

Online Dating in Japan: A Test of Social Information Processing Theory

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of past and present members of a popular Japanese online dating site in order to explore the extent to which Western-based theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the development of online relationships are relevant to the Japanese online dating experience. Specifically, it examines whether social information processing theory (SIPT) is applicable to Japanese online dating interactions, and how and to what extent Japanese daters overcome the limitations of CMC through the use of contextual and other cues. Thirty-six current members and 27 former members of Match.com Japan completed an online survey. Using issue-based procedures for grounded theory analysis, we found strong support for SIPT. Japanese online daters adapt their efforts to present and acquire social information using the cues that the online dating platform provides, although many of these cues are specific to Japanese social context.

Introduction

JAPAN IS AN EARLY INTERNET ADOPTER with its own online cultural norms, including a preference for mobile platforms such as cell phones.¹ Traditionally, Japanese preferred mediated forms of dating as a way of reducing the uncertainties and anxieties associated with meeting complete strangers.² With the traditional form of mediated introductions—*omiai*—now accounting for less than one tenth of marriages,³ Japanese increasingly are turning to other forms of organized “marriage hunting” (*konkatsu*), including online dating.⁴ The practice of peer-mediated blind group dates—*gokon*—has long been prevalent among college students in Japan but is less available for older Japanese adults, especially the increasingly large number of adults outside of regular corporate employment. Recently, online sites have become a popular form of mediated introduction, and they also offer some advantages over *gokon* and other face-to-face introductions. The Internet provides a way of getting to know a person “from the inside out” without having to risk first meeting that person face to face.⁵ However, there is also some distrust of Internet dating in Japan. The practice of *deai-kei*, arranging meetings online, became associated with prostitution and sexual assaults in Japan.⁶ The bad reputation of *deai-kei* was described by Match.com Japan managers as a problem for mainstream online “matching” services in Japan (personal communication). On the other hand, Japanese men and women are marrying increasingly late or not at all, leading to increased

anxieties about unmarriageable singles and declining birth-rates.⁷ All these trends have lowered social resistance to online dating.⁴

Although the same communicative acts can have different meanings in different cultures, online dating sites worldwide tend to follow the same, originally North American, model. Members of online dating sites post profiles describing themselves and their ideal partners, they send and receive e-mails on the basis of these initial descriptions, and in many cases continue to communicate using a variety of online and offline channels in order to get to know each other more fully. This process often culminates in the formation of offline romantic relationships, at which point membership of the dating site is canceled. Since most studies of online dating have looked at European or North American cases, this Japanese case study allows us to address questions about cultural differences in the use of online dating platforms and to explore the extent to which Western-based theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the development of online relationships are relevant to the Japanese experience.

Theories of CMC

Online communication has apparent disadvantages in terms of building personal relationships, as compared to face-to-face interactions, which make an abundance of verbal and nonverbal cues available.⁸ Early “cues filtered out” models argue that important nonverbal and contextual cues are

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missing (or filtered out) in CMC⁹⁻¹¹ and that the fewer cue systems a channel offers, the greater the barrier to intimate relational development. This approach, however, does not take into account the intent of communicators. To this end, Walther's^{12,13} social information processing theory (SIPT) argues that CMC users adapt their efforts to present and acquire social information using whatever cues a medium provides. To compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues, CMC users employ content and linguistic strategies as well as timing-related¹⁴ and typographic cues¹⁵ to glean information about a CMC partner. Furthermore, Walther¹⁶ found that, proportionately, CMC partners ask more questions and disclose more about themselves than do their face-to-face counterparts. In these ways, impressions and relational communication improve over time in CMC to parallel face-to-face interactions.¹⁷ A central premise of SIPT is that relational processes take time, and CMC interactions are relatively slower than face-to-face interactions.¹² Given enough time, however, CMC partners can adapt to the lack of cues inherent in text-based communication and eventually achieve interpersonal outcomes comparable to face-to-face relationships.

Recent extensions to this model highlight its relevance to online dating. For example, the anticipation of future interaction has been included as a variable in modifications to SIPT, as it is assumed to increase intimacy and self-disclosure.¹⁸ Further, Walther's hyperpersonal model argues that not only can CMC partners overcome the limitations of CMC, they can use text-based communication to develop relationships more intimate than their face-to-face counterparts.¹⁷ Interactants compensate for the limitations of CMC by hyperpersonalizing their interactions. That is, CMC partners exploit the benefits of text-based communication to engage in, for example, selective self-presentation and partner idealization. This can lead to positively skewed perceptions leading to elevated feelings of intimacy. A recent study offers support for SIPT in the setting of online relationships by demonstrating the importance of small cues in online dating, in both the profiles and initial e-mails.¹⁹ Online daters attend to subtle, almost minute cues in others' profiles and e-mail messages, including spelling ability, timing (e.g., time of day or night), message length, as well as broader cues such as whether the online partner is an active user of the dating site or the type of photograph included. All of these strategies are consistent with SIPT.

Cross-cultural differences in communication styles

The meanings and limitations of online communication are not necessarily uniform across cultures, with recent researchers calling into question early theorizing of the Internet as "deterritorialized" or "borderless."²⁰ The Internet is not culture neutral but is shaped by local cultures of politics, community, Internet use, the social shaping of technology, and language. Therefore, the lack of social context cues in text-based communication could be particularly problematic in Japanese culture, where social context plays a much greater role in the communication process.²¹ Cross-cultural psychologists usually describe a Japanese preference for "high-context" communication in which information is conveyed not directly in the message itself but more indirectly through the larger context of communication.²² Communication focuses on implicit communicative cues, such as body language

and use of silence, implying a message through what is not said, including the situation, behavior, and paraverbal cues. These contextual cues are precisely the type of information that is often considered to be lacking in CMC. Other cultures (e.g., North America) communicate predominantly through explicit statements in text and speech and are thus categorized as "low-context" communicators.^{21,23} Most information is contained in the message itself, so there is a need for information to be conveyed in a direct and unambiguous way.²⁴

Research indicates that differences in communication styles between low-context and high-context cultures have carried over into various areas of online communication. Cross-cultural comparisons of Web-site content,^{25,26} e-business negotiations,²⁷ and international marketing²⁸ all indicate that cultural values are reflected in online communication styles and that the Internet should not automatically be assumed to be a culturally neutral medium. The presence of cross-cultural differences in online communication styles suggests that the techniques put forward by SIPT models, such as asking direct questions and increasing self-disclosure, may not be equally available in some online settings, particularly in Japan, a culture in which a reliance on high-context communication may preclude asking direct questions or providing explicit information, thus robbing the interaction of some of the elements said to aid relational development in CMC. For example, within Japanese culture, "being far more specific or elaborate than the situation demands is likely to be interpreted as a sign of incompetence, or *yabo* (insensitivity, or 'uncool')."^{29(p171)} Similarly, as Mushakoji states, "In Japan it is considered virtuous to 'catch on' quickly ... to adjust to someone's position before it is logically and clearly enunciated."^{30(p43)} Japanese young people put a great value on the idea of "implied communication" in dating relationships, using conventional social cues to indicate a desire for increased commitment or intimacy.³ Given the continuation of cross-cultural differences in communication styles in online settings, the Japanese preference for high-context communication, and the characterization of the Internet as a low-context medium,²⁵ this study examines whether Walther's SIPT is applicable to Japanese online dating interactions. Specifically, it explores how and to what extent Japanese daters overcome the limitations of CMC through the use of contextual and other cues.

Data and Method

The data were generated using an online survey consisting of a combination of 20 closed-ended and 35 open-ended questions, with 36 current and 27 former members of Match.com Japan, 40 female and 23 male. All women were looking for male partners, and all men were looking for female partners. Sixteen of the informants had married since beginning their use of Match.com. The others were never married (39) or divorced (8). Seventeen had never dated anyone on the site but were active users. Fifty-one lived in the Tokyo area, with rest spread out through Japan. Three were Japanese using the site from abroad. The median age of the informants was 32, with all but three between the ages of 25 and 45 (one below 25 and 2 over 45). Former members of Match.com were recruited via an e-mail sent to 89 participants of an earlier study on people who had married or formed a long-term relation-

ship using the Match.com interface and provided an email address indicating their willingness to participate in a future study. Current members were recruited via e-mails sent to 80 randomly selected members of Match.com who had been active on the site in the previous 2 weeks. The response rates were 40.4% and 33.3% respectively. After agreeing to participate in the study, respondents were directed to an online survey, which took about 15 minutes to complete. The survey was conducted using the online survey software Survey-monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). The survey instrument consisted of three sections: a set of closed-ended demographic questions; a section of open-ended questions on online dating behavior in general, including construction of a profile, searching behavior, and communication; and a section of questions about the formation of relationships online and any experiences of offline meetings.

Data analysis followed issue-based procedures for grounded theory.^{31,32} This method generates generalizations based on interviewees' responses. Transcripts were read and files of excerpted quotes and coder comments were created. In what Weiss calls "local integration" of data, similar responses were grouped together to generate sets of common themes. Two native Japanese-speaking student assistants independently worked on categorizing the themes, with thematic categorizations confirmed by the principal investigator. As the data from the former and current members were comparable in terms of the relevant themes identified, they have been collapsed in the following analysis.

Findings

General patterns

Contact is initiated between members via the sending of either an introductory e-mail or a virtual kiss. Most informants correspond with many people online rather than with just one, and send introductory e-mails and virtual kisses to many potential partners. There is a clear gender pattern in the sending and receiving of these initial messages. Most men (63.7%) have sent more than five introductory e-mails/virtual kisses to female members, with 27% of men sending 50 or more of these messages. On the other hand, only one woman has sent 50 or more messages, with most women (73.1%) sending five or fewer. Not surprisingly, this pattern is reversed with respect to receiving e-mails/virtual kisses, with women receiving many more than men. Fifty-six percent of women report having received 50 or more introductory e-mails/virtual kisses, with only one woman receiving five or fewer. On the other hand, only 9% of men report receiving 50 or more introductory e-mails/virtual kisses, with most (50%) receiving five or fewer.

These findings point to the great volume of direct and unsolicited communication established on this site, and on the whole, both men and women were responsive to the introductory messages they received. Although some men said they generally replied to every message they received, most informants, both male and female, generally checked photos and profiles before replying to introductory e-mails/virtual kisses. Our interest is on the cues that are drawn upon in deciding with whom to initiate contact, whether to respond to an introductory message, and whether to continue with the correspondence once an exchange of e-mail messages is underway.

The choice of the online platform as a filtering and signaling device

Before a profile is even created, the choice of an online platform is itself a social signal. Given the general suspicion of online dating in Japan, choosing a "reliable" and "trusted" site is an especially important strategy of conveying social information in online dating interactions, including a sense of purpose (such as seriousness or play). Our findings support Holden and Tsuruki's findings that the social stigma of *deai-kei* sites (online meeting sites) is itself a source of anxiety among Japanese users of online matching sites.⁶ This may work to the advantage of mainstream online dating sites such as Match.com. Informants perceived it as trustworthy because it is a brand-name company and did not seem to have employees paid to pose as members (known as *sakura* in Japan and common on *deai-kei* sites). Informants stated that because the site charges a member fee, it excluded people who were not serious about finding a partner. A few mentioned its success in the United States and elsewhere as a reason for choosing it over other sites. There is still some stigma attached to online dating, however, even among our sample of online daters. Thirty-two percent of informants said that they had not told any of their friends or family about their participation in online dating. Some explained this was because it was "embarrassing" but also because of the negative image of online dating or *deai-kei* in Japan.

Maybe I still have an image of it being dangerous myself. I am scared of acknowledging that "it might be safe" to meet people through this kind of medium. And it is embarrassing if someone you know sees you. (No. 2, 25–29, female)

Explicit and implicit social cues in profiles

The informants relied heavily on explicit information provided in self-descriptions provided via drop-down boxes in the online profile template. Using the Match.com search facility, this information then can be used to narrow down the potential "market" when browsing profiles. Ninety percent of the informants used the search function that allows them to specify parameters on profile elements such as age, language, and region to restrict their searches for appropriate partners and avoid certain types of members. Factors that were often used to limit searches included smoking (with a preference for nonsmokers), age, location, nationality, language, level of education, and marital history. Informants varied in their attitudes toward dating non-Japanese. Some said that they had no interest in foreigners or would be put off by different languages and values. Conversely, others used Match.com specifically to find a foreign partner or said they would prefer a foreign partner:

If there is someone who I could speak Japanese with, I actually would prefer him to a Japanese guy. (No. 62, 35–39, female)

As an Asian, I have looked for Asian ladies, especially Koreans and Chinese. It is the advantage of Match.com. Personally, I'm in favor of international marriage. (No. 41, 40–44, male)

While explicitly provided information such as nationality, age, occupation, geographical location, and hobbies was important, so too was the more implicit information conveyed by the way the profile was written. Some profiles included indirect forms of communication, such self-deprecating humor or irony and sexual innuendo. Many profiles, especially

those of younger users, use emoticons and other nonlinguistic symbols, such as musical notations or creative punctuation, to hint at emotional tone or personality traits. Photos were generally described as very important as a clue not only to attractiveness but also to personality.

You can tell what kind of person they are by the way it is taken. (No. 35, 35–39, female)

Seventy-nine percent of informants said they put up a photo with their profiles. These photos were chosen partly to convey physical appearance but also to convey more nebulous information; for example, “a smiling picture that shows who I am, and makes people think that I am having fun.” (No. 63, 30–34, female).

Social cueing through levels of politeness

As outlined previously, online daters send out e-mails and virtual kisses to many partners. It is at this stage that nonverbal and other contextual cues take on their greatest importance as part of the communication process. When describing their first messages, most informants answered that they tried not to write long e-mails at the beginning, with two to three lines being the norm. Members introduced themselves and wrote about what interested them when reading others' profiles. Members tried to write trivial things in first e-mails:

I write something simple and short just to make sure the person is interested in me. (No. 28, 25–29, female)

Once communication was established and an exchange of e-mails was underway, Japanese online daters drew on indirect cues, such as writing style, humor, and the speed of replies, in getting to know their potential partners. This is consistent with the strategies used by online daters in western countries.¹⁹

I was attracted by the polite tone in mails, humorous sentences, and wealth of subjects. I was able to perceive his serious character and reliability from the messages. (No. 19, 25–29, female)

I observe whether the person shows an interest in me or not (I do not reply to people who just introduce themselves); people who can use proper keigo; in cases where I can sense kindness in what is written; when I look at the profile and the photo is nice, and I feel that we share the same values. (No. 63, 30–34, female)

Japanese daters also incorporate cues that are unique to the Japanese language and writing styles. In Japanese-language online interactions, degrees of formality and informality in language are an especially important form of social cueing. In writing and replying to e-mails from other Match.com members, most informants used polite Japanese, or *keigo*. However, they also found ways of indicating familiarity and friendliness while using the polite forms of writing.

I use keigo while being careful not to appear too serious, so I use hiragana a lot [instead of Chinese characters]. I will try not to be rude. (No. 63, 30–34, female)

This use of polite language often continued until the first meeting. But it could also change in the course of online communication, in which case one partner might suggest that they drop formal language.

I will stop using keigo if we get to know one other, but will keep using keigo unless the person says, “You don’t have to speak in keigo.” (No. 19, 30–34, female)

For many informants, there was thus a pattern of relatively distant and formal communication with a large number of members, then settling on a smaller number of members with whom an exchange of e-mails occurred and a level of intimacy developed that could be signaled by dropping formal/polite language in favor of a more informal and intimate style of writing.

Communication channels as a social cue

An important means of signaling increased intimacy was broadening the means of communication used to include other media, including short text messaging, instant messaging, and telephone calls, and finally meeting in person. Although phone text messaging was also virtual, it was a way of signaling increased trust and intimacy in the relationship. Usually, the man asked to switch to talking on the cell phone and then to meet in person.

First it was mail in Match.com, next mail by computer, third cell phone mail, fourth cell phone, and at last, the direct line. (No. 17, 30–34, male)

We can see a pattern in which CMC is perceived as the least intimate means of communication, telephone text messaging as a step more intimate, and talking on the telephone as more intimate still. Changing the technical means of communication is thus a way of both developing and signaling intimacy. This is consistent with the pattern of intimacy found in other cultural contexts, such as Australia.³³

Controlling the context of communication

Flexibility and control are important perceived advantages of online dating. Informants said they could meet various types of people on this site and choose their ideal type of partner, controlling how much time they spend interacting with online partners and communicating when and where they choose. They could also meet people from different backgrounds and do not have to worry about dealing personally with mediators as one does in group dates (or *gokon*). Getting to know a person before meeting them face to face is an advantage of online dating, as is the fact that online daters can easily stop contacting their online partners.

The merit is that you can search for someone who fits your standards and start communicating. If you feel that he is not your type, you can stop communicating before you meet. You also can meet people who you cannot meet only in the Net. (No. 52, 25–29, female)

Online dating platforms, while perceived as unreliable by some informants, were perceived as allowing more control over the context of relationship develop, especially in the early phases. In general, face-to-face meetings were perceived to have more social costs than online meetings.

Meeting at office is troublesome after you break up. An introduction by friends or *omiai* is good if you are introduced by your friends who you trust. However, if you do not go well with your partner, it is troublesome that you need to care about your friends' feelings. ... A marriage introduction service is expensive and has an image that people use that place

as a last resort. The people who use them seem to be the people who are not popular. Also it is troublesome that there are mediators. (No. 63, 30–34, female)

These findings point to a perceived flexibility that online sites offer Japanese users in managing the breadth of social contexts and the cues of communication. Rather than understanding online communication as simply low-context communication and Japanese culture as favoring high-context communication, these findings highlight the active ways in which Japanese users can manipulate the context to achieve control over self-presentations and relationship outcomes.

Discussion and Conclusions

These findings strongly support Walther's SIPT.^{12,13} Japanese online daters adapt their efforts to present and acquire social information using the cues that the online dating platform provides. Research on Japanese communication strategies suggests that Japanese prefer indirect cues over direct messages and high-context to low-context communication strategies.^{22,29} This tendency would seem to pose particular problems for Japanese people engaging in online dating interactions in which much of the typically available social context of dating interactions (such as membership in a common social circle) is missing and in which there are seemingly fewer opportunities to engage in nonverbal cueing (such as glances and body gestures). Our findings suggest the opposite. From this research, it seems that online dating provides tools of social cueing and contextual communication that differ from but are not inferior to the contextual tools used in face-to-face interactions. One feature of online dating that informants discussed was that it allowed very effective means of *managing social contexts* as a way of controlling the flow of information and the development of relationships.

Consistent with SIPT, our research also supports previous findings¹⁹ in that the Japanese users are able to find many contextual cues in the ways that others communicate. Most informants described themselves as competent at managing their uncertainties over online interactions. They felt that they could discern true from false self-representations through interacting with people online. Informants reported that they tended to start with very brief and indirect ("trivial") messages as a way of signaling the appropriate level of social distance. In describing how they judged the sincerity of messages, many informants attached importance of indirect cues such as the speed of reply and length of responses, the style of writing, the use of humor, and the degree of politeness. In particular, the proper use of formal polite Japanese (*keigo*) without, however, seeming too formal or stiff, was taken as a sign of proper social distance, similar to what would be expected in the initial phases of face-to-face dating. Using styles of language as a cue to personality traits and intentions shows the importance of indirect communication and contextual cues even without face-to-face communication.

Another way in which indirect cues were used to signal intimacy was in supplementing the technical means of communication. The shifts from CMC to cell phone text messaging and then to calling on the cell phones were all ways in which a desire for increased intimacy was signaled without being explicitly articulated in a verbal message. The choice of a particular platform also is a form of social cueing. The choice of a "branded" site such as Match.com is described as a

way conveying a message about one's "seriousness" as well as a way of controlling for the seriousness and honesty of others. Sites can also be associated with particular types of people, such as foreigners, a special appeal of international sites such as Match.com.

Many uses of online dating tools can be described as tactics of managing social risks. In general, Japanese people prefer mediated forms of dating as a way of reducing the uncertainties and anxieties that go with meeting complete strangers. Web sites provide a way of getting to a person "from the inside out" without having to risk first meeting that person face to face.⁵ Not only do online sites reduce the anxieties of meeting people face to face, but our informants point out that they allow people to more easily *end* interactions without embarrassment and the other psychological costs of breaking off an interaction. Finally, unlike the personal go-betweens and organizers of face-to-face meetings, who are commonly involved in group dating (*gokon*), the mediator in online dating, the Web site, is impersonal and requires no special considerations or social interaction. Perhaps because Japanese users put an even greater importance on the context of communication and forms of indirect communication, online dating is perceived as an effective means of managing the social costs of interactions.

This research thus suggests a more complex understanding of the presumed Japanese preference for high-context communication. One attractive feature of online communication for Japanese users may in fact be that it allows more direct communication than in face-to-face contexts. The much discussed "disinhibition effect" of CMC allows people to do things online that they might not be able to in face-to-face contact.^{34,35} This research provides some evidence that Japanese online dating users experience this disinhibition effect as well. The patterns of communication engaged in by our informants indicate that both men and women approach numerous strangers online. People who might be unlikely to approach a stranger on the street—a practice known derisively as *nanpa*—may send dozens of virtual kisses and messages to strangers on the dating site. So, while Japanese remain sensitive to contextual markers in online communication, they are also able to use online spaces to engage in more direct forms of communication without the social costs associated with many face-to-face contexts. This research shows that SIPT is very relevant for understanding online communication in Japan, while cautioning us about overly simple applications of the distinction between high-context and low-context communication styles.

Disclosure Statement

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