

Love online is about being real, not perfect

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How you fill out an online profile makes a big difference in how you're seen by others. New research shows it is better to be real with your information than trying to be perfect. Credit: Tim Schoon

People using online dating services are searching for a perfect match, but not a perfect person.

In fact, researchers at the University of Iowa say people who are looking for love online are less apt to trust a person with a flashy profile, preferring instead a potential partner who appears not only successful,

but humble and real as well.

"We found people want to contact a person who appears to be accurate in what they are saying about themselves online," says Andy High, assistant professor in the University of Iowa's Department of Communication Studies and corresponding author of the study. "It's tough when it comes to dating profiles because we want someone who seems like an amazing person, but we also hopefully will have a relationship with this individual, so we want them to exist."

As many as one in 10 Americans age 18 and older use [online dating sites](#) or a mobile dating app—according to a 2013 study by the Pew Research Center. High and Crystal Wotipka, lead author of the study and graduate teaching assistant in the UI's Department of Communication Studies, wanted to know how people who use these sites respond to different ways people present themselves online.

What they discovered is most people in their study were drawn to individuals whose profiles were positive but not over-the-top glowing. More important, however, participants preferred people whose online persona could be clearly traced to a real person.

That means people want details, not broad generalities, especially about where a prospective love interest works and what he or she does for a living.

"Instead of just saying, 'I write a blog,' name the blog and encourage people to check it out," High says. "If you work for a company, name the company. ... If you can name something or provide people with a link to get there, then do it.

"The idea is the viewer will think this is a real person," he adds.

High and Wotipka presented their preliminary findings in November 2014 at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association. They plan to submit a paper to a peer-reviewed journal in the spring of 2015.

Personal profiles are not just for romantic pursuit. People create profiles for networking, advancement, and business opportunities, through sites such as the business-oriented social networking service LinkedIn. As of November 2014, 332 million people had LinkedIn profiles.

High says previous research on online dating has focused on how people present themselves in their profiles. Those studies found that some people tend to exaggerate or lie about themselves and their accomplishments.

High and Wotipka took a different tack in this study, studying online dating from the point of view of the person sorting through the profiles.

"We wondered, 'What do people like in a dating profile?'" Wotipka says. "'Whom are they most likely to contact? Whom are they most interested in meeting?'"

To do this, they created eight online dating profiles—four men and four women—with various combinations of two perspectives. One perspective is called "Selective Self-Presentation," or what the researchers refer to as SSP, which is a profile that highlights only what's "good" about a person and downplays the rest. The other is called "Warranting," which is a profile that contains information easily traced to a real person.

Once the profiles were created in a template from OKCupid—a free, online dating service—they were shown to 317 adults who said they were using or had used an online dating service. There were 150 men

and 167 women, and the mean age was 40.

Participants were asked to judge the profiles and decide which ones they would contact. Researchers expected that profiles that were presented with high selective self-presentation—those who sounded perfect—and high warranting—those who provided specifics that could be traced to a real person—would be the most popular.

They were wrong.

Too good to be true

"I thought people would think, 'Not only is this person the greatest in the world, but they're real, too. Wow!' but I was wrong," Wotipka says. "It was the low SSP" and high warranting "that ended up winning out."

In other words, people were turned off by profiles that sounded too good to be true. This was especially true for viewers who said they preferred online social interaction. Researchers found the more specific information a profile contained that could be traced to a real person, the more the viewer trusted the profile.

"Users of online [dating sites](#) are aware that people misrepresent themselves, and inaccurate profiles are one of the biggest drawbacks to using online [dating sites](#)," the study says.

High says the key to creating an attractive [online dating profile](#) is balance.

"You want to balance all that is wonderful about yourself with some things that aren't negative, but more humble or realistic about yourself.

"It's important to put your best foot forward," he adds, "but maybe not in

your best pair of shoes."

Provided by University of Iowa

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