Attractiveness Assessment in Online Dating Profiles in Taiwan

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Abstract

Online dating is a social phenomenon widespread worldwide to increase opportunities to meet potential partners. Whilst research in western countries provided valuable insights on how users perceive one another when viewing their profiles, little research has been done in Asia, where culture and cultural environment are different. In an experimental approach, we evaluated how people assess attractiveness of profile owners. We created two online profiles of a young woman and of a young man, both of which were evaluated by 295 participants. First, participants were shown the written description of a profile and asked to evaluate it in terms of attractiveness, trustworthiness and self-esteem, plus being asked if they'd consider dating the profile owner or no. Second, participants were shown the pictures of the profile and were asked the same questions. As previous studies in psychology, in the absence of photographs, participants tend to rely more on other clues to evaluate the attractiveness; whilst after looking at profile photographs, there as a big noticeable decrease on the participants willing to meet the profile owners, participants seemed to evaluate the final attractiveness based on the photographs rather than in the initial written description of the profile owners.

Keywords: Online dating, attractiveness, photograph, Taiwan

Introduction

Computers have changed many aspects of our life, not only the way we work but the way we fall in love. Falling in and out of love, loving, flirting, cheating, or

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having sex online have all become a normal part of the world. However, we yet need to understand more the impact of Internet on new types of relationships. Since online dating is significant as a major social phenomenon, that is changing the landscape for the formation of human relationships, we need to understand the psychological reasons and elements behind the desire of contact or reject a specific user, and how this can affect online business models (Aron, 2012).

Online dating offers significant advantages over traditional dating: increased opportunities to meet potential partners, low threatening environments and contexts for building new relationships, and the possibility of choosing from the dating database people who are likely to be the best relationship partners and skip those who might not (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012).

Theoretical Background

1. Consumer Acceptance of Technology (CAT)

From the merging of both the TAM (the Technology Acceptance Model) and the PAD (the Pleasure, Arousal, and Dominance paradigm of affect) comes the Consumer Acceptance of Technology (CAT) (Kulviwat, Brunner II, Kumar, Nasco, & Clark, 2007). To this end, the authors increased the cognitive constructs of the TAM whilst using the affect constructs of the PAD. This model includes:

1.1 Perceived Usefulness

Refers to the extent to which an individual believes that technology will increase its productivity or job performance (Davis, 1989). In the consumer context, perceived usefulness would be the perceived likelihood that the technology will benefit the individual's performance of a given task. It deals mostly with an individual's perceptions of the functional outcome as a consequence of using technology. Further, it's a strong determinant of user acceptance, adoption, and usage behaviour (Davis, 1989; Mathieson, 1991; Taylor & Todd, 1995). In the technology consumer context, a significant positive relationship was found between the perceived usefulness of new Internet services and attitudes toward these services (Childers, Carr, Peck & Carson, 2001). On a similar path, perceived usefulness was found to have a positive impact on consumer's attitude toward using mobile Internet products (Bruner II & Kumar, 2005).

1.2 Perceived Ease of Use

Refers to the extent to which an individual believes that using a given technology will be simple or not (Davis, 1989). This construct is tied to the assessment of each person of the effort involved to learn and using a given technology. Perceived ease of use is beneficial for initial acceptance of an innovation and is essential for adoption and continued use (Davis, 1989). In the consumer context, ease of use of a given technology has a direct and positive effect on an individual's attitude toward use of technological innovations (Childers, Carr, Peck & Carson, 2001).

1.3 Relative Advantage

Refers to the extent people is more likely to adopt innovations that have perceived advantages compared to products which have little or no additional benefits over the alternatives. Hence, an individual will believe that the innovation is in some way superior to what it is intended to supersede (Rogers, 2003). Despite that both constructs are related, they are distinct from each other and may play complementary roles in shaping technology adoption attitudes (Moore & Benbasat, 1991). In the consumer context, consumers have the freedom to compare the characteristics of one or more technological options and, therefore to decide which option offers them the best advantage compared to what they have previously used. Hence, in this context, relative advantage, influence the perceived usefulness of a given technology (Kulviwat, et al., 2007).

Previous research found that both, relative advantage and perceived ease of use, have a direct effect on the perceived usefulness of a given technology (Kulviwat, et al., 2007). At the same time, only pleasure and arousal are relevant constructs which will only influence directly an individual's attitude toward adoption of technology. However, the perceived usefulness will influence both the attitude toward adoption and the final adoption intention of a given technology by the individual.

Researchers used the former theories from environmental psychology and sociology, to make sense of an individual's attitude toward technology and its subsequent adoption or not of that technology, whilst making sense of the most relevant constructs that seem to affect such choice (Childers, Carr, Peck & Carson, 2001; Bruner II & Kumar, 2005; Kulviwat, et al., 2007) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

The Internet now affords access to a vastly wider network of potential partners who would have been unknown or inaccessible before its invention. Hence, an individual's "field of eligible", is greatly increased and it can reach worldwide (Kerckhoff, 1964). Previous researchers explored relationship development and self-presentation online, however online dating platforms are qualitatively different from many other online settings due to consumer's anticipation of face-to-face interaction and due to that social interactions and practices are in constant development (Parks & Floyd, 1*996;* Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons, *2002;* Gibbs, Ellison & Heino, *2006).*

2. Theory of Social Information Processing

When adopting a technology which allows Individuals to meet each other online, they form impressions of other users, this helps them to decide whether to pursue or continue a relationship (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2007). Individuals form initial impressions very quickly, in little as three minutes in face-to-face settings (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Individuals try to manage these impressions, strategically emphasizing some characteristics of the other person whilst de-emphasizing others. The same processes of impression formation in individuals and management take place in online settings, albeit slightly differently since affordances and constraints of CMC mean that, traditional identity cues of an individual, such as linguistic accent and style of dress, are not available (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2007). The theory of Social Information Processing states that "people make inferences about others in social situations based on any available cues, however scant", such as spelling ability (Walther, 1992; Walther, 1996; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). The notion of "hyperpersonal interaction" (Walther, 1996) which suggests that users communicating in lean media, and cues from others being are limited or slowly to arrive, might form even higher levels of affinity for one another than they would face-to-face. This could result from a tendency to fill in the blanks optimistically when faced with limited information about a person (Walther, 1996). For example, a research found that pairs of college students in a laboratory study liked each other better when they met in synchronous, text-only chat than when they met face-to-face (Hancock, Toma & Ellison, 2007).

3. Attractiveness in online dating profiles

Despite that online dating users are limited in the types of cues available for self-presentation, users spend time creating and revising their profiles, tailoring them in ways they cannot face-to-face. The main motivation of users writing online profiles is to present themselves as attractively as possible, to draw the attention of potential dates. Online dating users might also consider some exaggeration necessary if they think that everyone else is exaggerating, such exaggeration would help them to maintain equal footing with competitors (Fiore & Donath, 2004). For example, small exaggerations about height, weight, and age in online dating profiles are common (Hancock, Toma & Ellison, 2007).

4. Assessing Attractiveness

Traditional theories of interpersonal attraction and interpersonal judgments stress the importance of physical attributes over factors such as personality and intelligence (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams & Rottmann, 1966; Dion, Berscheid & Walster, 1972). Similarly, online dating sites urge their users to post great photos of themselves to increase their chances of being contacted by potential dates or even base their business models on pictures (i.e. Tinder). For example, in a study of Australian online dating users, 85% of interviewees said they would not contact a user without a photo on his or her profile (Whitty & Carr, 2006; Norton, Frost & Ariely, 2007). Hence, it is possible that a big percentage of the attractiveness of a profile it's based on the photo. One's photo becomes a predictor of the appeal of one's online dating profile as a whole (Fiore et al., 2008). At the same time, a typical site's profile has a lot of written information to describing one's personal characteristics and one's ideal match. However research has not proven if written information contributes to one's attractiveness to potential partners.

Only a few studies have analysed how users judge attractiveness online, describing the strategies employed by online dating users to interpret the self-presentations of others (Gibbs, Ellison & Heino, *2006)*. Primarily, the participants they

interviewed made substantial inferences from small cues, lending support to the theory of Social Information Processing.

Other studies found that even though online dating users believe they will like people better when they have more information about them, in fact more information leads to less liking, perhaps because it helps us better to assess incompatibility (Fiore & Donath, 2005).

Some authors, used the number of messages online daters received as a measure of attractiveness and found that men received more messages when they were older, more educated, and had higher levels of self-reported attractiveness (self-esteem). Women received more messages when they did not describe themselves as "heavy," had higher levels of self-reported attractiveness, and posted a photo on their profiles. These results roughly correspond to what we would expect from past social psychological research. Fiore et al. (2008), assessed the attractiveness of online dating profiles of 50 users of Yahoo! Personals.

Research Objective

Our objective during the experimental research was to understand the relevant factors for evaluating attractiveness in online profiles

Research Methods

Following previous research into profile attractiveness (Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn & Hearst, 2008), the authors interviewed 65 people and asked them to rate 100 profiles. The authors selected profiles from an online dating site, the profiles belonged to people of different ages and ethnicities, most of them (56%) were Caucasian, others were Latin-American, Asian, etc. For the present research, we made a different experimental approach.

We asked a young woman (named as Female hereafter) and a young man (named Male hereafter) to create a profile, in a similar way to a real website. We gathered information about their:

- Height, age and weight
- Education and occupation
- Personality
- Habits
- Hobbies
- Life expectation (children, career, and importance of money)
- 3 pictures, including a selfie

For personality, habits and life expectation variables, we used a Likert-scale of 5 points ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). After gathering the information, we created two questionnaires using Google Forms. The first one containing the profiles of the two men, and the second one with the profiles of the two women. We targeted university students.

We analised how respondents evaluated the attractiveness of each profile (Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn & Hearst, 2008), we modified their analysis to adapt it to an Asian context. We analised the following six factors using a 5-point Likert-scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much):

- Attractive
- Trustworthy
- Masculine
- Feminine
- Selfishness
- Self-esteem

Furthermore, we added a one more factor which encompass the previous six: Dating, we asked if the respondent would date or not the person in the profile, using 2-point Likert-scale from 1 (Yes) to 2 (No).

In each questionnaire, we showed the written profile of a person first, followed by questions assessing the seven dimensions. After that, we showed the pictures of the profile owner and repeated the same questions.

We repeated the same procedure for the second person. We used IBM SPSS Statistics 21 software to perform statistical analysis. We run the same statistical analysis twice in order to have a clear picture of what respondents think of the profile owner. First, we performed the analysis after respondents saw the written description without the profile owner's pictures (Before Picture), second, we performed the analysis again after respondents saw the pictures (After Picture).

Since the effects of more than one factor are being considered together, we run a factorial experiment and used a factorial Anova being the Null hypothesis H0=beta1=beta2=beta3=beta4=beta5=beta6=0. After checking if the factors were significant, and because we expect the factors to be highly correlated, we used a collinearity diagnostic, being Dating the dependent variable. Finally we run a binomial linear regression using Dating as the dependent variable in order to find which variables has more effect on when choosing to date or no the profile owner.

Research Results

A total of 164 female and 131 male university students participated in our experiment.

1. Male

This is a sedentary and slim person, who likes to play soccer sometimes. We found a difference on the willingness to date Male 1. When respondents read the profile of the male, they showed a higher willingness to meet him, but after seeing his pictures their willingness to meet declined by 12% (Figure 1).

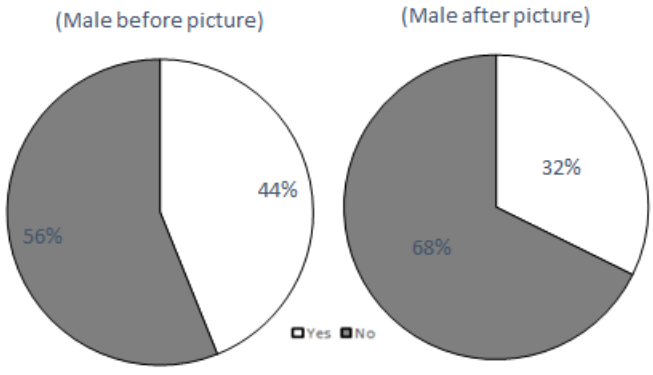


Figure 1 Percentage of female students willing to meet the male subject

The Anova for all the factors was significant <0.001, therefore we rejected the Null hypothesis. After running the Collinearity Diagnostics, checking the VIF of all variables (Table 1), and performing the Binomial Linear Regression, two variables, Attractive and Trustworthy are the significant variables affecting the choice of meeting the profile owner or not (Table 2).

After running the same analysis once the respondents saw his pictures, the Anova is also significant <0.0001, therefore we also rejected the Null Hypothesis. After running the Collinearity diagnostics and checking the VIF (Table 3) and the respective Binomial Linear Regression (Table 4), it comes out that Attractive, Trustworthy, Masculine and Self-esteem are the relevant factors.

Table 1. Collinearity Statistics of the Male Before Picture

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
Model	B	Stand. Error	Beta	T	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1							
(Constant)	.629	.351		1.793	.075		
Attractive	.139	.053	.244	2.632	.009	.735	1.361
Trustworthy	.141	.063	.210	2.251	.026	.727	1.376
Masculine	.003	.055	005	.048	.962	.508	1.970
Feminine	.077	.052	.150	1.470	.144	.609	1.643
Selfish	-.034	.052	-.054	-.656	.513	.917	1.090
Self-esteem	.011	.052	.018	.207	.836	.793	1.262

Table 2. Binomial Linear Regression of Male Before Picture

		B	S.E.	Wals	Df	Sig.	Exp (B)
Step 1[a]	Attractive	-.733	.270	7.368	1	.007	.480
	Trustworthy	-.730	.311	5.512	1	.019	.482
	Masculine	-.103	.278	.138	1	.710	.902
	Feminine	-.505	.282	3.197	1	.074	.604
	Selfish	.104	.251	.170	1	.680	1.109
	Self-esteem	-.072	.245	.085	1	.770	.931
	Constant	5.432	2.083	6.798	1	.009	228.624

a. Variables entered on Step 1: Attractive, Trustworthy, Masculine, Feminine, Selfish, Self-esteem

Table 3. Collinearity Statistics of Male After Picture

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
Model	B	Stand. Error	Beta	T	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1							
(Constant)	1.988	.365		5.444	.000		
Attractive	.146	.051	.276	2.847	.005	.657	1.521
Trustworthy	.083	.060	.140	1.385	.168	.603	1.660
Masculine	-.101	.058	-.214	-1.728	.086	.402	2.487
Feminine	-.068	.050	-.166	-1.356	.177	.413	2.420
Selfish	-.075	.055	-.119	-1.357	.177	.801	1.249
Self-esteem	.087	.048	-.159	-1.835	.069	.821	1.217

Table 4. Binomial Linear Regression of Male After Picture

		B	S.E.	Wals	df	Sig.	Exp (B)
Step 1[a]	Attractive	-.949	.322	8.693	1	.003	.387
	Trustworthy	-.679	.376	3.256	1	.071	.507
	Masculine	.623	.345	3.265	1	.071	1.864
	Feminine	.415	.297	1.950	1	.163	1.514
	Selfish	.406	.315	1.660	1	.198	1.501
	Self-esteem	.623	.294	4.488	1	.034	1.864
	Constant	-2.315	2.130	1.181	1	.277	.099

a. Variables entered on Step 1: Attractive, Trustworthy, Masculine, Feminine, Selfish, Self-esteem

2. Female

This is a sedentary and slim girl that likes to go sometimes to the gym, loves shopping and is a big fan of Japanese culture. There was a difference between the willingness to date the female before respondents saw her pictures, and after they did. There was an 8% increase in the willingness to date her (Figure 3). The Anova gives a significance of <0.0001, therefore we reject the null hypothesis. After performing the Collinearity Diagnostics (Table 5) and the subsequent Binomial Linear Regression (Table 6), we found Attractive and Masculine are the relevant factors.

After respondents saw the pictures of the female, The Anova gives a significance of <0.0001, therefore we reject the null hypothesis. After performing the Collinearity Diagnostics (Table 7) and the Binomial Linear Regression (Table 8), Attractive and Feminine are the relevant factors.

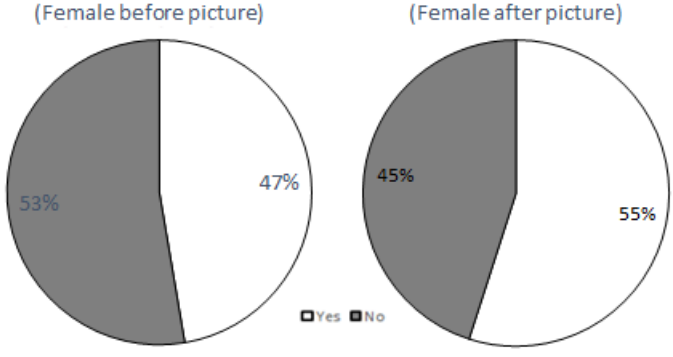


Figure 3. Percentage of male students willing to meet the female subject

Table 5. Collinearity Statistics of Female Before Picture

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
Model	B	Stand. Error	Beta	T	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1							
(Constant)	1.139	.365		3.119	.002		
Attractive	.219	.048	.439	4.588	.000	.665	1.503
Trusworthy	.008	.056	.014	.151	.880	.677	1.478
Masculine	-.100	.054	-.192	-1.855	.066	.567	1.762
Feminine	-.034	.067	-.052	-.507	.613	.586	1.707
Selfish	.050	.048	.087	1.046	.298	.878	1.138
Self-esteem	.021	.046	.039	.454	.650	.832	1.202

Table 6. Binomial Linear Regression of Female Before Picture

		B	S.E.	Wals	Df	Sig.	Exp (B)
Step 1[a]	Attractive	-1.146	.287	15.909	1	.000	.318
	Trustworthy	-.041	.309	.018	1	.894	.959
	Masculine	.620	.313	3.918	1	.048	1.859
	Feminine	.255	.377	.457	1	.499	1.290
	Selfish	-.268	.269	.991	1	.320	.765
	Self-esteem	.171	.253	.458	1	.498	.843
	Constant	1.532	1.937	.626	1	.429	4.628

a. Variables entered on Step 1: Attractive, Trustworthy, Masculine, Feminine, Selfish, Self-esteem

Table 7. Collinearity Statistics of Female After Picture

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
Model	B	Stand. Error	Beta	T	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1							
(Constant)	.354	.441		.803	.424		
Attractive	.232	.056	.408	4.103	.000	.643	1.555
Trustworthy	.021	.069	.031	.307	.759	.630	1.587
Masculine	.070	.062	.123	1.116	.267	.520	1.925
Feminine	.154	.077	.241	2.009	.047	.442	2.260
Selfish	.008	.054	.013	.156	.876	.854	1.171
Self-esteem	-.074	.056	-.125	-1.328	.187	.722	1.385

Table 8. Binomial Linear Regression of Female After Picture

		B	S.E.	Wals	Df	Sig.	Exp (B)
Step 1[a]	Attractive	-1.168	.312	13.979	1	.000	.311
	Trustworthy	-.106	.342	.096	1	.757	.900
	Masculine	-.419	.320	1.714	1	.191	.658
	Feminine	-.875	.418	4.392	1	.036	.417
	Selfish	-.004	.270	.000	1	.987	.996
	Self-esteem	.341	.279	1.502	1	.220	1.407
	Constant	6.188	2.337	7.013	1	.008	486.745

a. Variables entered on Step 1: Attractive, Trustworthy, Masculine, Feminine, Selfish, Self-esteem

Research Discussion

Traditional theories of interpersonal attraction and interpersonal judgments stress the importance of physical attributes over factors such as personality and intelligence (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams & Rottmann, 1966; Dion, Berscheid & Walster, 1972). Previous research showed at the same time to respondents, both, the picture and written description of the profile owners (Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn & Hearst, 2008). In this way, it is not possible to differentiate the weight that the picture or the written description have at the time to choose selecting a profile owner or not. Hence, we decided to separate the information, in order to test if the presence of photos is significant or not.

Our experimental approach to assess attractiveness using Dating as dependent variable, found that in the absence of photos, respondents tend to read carefully the written information, trying to build an image of the profile owner making inferences based on the available cues, lending support to the theory of Social Information Processing (Walther, 1992; Walther, 1996; Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Profile owners had few non-closed questions where they could give more cues about their personalities to others, however, they had the freedom to choose the pictures they wanted others to see, and show their life styles, or what they like to convey a particular impression (Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn & Hearst, 2008).

Before seeing the pictures of the Male profile owner, only Attractive and Trustworthy are significant, but after seeing his pictures, then Attractive and Self-esteem are significant variables. There is also a decrease in the willingness to date him after seeing his picture. This can be due to the kind of pictures chosen by the profile owner, the first impression of respondents was that the Male was trustworthy, but after seeing his pictures this impression changed and respondents thought that he has a high self-esteem. This change in the significant variable portrays the importance of the human face to assess attractiveness and trustworthiness. The human face provides information on health and on perceived beauty, which means that humans can quickly assess if a stranger is attractive and trustworthy.

Before seeing the pictures of the Female profile owner, less than half of male respondents considered her attractive (47%), being Attractive and Masculine the significant variables. However, after seeing her pictures, more male respondents were willing to date her, and the significant variables were Attractive and Feminine. This change of significant variable from Masculine to Feminine, suggests that respondents

tend to answer the second part of the questionnaires based on the photos not on the written descriptions of the profiles. Therefore, the most important component upon which people make their judgements of a profile owner is mainly the picture similarly as observed by previous research (Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn & Hearst, 2008).

Contrary to the findings of similar research, where most respondents associated other qualities with attractiveness in the profile owner photos, such as genuine and trustworthy, extraverted, feminine, warm and kind (Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn & Hearst, 2008); in the Asian context, female respondents seem to pay more attention if a man is slim to consider him handsome or not. Male respondents seemed to like more fair skin and long hair and rather short women.

For the women photos, previous research found that male respondents rated women photos as attractive when they appeared more feminine, higher in self-esteem, and lower in self-centeredness (Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn & Hearst, 2008). In our context, most male respondents paid more attention to if a woman is slim and beautiful rather than to her personality. Since in Taiwan, beauty standard for both men and women are slim to skinny bodies, white skin and pretty faces. Cultural aspects lead people to be more group-oriented than individualistic, this can influence the attractiveness of males, for example if a profile owner posts a more individualistic sport like rock-climbing compared to a group sport like basketball.

Not all profile owners wrote long text for self-description, this fact can also have had an effect on the results we found. Other factor affecting the overall results can be the age of the respondents, which belongs to college and graduate students, most of them may have different idea of beauty than older people.

Conclusions

Our study revealed that in the absence of photos, respondents tend to read carefully the written information, trying to get clues about the profile owners' personalities. Hence, they build themselves a picture in their minds about the profile owners. After respondents were allowed to see the pictures the picture they had in their minds changed in a big percentage. We conclude that despite the written information, respondents tend to judge profile owners in a big percentage based in their pictures. Hence attractiveness seemed judged through pictures rather than written profiles.

Previous research in Western countries, cannot be applied in the Asian context, where idea of beauty, social values and other cultural factors are quite

different. Some factors such as trustworthy, masculine, feminine, selfish and self-esteem, taking into account by previous authors showed no influence. However more research is needed in this area.

The Asian context due to its cultural aspects it's different from the western context, therefore it's advisable to further research online dating phenomena in a different way than in western countries.

Since our research was limited to respondents of certain age and background, more studies are needed to encompass people of different ages, Asian countries and backgrounds.

Our research has implications to online businesses in dating and social platforms, showing in the Asian context some of the people's preferences when interacting assessing attractiveness, which can have a direct influence when interacting online with each other. Further research is needed to enhance our understanding in this field in different age groups and social/working environments.

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