the effect of sensation seeking on whether people seek casual dates online may be mediated by the importance high sensation seekers attach to the anonymity of online communication. This mediated influence pattern occurs if sensation seeking increases the importance attached to the anonymity of online communication and if this importance attachment, in turn, leads people to seek casual dates online.

In summary, the sub-hypotheses of the recreation hypothesis set state:

H4: (a) Sexually permissive people and (b) high sensation seekers will look more often for casual dates online than sexually restrictive people and low sensation seekers.
H5: (a) Sexually permissive people and (b) high sensation seekers will attach more importance to the anonymity of online communication than sexually restrictive people and low sensation seekers.
H6: When we investigate the effect of (a) sexual permissiveness and (b) sensation seeking on the online search for casual partners simultaneously with the effect of the importance people attach to the anonymity of online communication (the mediators), only the importance attachment will have a significant effect.
Method

Sample and Procedure

In May 2005, an online survey was conducted among 729 adults between 18 and 60 years of age. For the study of sensitive issues, computer-mediated surveys have generally proven superior to other modes of interviewing (e.g., Mustanski, 2001). Sampling and fieldwork were done by Intomart GfK, the Netherlands. Respondents were recruited from an existing online panel managed by Intomart GfK. Intomart GfK had sampled the respondents in all parts of the Netherlands, partly through random telephone interviews, partly through respondents’ social networks. Analyses showed that the gender, age, and formal education of our respondents did not deviate from official statistics. It should be noted that, in terms of ICT, the Netherlands is one of the most advanced countries in the world (OECD, 2005).

Prior to the implementation of the survey, respondents’ informed consent was obtained. The respondents were notified that the study would be about dating and relationships with several personal questions and that they could stop at any time they wished. Of the 729 respondents who started the questionnaire, 657 fully completed it. Various background variables, such as gender, age, and formal education (but not their name and contact information), were known for all respondents who started the questionnaire. As a result, we could test whether those who completed the questionnaire differed from those who did not. We did not find any significant differences between the two groups.

We took the following measures to improve the confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity of the answering process (Binik et al., 1999; Mustanski, 2001). On the introduction screen of the online questionnaire, we emphasized that the answers would be analyzed only by us, the principal investigators. Moreover, respondents were asked to make sure that they filled in the questionnaire in privacy. Finally, we ensured the respondents that their answers would remain anonymous. That is, we explained explicitly that there was no possibility for the principal
investigators to identify who had filled in the questionnaire and that, beyond that, Intomart GfK could not see what the respondents answered. Intomart GfK did not link respondents’ answers in our questionnaire to their names or contact information and only provided us with the background variables plus the answers to our questionnaire. This procedure has proven successful in various other studies on sensitive issues and ensures the protection of respondents’ anonymity. Completing the questionnaire took about 15 to 20 minutes.

Measures

Seeking casual dates online. We operationalized this variable with two questions, “How often do you currently look for casual contacts on the internet?” and “How often do you currently look for sexual contacts on the internet”. Casual contacts were explicitly defined to the respondents as “contacts without the intention to become partners”. Sexual contacts were explicitly defined as “contacts whose main goal is sex”. Response categories ranged from 1 (never) to 6 (very often). The items correlated $r = .59$. We created a scale by averaging the items, resulting in an alpha of .74 ($M = 1.23, SD = .64$).

Dating anxiety. We selected the five items with the highest factor loading from the active-intentions-for-dating subscale of the dating anxiety survey by Calvert et al. (1987). We eliminated the college and female bias from the original items. An example of an item we used is “Asking somebody you find attractive to have a cup of coffee with you”. The items were measured on a 7-point scale, with the anchors 1 (very difficult) and 7 (very easy). The items loaded on a single factor (explained variance 78%) and the resulting scale had an alpha of .93 ($M = 4.13, SD = 1.53$).

Physical self-esteem. We operationalized physical self-esteem using the four items with the highest factor loading from the physical self-esteem subscale of Harter’s (1988) self-esteem scale. An example item is “I am happy with the way I look”. The items, which were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (does not apply at all) to 5 (applies completely) loaded on
one factor (explained variance 79%). The resulting scale had an alpha of .90 ($M = 3.37, SD = .87$).

**Sensation seeking.** To measure sensation seeking, we used the disinhibition subscale of Zuckerman's (1979) sensation seeking subscale Form V. Examples of items within the scale are: “I like to have new and exciting experiences and sensations even if they are a little frightening, unconventional, or illegal” or “I often like to get high (drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana)”. The response categories ranged from 1 (*disagree completely*) to 5 (*agree completely*). A factor analyses revealed that the three drinking-related items in the disinhibition scale clustered on a separate factor. Removing these items led to a unidimensional item structure (explained variance 54%). Therefore, we formed the scale with the remaining items of the original scale, which resulted in an alpha of .83 ($M = 2.43, SD = .79$).

**Sexual permissiveness.** We selected the six items that had yielded the highest factor loadings in a sexual permissiveness scale used by Hendrick and Hendrick (1987). An example item is “It is okay to have ongoing sexual relationships with more than one person at a time”. Responses were measured on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (*disagree completely*) to 5 (*agree completely*). The items loaded on one factor (explained variance 68%), and the resulting scale had an alpha of .90 ($M = 2.37, SD = 1.13$).

**Reduced visual cues.** The importance people attach to the reduced visual cues on the internet was operationalized with three items. An example is “It is important to me that, on the internet, others can see me less well than in a real meeting”. Response categories ranged from 1 (*disagree completely*) to 5 (*agree completely*). A factor analysis yielded a unidimensional factor structure (explained variance 86%). The alpha of the resulting scale was .92 ($M = 2.58, SD = 1.05$).

**Anonymity.** The importance people attach to the relative anonymity of the internet was measured with three items, an example of which is “It is important to me that, on the internet,
I do not have to reveal my identity as quickly as in a real meeting”. Response categories ranged from 1 (disagree completely) to 5 (agree completely). The items loaded on one factor (explained variance 86%), the alpha of the resulting scale was .90 ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.05$).

**Controllability.** How important respondents considered the controllability of online communication was tapped with three items. An example was “It is important to me that, on the internet, I can better reflect on how I present myself than in a real meeting”. Response categories ranged from 1 (disagree completely) to 5 (agree completely). Again, in a factor analysis, the item structure turned out to be unidimensional (explained variance 84%), with the alpha of the resulting scale being .92 ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.05$).

**Control Variables**

Previous research on casual dating on the internet (McFarlane et al., 2000) has shown that gender, age, and sexual orientation may present alternative explanations of the extent to which individuals look for casual partners online. These variables should therefore be controlled for. Additionally, we controlled for education because, among adults, the type of internet use may still be related to educational levels; with better educated people using the internet more often for information than less educated people (Bonfadelli, 2002). McKenna and Bargh (1999) have also suggested that people’s perceived chance of meeting a partner in their offline world may be influential. Because people’s experience with offline casual dates and offline sexual contacts may motivate people to look for casual dates online, this variable was also controlled for. Finally, we controlled for individual’s relationship status because singles may be more likely to look for casual dates than people in a relationship.

**Gender and age.** The measurement of gender and age ($M = 39.26$, $SD = 11.51$) was straightforward, with women (51%) coded 1 and men (49%) coded 0.

**Sexual orientation.** We asked the respondents whether they considered themselves heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual/lesbian. For statistical reasons, we recoded the variable
into a dichotomous variable where 0 meant non-heterosexual (6%) and 1 meant heterosexual (94%).

**Education.** We measured people’s formal education on a 7-point scale that represents all the educational degrees that can be obtained in the Netherlands. The anchors were 1 (elementary school) and 7 (university degree) \( M = 4.13, SD = 1.66 \).

**Perceived chance of meeting a partner in the offline world.** We asked respondents: “Assuming you were looking for a partner, how big would the chance be that you could find a partner in your social environment?” Response categories ranged from 1 (very slim) to 5 (very big) \( M = 2.74, SD = .94 \).

**Relationship status.** We asked people whether they currently had a relationship or whether they were single. Singles were coded 0 (20%), people in a relationship were coded 1 (80%).

**Previous casual offline partners.** To find out how many casual and/or purely sexual contacts respondents had in the 10 years before the interview we asked them: “In the past ten years, how often did you have a casual date in your own social surroundings (excluding the internet), for example, in your social circle, at work, or in your neighborhood”. The wording for sexual contacts was similar. The meaning of casual dates and sexual contacts had been explicitly defined at the beginning of the questionnaire. The two items were correlated \( r = .64 \). We created a scale by averaging the items. The alpha was .73 \( M = 1.60, SD = 4.27, MIN = 0, MAX = 45 \).

**Data Analysis**

Because both the compensation and the recreation hypothesis contain a mediation sub-hypothesis, we largely followed the procedure suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test mediated relationships. First, we tested with zero-order correlations whether the personality characteristics dating anxiety and physical self-esteem (Hypotheses 1a/b) as well as sexual
permissiveness and sensation seeking (Hypothesis 4a/b) were related to the dependent variable: seeking casual dates on the internet. Second, we analyzed, also with zero-order correlations, whether dating anxiety and physical self-esteem (Hypotheses 2a/b) as well as sexual permissiveness and sensation seeking (Hypothesis 5a/b) were associated with the presumed mediator variables, the importance attached to the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication. Finally, in a multiple regression model, we included the independent variables dating anxiety and physical self-esteem (Hypotheses 3a/b) as well as sexual permissiveness and sensation seeking (Hypothesis 6a/b) along with the mediator variables reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability.

For the multiple regression analysis, we checked whether assumptions of this analysis technique were met. We did not find any indication of multicollinearity. However, several of our variables were not-normally distributed, as the Shapiro-Wilk tests showed. Therefore, we log-transformed these variables. Moreover, there was evidence of heteroskedasticity, that is, the violation of the assumption in regression analysis that the error term has a constant variance. Heteroskedasticity may lead to an underestimation of the standard error and, thus, to an increased chance of a Type-1 error. To avoid this, we estimated the model with the Huber-White correction of the standard error.

Results

Descriptives

Before testing our hypotheses, we present some descriptive information about the distribution of our dependent variable. We present this separately for the two items constituting our dependent variable, that is, people’s online search for casual contacts and their search for sexual contacts. Less than one percent of the respondents frequently looked for casual contacts on the internet at the time when the interview was held. Seven percent said
that they sometimes sought such contacts online, six percent reported doing so almost never. The remaining 86% of the respondents never looked for casual dates on the internet.

One percent of our respondents reported that they frequently used the internet to seek sexual contacts at the time of the interview. Five percent of the respondents sometimes sought sexual contacts online, three percent almost never did so. Ninety-one percent of our respondents never looked for sexual contacts on the internet.

The frequency with which people looked for casual dates and/or sexual contacts differed significantly between singles and people in a relationship, casual contacts: $\chi^2 (5, N = 705) = 102.77, p < .001$; sexual contacts: $\chi^2 (5, N = 705) = 29.68, p < .001$. However, this does not imply that people who had a relationship at the time of the interview never looked for casual and/or sexual contacts online. Eight percent of the respondents who had a relationship when the interview was held did look for casual contacts online (i.e., aforementioned categories frequently, sometimes, and almost never added up), compared with 40% of the singles. Similarly, seven percent of those in a relationship looked for sexual contacts, compared with 19% of the singles.

**Hypothesis Testing**

**Compensation hypothesis.** Hypothesis 1 predicted that (a) people with high dating anxiety and (b) people with low physical self-esteem would look more frequently for casual partners on the internet than their counterparts with low dating anxiety and high physical self-esteem. As the zero-order correlations in Table 1 show, this hypothesis was not supported. Dating anxiety ($r = -.02$, n.s.) and physical self-esteem ($r = .02$, n.s.) were not associated with how often people looked for casual dates online. Overall, the first hypothesis of the compensation hypothesis set was not supported.

*** Table 1 about here ***
Hypothesis 2 stated that individuals (a) with high dating anxiety and (b) with low physical self-esteem would attach more importance to the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication. This was the case as Table 1 indicates. All correlations were significant at \( p < .001 \). The second hypothesis of the compensation hypothesis set was thus supported.

The multiple regression analysis in Table 2 did not support the third hypothesis of the compensation hypothesis set. The analysis of the first hypothesis already showed that the effect of dating anxiety and physical self-esteem on the online search for casual dates could not be mediated. However, Table 2 also demonstrates that the importance that people attach to the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication was unrelated to how often people sought casual dates online.

*** Table 2 about here ***

Recreation hypothesis. Hypothesis 4 predicted that (a) sexually permissive people and (b) high sensation seekers would look for casual dates online more often than sexually restrictive people and low sensation seekers. The zero-order correlations in Table 1 supported this hypothesis, \( r = .27, p < .001 \) for sexual permissiveness, \( r = .24, p < .001 \) for sensation seeking.

Hypothesis 5 stated that (a) sexually permissive people and (b) high sensation seekers would attach more importance to the anonymity of online communication than sexually restrictive people and low sensation seekers. This hypothesis was also supported as Table 1 shows, \( r = .07, p < .05 \) for sexual permissiveness, \( r = .08, p < .05 \) for sensation seeking.

Hypothesis 6 predicted the following: When the effect of (a) sexual permissiveness and (b) sensation seeking on the online search for casual partners is investigated simultaneously with the effect of the importance people attach to the anonymity of online communication (the mediators), only the importance attachment will have a significant effect.
This hypothesis was not supported as Table 2 shows. Similar to the zero-order correlations (see Table 1), sexual permissiveness and sensation seeking exerted a significantly positive influence on casual online dating in the multiple regression analysis. In contrast, the reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication were unrelated to casual online dating.

Control variables. As Table 2 indicates, the majority of the control variables affected the frequency with which people looked for casual dates online. Women did so significantly less often than men ($\beta = -.06, p < .05$). Heterosexual respondents looked online for casual dates less often than non-heterosexual respondents ($\beta = -.14, p < .01$), as did people in a relationship compared with singles ($\beta = -.26, p < .001$). The more casual offline partners respondents had had, the more frequently they looked for casual dates online ($\beta = .08, p < .05$). The extent to which people looked for casual dates online was unrelated to age, education, and the perceived chance to meet a partner in one’s own social surrounding.

In conclusion, our analyses largely supported the recreation hypothesis, but not the compensation hypothesis. However, the anticipated mediated influence mechanism did not emerge in either of the two sets of hypotheses.

Discussion

Although people’s online search for casual partners may have severe consequences for people’s health (Benotsch et al., 2002; Klausner et al., 2000; McFarlane et al., 2000, 2002), research on the antecedents of why people look for casual partners online has been scarce. This study has formulated and empirically tested two sets of hypotheses on why people may seek casual partners online, the compensation and the recreation hypothesis. The two sets of hypotheses addressed three shortcomings of existing research. First, they outlined how personality characteristics may influence people’s online search for casual dates on the internet. Second, they specified how people with different personality characteristic may vary
in the importance they attach to crucial features of online communication (i.e., reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability). And finally, the hypotheses sets explained how the interplay between personality characteristics and what people consider important in online communication influences the online search for casual partners.

Our results largely supported the recreation hypothesis. High sensation-seekers and sexually permissive people looked for casual dates online more frequently than low sensation-seekers and sexually restrictive people. These findings dovetail with an abundance of research on how sensation seeking and sexual permissiveness are linked to casual dating and sexual contacts in the offline world (e.g., Barta and Kiene, 2005; Feldman and Cauffman, 1999; Hansen, 1987; Henderson et al., 2005; Hoyle et al., 2000; Kalichman et al., 1994; Wiederman and Hurd, 1999). Thus, at least regarding personality characteristics such as sexual permissiveness and sensation seeking, the determinants of people’s online search for casual dates do not differ from determinants of their offline search for such types of dates. This finding confirms Tyler’s (2002) dictum on the internet that “the more things change, the more they stay the same” (p. 195). With respect to people’s search for casual dates on the internet, it seems that explanations of online activities are not fundamentally different from explanations of comparable offline activities. Furthermore, the internet seems to enable people to do what they have already done in the offline world, while providing them with better opportunities to tailor their interactions to meet their needs: People with experience in offline casual dating looked more frequently for dates online than people without experience in offline casual dating. The internet, it appears then, is a new outlet for doing old things (Tyler, 2002).

This interpretation of our results is even more plausible against the backdrop that the compensation hypothesis remained largely unsupported. People high in dating anxiety and low in physical self-esteem did not look for dates online more often than people low in dating
anxiety and high in physical self-esteem. We urge researchers to additionally study the influence of these concepts on romantic online dating in order to validate, and potentially extend, our findings. However, recent related research on the impact of social anxiety (or introversion) suggests that people do not use the internet to compensate for deficits they encounter in the offline world (Kraut et al., 2002; Peter et al., 2005; Waestlund et al., 2001).

By now, the internet is so widely used that the online population increasingly resembles the offline population. As a result, patterns that occur in the offline world increasingly also emerge in online life. For example, the extraverted make more friends online than the introverted (e.g., Peter et al., 2005); the non-lonely communicate more frequently on the internet than the lonely (e.g., Moody, 2001); and those with high dating anxiety and low physical self-esteem are not more likely to seek partners online than those with low dating anxiety and high physical self-esteem.

Individuals with high dating anxiety and low physical self-esteem considered reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability of online communication more important than their counterparts with low dating anxiety and high physical self-esteem. Similarly, sexually permissive people and high sensation seekers valued the anonymity of online communication more strongly than sexually restrictive people and low sensation seekers. However, the importance people attached to these features of online communication did not explain how frequently people look for casual dates online. Thus, our data did not confirm the idea that the impact of personality characteristics on the online search of casual partners was mediated by how important people consider particular features of online communication.

These results leave us with several empirically and theoretically challenging questions. First, theoretical accounts of online dating have emphasized the important role of reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability in online dating in general (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997; Levine, 2000). We focused specifically on people’s online search for casual dates, but still our
results tentatively suggest that the underlying mechanisms of online dating as proposed in the theoretical accounts are not empirically tenable. Second, the association between sexual permissiveness and sensation seeking on the one hand and importance attached to anonymous online communication fits into a broader theoretical line of argument of what may attract people to engage in sensitive activities online (Cooper, 1998). However, the importance attached to online anonymity did not explain the extent to which individuals looked for casual dates online. Therefore, future research should test if it may explain how individuals look for casual dates online, for example, which sites they choose, or how they present themselves. Finally and more generally, the clear associations between personality characteristics and the importance that people attach to essential features of online communication such as reduced cues, anonymity, and controllability seem to be a promising step towards understanding what people really do with the internet. To paraphrase an old dictum, research so far has predominantly focused on what the internet does with people, but largely ignored what people do with the internet. We have translated undisputed constants of theoretical accounts of online communication into researchable variables. Although these variables did not mediate the effect of personality characteristics on people’s online search for casual dates, they may be able to clarify the dynamics of online communication.

This study may not only shed new light on people’s online search for casual dates as a phenomenon of computer-mediated communication. It may also help us to sketch, more precisely than before, the type of individual who looks for casual dates online. Medical studies have suggested that this group may be at a greater risk to contract sexually transmitted diseases than those who look for casual dates offline, but have been silent about personality characteristics of these individuals (Benotsch et al., 2002; Bull and McFarlane, 2000; Klausner et al., 2000; McFarlane et al., 2000, 2002). In line with the medical studies, we found that men and non-heterosexuals were more likely to look for casual dates online than
women and heterosexuals. However, our results additionally showed that people looking for casual dates online may have more experience with offline casual dates and are equally distributed in different age groups. Most importantly, people who seek casual partners on the internet are high sensation seekers and sexually permissive. Intervention programs should thus be targeted at people with these characteristics.
References


http://www.oecd.org/document/60/0,2340,en_2825_495656_2496764_1_1_1_1,00.html#data2004


Table 1

Zero-order Correlations Between the Variables Used for Testing the Compensation and Recreation Hypothesis

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Note.  <sup>a</sup><i>p</i> < .05, <sup>b</sup><i>p</i> < .01, <sup>c</sup><i>p</i> < .001 (one-tailed tests). Bold figures are correlations that are relevant to the testing of our hypotheses.
Table 2

Predictors of People’s Online Search for Casual Dates

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*Note.* <sup>a</sup> *p < .05,*  <sup>b</sup> *p < .01,*  <sup>c</sup> *p < .001* (t-test, one-tailed). ln = log-transformed.
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