Shy geek, likes music, technology and gaming: An examination of autistic males' online dating profiles

Jeff Gavin*

Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK

Daisie Rees-Evans

Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK

Mark Brosnan

Centre for Applied Autism Research, Department of Psychology, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK

Running title: Autistic males' online dating profiles

* Corresponding author. Email: j.gavin@bath.ac.uk

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Abstract

Dating involves a range of complex social skills that autistic adults can often find challenging. Many autistic adults have turned to online dating, which in theory may ameliorate these social difficulties. The aim of this study was to explore, for the first time, how autistic males describe themselves in online dating profiles. The online dating profiles of 52 self-identified autistic males were analysed using a combination of frequency and thematic analysis. A common pattern of self-description was identified, involving a combination of both desirable and undesirable characteristics. Themes included interests, negative descriptions of personality, ideal match, and autism. Findings are discussed in terms of desirability, the norms of online dating and the benefits and costs of computer-mediated communication for autistic male online daters.

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD, hear after autism) is characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction across multiple contexts combined with restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities[1]. Recent estimates suggest 1 in 59 people have a diagnosis of autism[2], comprising 3 to 4 times as many males as females[3]. Few autistic adults report having been in a romantic relationship, compared to the general population[4, 5, 6]. This is not for want of desire (93% of autistic adults would like to be in a romantic relationship[7]), but rather to reduced interaction with others and a subsequent lack of the necessary social-emotional skills to form and maintain a romantic relationship[6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11].

The use of online dating sites and mobile dating apps is becoming increasingly commonplace[12] and many of the social-emotional deficits associated with autism can be alleviated in computer-mediated communication (CMC)[13]. For example, an analysis of autistic people's Facebook posts suggests that the affect-limited and time-delayed nature of online communication enables autistic people to express empathy on social media[13], despite struggling to express empathy face-to-face[14]. Therefore, with its many similarities to social media such as Facebook (an online profile, the option of text-based, asynchronous communication), online dating might be more suited to the social capabilities of autistic people, offering a way of initiating dating with reduced social demands[15].

Research suggests that autistic people do use online dating, possibly to a greater degree than the general population[16]. For example, a small-scale exploratory study of 24 young autistic adults found that 53% had used online dating, through which almost half (44%) had formed a long-term relationship[16]. Respondents highlighted several aspects of online dating that they find easier in comparison to face-to-face dating: control over self-

presentation, fewer nonverbal cues to interpret, and more time to process information. This suggests that online dating may offset some of the social communication deficits associated with autism, consistent with the Facebook-based research[13]. However, respondents also highlighted several aspects of online dating that they find challenging, especially in terms of constructing a profile. Questions such as how much information to include, how to word their profiles, how to express personality, acceptable levels of exaggeration, and whether to include their autism diagnosis were all raised as particularly challenging[16].

Online dating begins with the construction of a profile, a process that involves selective self-presentation. Daters need to filter out unflattering self-information, while simultaneously highlighting their positive characteristics[17]. However the ability to judge which characteristics are most flattering and worthy of inclusion in an online profile depends on the ability to take on others' point of view, a skill that autistic people often find challenging[8]. Similarly, striking a balance between realistic, but flattering, self-description and over-sharing could prove difficult for autistic people in light of a propensity to be truthful[18]. What online daters choose to disclose, however, is shaped by their understandings of the norms and expectations around online dating, particularly those relevant to the specific site they are using[17]. They need to disclose information about themselves in a way that is compatible with these norms and in a way that encourages the formation of romantic relationship, and autistic people might have difficulty understanding and negotiating these norms[16].

Thus online dating may be particularly well-suited to autistic daters, however there may be some barriers to successful dating related to understanding what is typically presented within online dating profiles. The aim of this study therefore was to explore, for the first time, how people who identify as autistic describe themselves in their online dating profiles. This is important as perception of the dating profile is the first step in the online dating process.

Method

Data collection procedure and ethics. Data were collected from the UK's most popular free online dating site, in terms of unique monthly visitors. This site was chosen as free online dating sites (as opposed to subscription sites such as Match.com and eHarmony) are preferred by autistic online daters[16]. Pre-existing online dating profiles were selected through various search terms of usernames accessed on the 29th April 2017. This search covered all active accounts on this particular site. These profiles are in the public domain and are accessible by anyone with internet access without a password, and can therefore be analysed without gaining consent from the online daters[19]. Accordingly, a covert approach was adopted. Whilst direct quotes are used, these are not searchable in Google or any other platform. Any potentially identifiable details, including names and usernames, have been anonymised. The study received ethical approval in accordance with British Psychological Society ethical guidelines.

The first step involved searching for profiles by UK-based males who self-identify as autistic, as most of those with a diagnosis of autism are male[3]. The search terms included: ASD, Aspie, Autism, Autistic and Asperger. This yielded a total of 52 male online dating profiles, with stated ages ranging from 19 to 65 years (M=34.13 years, SD 10.8). The profiles all seemed oriented towards heterosexual relationships (although this was not an inclusion criteria). The adjectives used to describe their personality, based on the forced choice options in the personality section, as well as the self-description in the free-text 'About Me' section were copied and saved into a word file for analysis.

Analysis. Initially, the frequency of the items selected from a prescribed list of personality traits in a drop-down personality section were analysed. It was not compulsory for daters to

select an item. The free-text section was then analysed using thematic analysis[20]. The profiles were read carefully to identify meaningful text relevant to the research question. Texts dealing with the same issue were grouped together in analytic categories and given temporary definitions. The final step involved systematically reviewing to ensure that a name, definition, and units of text were exhaustive to support each category identified.

Results

Personality attributes. Of the 52 profiles analysed, 40 (77%) daters described themselves using adjectives selected from the drop-down menu. Frequencies of each of the personality descriptors chosen by autistic daters are presented in Table 1. The most popular choice was *gamer* (6) followed by *geek* (5) and *adventurer* (5).

About me. Responses to the 'About Me' section ranged from 1 to 491 words with an average of 119 words. Thematic analysis of these responses revealed four key themes: interests, negative descriptions of personality, ideal match and autism. These themes and example excerpts are presented in Table 2.

Theme 1: Interests. This theme encapsulates what the participants enjoy doing in their free time. The three most common interests in order of frequency were music, technology, and exercise/outdoor activities. Interestingly, 'Exercise and outdoor activities' was usually linked to 'staying in shape', yet only two individuals discussed their physical appearance in their profile. Descriptions of interests were kept mainly positive, listing the interests they enjoyed. Some profiles, however, were more negative, listing activities they disliked.

Theme 2: Negative descriptions of personality. Consistent with their forced-choice responses, many users described themselves as 'a geek', 'kind of nerdy', 'weird' or 'different'. However, the most common words used in self-descriptions were shy, loving, open, fun, kind, and honest. On the face of it, most of these are positive adjectives. However, consistent with other elements of the profile (described below), these positive attributes were often presented in a negative way, or immediately undermined by a negative attribute. In relation to descriptions of personality, a clear theme emerged in relation to *how* users described themselves. Descriptions tended to be couched in negative terms. Many users described themselves in self-deprecating ways, often expressed using negative wording such as 'hate', and highlighted extremes in their personality and/or behaviour, with words such as 'overly so' and 'highly' recurring throughout the profiles. Interestingly, honesty was the most common trait presented in this negative way.

Theme 3: Ideal match. This theme describes the trend for autistic daters to describe the type of person they are seeking. However, rather than describe the attributes they want from a potential mate, autistic daters tended to describe the attributes they did not want. There was a consistent negative tone to these descriptions. Rather than describe desirable attributes in a partner, there is a focus on the undesirable. Moreover, in describing their ideal match there was a tendency to make further self-deprecating comments, reiterating many of the negative personality attributes already described.

Theme 4: Autism. The inclusion of autism-related words in a profile was central to inclusion in the data set, but autism nonetheless emerged as a theme as it appeared to be an important identity marker for many of these online daters, many of whom included reference to autism as part of their dating username. Moreover, in the free text About Me section, many

respondents did not simply include autism as part of a list of attributes, but expanded on the topic, explaining what it is and how it affects their behaviour.

Discussion

This study found a remarkable similarity in the ways that autistic males present themselves in online dating profiles, both in terms of content and style. The profiles of these autistic males included a combination of both desirable and undesirable attributes. Two of the most common personality-descriptors were geek and gamer, with a common interest being technology. These three characteristics are strongly linked and not generally considered desirable. As an activity, online gaming is associated with a negative stereotype, associated with four key characteristics: unpopularity, unattractiveness, idleness, and incompetence[22]. Moreover, the stereotype assumes social, physical and psychological shortcomings[23]. It should be noted however, that this stereotype is not borne out in reality, with studies comparing gamers with non-gamers finding these characteristics only in the most involved, problematic video game players[23]. Nonetheless, the stereotype associated with geek and gamer are unlikely to contribute to a desirable first impression. Offsetting these undesirable characteristics, a common self-description was adventurer, which is perceived as an attractive personality attribute in online dating[24].

In terms of content, descriptions of personality attributes often included undesirable characteristics, such as being annoying, while positive personality attributes, such as honesty are presented as flaws or negated with undesirable comments. Honesty is typically viewed as a positive attribute within online dating profiles[24], but such self-deprecating descriptions are incompatible with the norms of online dating. Research shows that positive content is the norm in online dating profiles[25, 26] and in other online contexts (such as Facebook) deviating from this norm generates negative judgements[27]. This is pertinent as for the vast majority of

autistic adults, when they have (or have had) a romantic partner, the partner is not autistic[7]. The final theme to emerge was the online daters' description of their autism. Brosnan and Mills[28] report that norm-violating behaviour was perceived more positively when the respondent knew the protagonist was autistic than when they did not. If this extends to the online dating context, it would suggest that an explicit statement about the autism diagnosis may off-set negative perceptions of norm violation within the online dating profile.

Overall, the most frequent descriptors (gamer, geek, adventurer) and themes within the About Me text (interests, negative descriptions of personality, ideal match, autism) deviate from online dating norms, and deviation from these norms is viewed negatively. As with face-to-face norms, online norms are often implicit, and it is precisely this kind of implicit social information that autistic people can have difficulty understanding. Thus, despite the benefits of CMC of removing social cues and providing greater time to respond[13], face-to-face social norms have been replaced with online dating norms. This study suggests that autistic males may find understanding online norms as challenging as understanding face-to-face norms, at least within the context of online dating. In addition, this study does not tell us how such profiles are perceived by those viewing the profile. Further research is needed to investigate how such profiles are perceived by online daters, both autistic and non-autistic. In addition, whilst most people receiving a diagnosis of autism are male[3], future research can explore how female autistic daters present themselves in online dating profiles.

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Table 1: Summary of Personalities chosen from drop-down menu

Personality	Frequency
Gamer	6
Geek	5
Adventurer	5
Free thinker	3
Intellectual	3
Night owl	2
Crafty	2
Class clown	2
Nomad	2
Techie	2
Tattooed/Pierced	2
Professional	1
Comic nerd	1
Chef	1
Hopeless romantic	1
Film/TV junkie	1
Starving Artist	1

Themes and sub-themes derived from 'About me'

Theme	Example profile excerpt
<u>Theme 1: Interests</u>	*Music is very very important in my life and i love to spend an evening listening to classical, jazz or indie.*
	I spend a lot of time in front of a computer, but I make it a point to take a break every 20 minutes or so. When I take said breaks.
	Im very health conscious and try eat healthy and exercise as much as I can. Anything outdoor activities whatsoever I enjoy.
<u>Theme 2: Negative descriptions of personality</u>	*I'm a gentle lover not a fighter (but if you push me far enough I may push back), shy (I can be a "closed door" sometimes not purposely its just one of my flaws but sometimes all it takes is a little nudge to get it open).*
	I have a weird and strangely annoying personality. I'm also really outgoing, a little shy though Sometimes I am loving and needy other times I like to be by myself, I am highly emotional when angry.
	It means im completely honest (I hate everything about lying).
<u>Theme 3: Ideal match</u>	*looking to chill out with someone nice, no Glasgow hairies, women who have a psycho ex in the back ground who may wish to alter my apearance with the help of a cleaver and no one please who is expecting their door to be kicked down by Strathclydes finest whilst the drugs dog is licking at my butt.*
	Have a physical job. Would like to come home and relax. Don't smoke, but do drink. I'm a funny drinker. I like to laugh. Looking for somebody to be stupid with. ... If it does turn into a relationship the woman must have a job. I just can't afford to take care of my son and your family.

Theme 4: Autism	*I don't see my aspergers/autism as a disability. More so it just means I can be socially awkward. Anyways enough about that.... definitely wanted to get it out in the open though, so that if people have a problem with it you can just move on and don't waste your time or mine, with all respect.*
	I'm autistic. More specifically, I have aspergers. I'm not a "normal" person, I'm just unique in my own way. I have difficulty with emotions, I come off as rather monotonous when speaking, and I have very few interests. I do have a caring personality though. I just don't show it in a normal sort of way. Don't be afraid to ask me questions though. I don't bite.