

Pace University
DigitalCommons@Pace

Honors College Theses

Pforzheimer Honors College

2019

An Experimental Test Examining Preferable Romantic Characteristics as Displayed Through Social Media

Marcus A. Joyner
Pace University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/honorscollege_theses

 Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Joyner, Marcus A., "An Experimental Test Examining Preferable Romantic Characteristics as Displayed Through Social Media" (2019).
Honors College Theses. 213.
https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/honorscollege_theses/213

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Pforzheimer Honors College at DigitalCommons@Pace. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Pace. For more information, please contact nmcguire@pace.edu.

An Experimental Test Examining Preferable Romantic Characteristics as Displayed Through

Social Media

Marcus A. Joyner

Major: Psychology

Advisor: Lisa Rosenthal

Pace University Department of Psychology

Presentation Date: May 10th 2019

Graduation Date: May 23rd 2019

Table of Contents

● Abstract	3
● Figure(s)	4
● Introduction	5
○ BPD and Interpersonal Relationships	8
○ Social Media and Romantic Relationships	12
○ The Current Study	16
● Methods	17
○ Participants	18
○ Procedure	20
○ Materials	20
● Results	21
● Discussion	22
○ Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions	24
○ Implications	27
● References	30
● Appendix A	34
● Appendix B	38

Abstract

Previous research suggests a tendency towards negative emotionality and dysfunctional behavior in romantic relationships among individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). BPD is characterized by the trait of emotional lability, which is described as frequent changes in mood or affect over a short period of time. Research also shows that social media plays an integral role in dating in the 21st century. Thus, I sought to integrate these areas of research and examine the effect of the BPD feature of emotional lability displayed through social media on people's interest in dating potential partners. I recruited 58 participants 18-30 years old interested in dating. Qualtrics randomly assigned participants to view one of two social media profiles and posts: one including posts suggesting emotional lability (experimental condition), and one excluding those posts (control condition). Participants were then asked their interest in dating the described individual. I hypothesized that participants in the experimental condition will be less interested in dating the potential partner than individuals in the control condition. Results supported this hypothesis, with the t-test performed on dating interest finding a significant difference between conditions, $t(56) = 2.45, p = .018$ in the predicted direction. This research will contribute to the field by helping individuals with BPD better understand how their expression of emotional lability appears to others who are interested in dating them.

Keywords: borderline personality disorder, dating, emotional liability, romantic relationships, social media

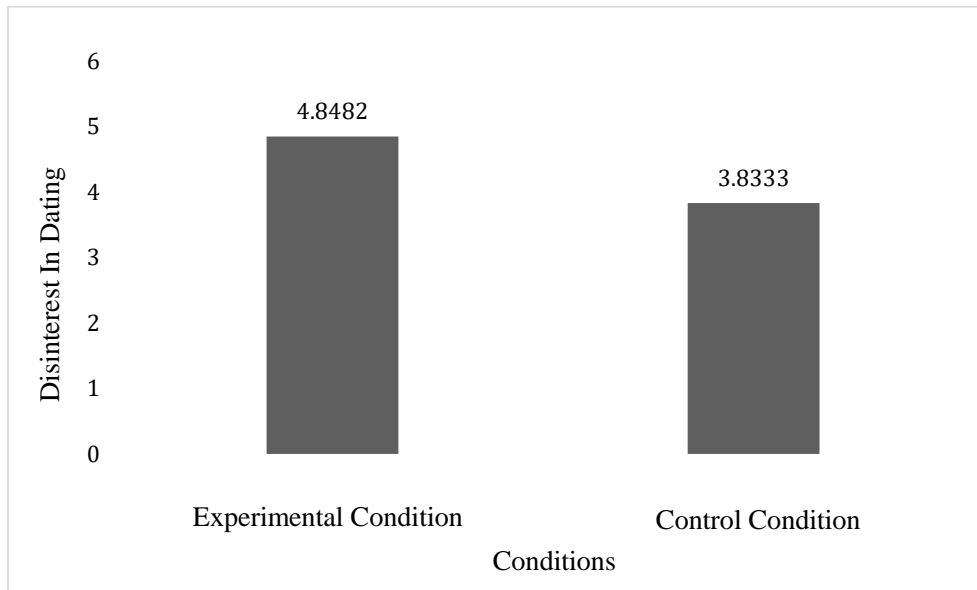


Figure 1. The means on interest in dating for participants in the experimental and control conditions. For the outcomes variable, a higher score indicates less interest in dating.

An Experimental Test Examining Preferable Romantic Characteristics as Displayed Through
Social Media

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a psychological condition associated with frequent dysregulation in interpersonal relationships. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Edition (DSM 5) defines Borderline Personality Disorder as, “impairments in personality (self and interpersonal) functioning and the presence of pathological personality traits ... impairments in personality functioning [and] ...interpersonal functioning” (American Psychological Association, 2013). BPD is often characterized by emotional lability (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), which is defined as, “intense, frequent, and reactive shifts in emotions” (Schoenleber et al., 2016, p. 211). Additionally, the DSM-5 describes emotional lability as, “Unstable emotional experiences and frequent mood changes; emotions that are easily aroused, intense, and/or out of proportion to events and circumstances” (American Psychological Association, 2013. p. 398). Jang, Dick, Wolf, Livesley, and Paris (2005) assert that emotional lability or ‘dysregulation’ is defined by traits such as, “anxiousness, submissiveness, cognition distortion, identity problems, affective lability, suspiciousness, insecure attachment, and social avoidance” (p.359). As a result of this emotional upheaval that can occur, many individuals with BPD adopt further maladaptive behaviors, such as self-harm or mutilation, substance abuse, and suicidality (Jang et al., 2005). Emotional lability is one of the externally noticeable characteristics of BPD that affects interpersonal relationships among individuals with BPD, including romantic relationships (Jang et al., 2005).

Research has not greatly explored how the dynamics of an individual with BPD play out on social media platforms, such as Facebook™ or Tinder™. Social media or social networking sites are often used platforms for communication among individuals interested in romantic pursuit (Fox & Andereg, 2014). Within this context, it is possible that if individuals’ social media profiles display emotional lability, this could negatively affect others’ perceptions of and

potential interest in dating them. I aimed to test this experimentally, thereby helping to fill gaps in the literature and contribute to our understanding of BPD and dating dynamics in the increasingly relevant context of social media.

BPD and Interpersonal Relationships

BPD is a difficult condition to manage in the context of romantic relationships because of symptoms like emotional lability. Romantic interactions have been found to involve greater displays of negative affect than their non-romantic interactions when the individual with BPD is given social critique (Jeung, Walther, Korn, Bertsch, & Herpertz, 2018). Further, the individual's perception of rejection when interacting with a significant other over a period of 10 minutes has been found to be higher among individuals with BPD than among neurotypical controls (Lazarus et al., 2018). However, relationship satisfaction alone does not mediate or negate emotional lability or the BPD characteristic of anger meaning that a happy relationship does not cure features of BPD (Kuhlken et al., 2014). Additionally, when presented with an emotionally taxing scenario, individuals with BPD were found to be less trusting of their partner, potentially due to fears of rejection (Miano, Fertuck, Roepke, & Dziobek, 2016). Partner-initiated contact seems to elicit negative emotionality among those with BPD (Bhatia, Davila, Eubanks-Carter, & Burckell, 2013). Reasons for the individual's fear of rejection stem from attachment theory which suggests negative attachment systems formed during childhood (Selby, Braithwaite, Joiner, and Fincham, 2014). Finally, stigma related to individuals with BPD are presented through pejorative language used in previous, outdated, psychological literature which may cause those outside of the psychological community to be oblivious to the struggles an individual with BPD may face (Aviram, Brodsky, & Stanley, 2006).

Research finds that individuals with BPD can experience strong negative emotional reactions in interpersonal contexts. For example, Jeung, Walther, Korn, Bertsch, and Herpertz (2018) conducted an experiment with 21 individuals diagnosed with BPD and 21 neurotypical individuals, asking them to evaluate their emotional responses (e.g., happy, sad, angry or shame), the degree of those responses, and how they viewed themselves in relation to social feedback, including whether they believed it to be correct, incorrect, or felt neutral about it (Jeung et al., 2018). Results indicated that individuals with BPD perceived the social feedback more negatively than did the neurotypical controls, regardless of whether the feedback was ‘positive’ or ‘negative. This experiment indicated that in interpersonal situations, individuals with BPD are more likely to interpret advice or relationship issues, romantic or platonic, in a more negative fashion than individuals without BPD.

Individuals with BPD have also been found to experience greater increases in negative emotionality than their neurotypical control counterparts in response to both acceptance and rejection from romantic and non-romantic partners (Lazarus et al., 2018). This study involved 101 psychiatric outpatients involved in romantic partnerships recording daily interpersonal interactions lasting at least 10 minutes between. Participants were asked to describe their rejection or acceptance and then rate their emotional response to the interaction. Those diagnosed with BPD showed a tendency towards reporting experiencing rejection more than individuals diagnosed with other disorders (Lazarus et al., 2018). Additionally, in interactions with romantic partners only, the individuals with BPD showed increased hostility and acute sadness more frequently than did those with other illnesses. Lazarus et al. (2018) attributed this finding to “hyperactivating affect-regulation strategies” involving anger, theorized to be triggered by perceived rejection in order to shield oneself from potential forthcoming rejection (p. 203).

Given these findings and that acceptance and trust are often considered key components in a relationship, it can be expected that individuals with BPD in relationships have a higher incidence of dysfunctional interpersonal reactions (Lazarus et al., 2018).

Kuhlken et al. (2014) also found that anger seemed to be especially triggered when individuals with BPD perceived their partner as being “neglectful or abandoning” (p. 24). In this study, participants were 111 female undergraduates in short-term relationships who were given a questionnaire regarding negative affect, relationship satisfaction, and BPD symptoms. It was found that when tested for BPD characteristics and then compared to relationship satisfaction, anger was significantly predicted. The goal of this study was to determine the interaction between relationship satisfaction and the presented symptoms of BPD. Results in this study contradict previous research, indicating that relationship satisfaction does not control for negative affectivity in individuals with BPD. Kuhlken et al. (2014) hypothesized that perceived rejection may be the cause of the intense anger shown by individuals with BPD. An implication of this research suggests that higher romantic satisfaction may only temper the characteristics of emotional lability or anger in an individual with BPD but will not completely negate them (Kuhlken et al., 2014).

Another study found that individuals with BPD lost trust in their romantic partners more when faced with a hypothetical circumstance that threatened their relationship than when faced with a neutral circumstance where the threat to the relationship was minimal (Miano, Fertuck, Roepke, & Dziobek, 2016). In the study, 31 heterosexual couples in which the female was diagnosed with BPD and 36 neurotypical control couples discussed three different scenarios which were either neutral, relationship threatening, or personally threatening. Trustworthiness was shown to be affected significantly, showing a negative trend in individuals with BPD when

compared to the neurotypical control groups after discussing the separation vs. fear condition set forth by the experimenters (Miano et al., 2016). These findings may be due to negative attachment systems or relationship representations developed throughout childhood (Miano et al., 2016).

In a 14-day study of 114 romantically involved couples, half of whom were diagnosed with BPD, it was found that negative emotional experiences were linked with partner-initiated contact (Bhatia, 2013). Couples were asked to keep a diary over the course of the study and describe positive or negative experiences in response to daily self-initiated contact and partner-initiated romantic contact (e.g., having a conversation or displaying affection). Individuals with BPD were found to have a higher incidence of negative emotional responses to partner-initiated contact and positive experiences than those who were not diagnosed with BPD. Bhatia (2013) suggested a negative interpretation bias because self-initiated contact and negative experience showed a higher incidence of positive emotional responses (e.g., happiness) in individuals who are diagnosed with BPD. It is possible that individuals with BPD may question their partners' attempts at positivity and not question their own (Bhatia, 2013).

Romantic relationships including individuals with BPD are often difficult for both partners. Selby, Braithwaite, Joiner, and Fincham (2014) found in a study of 758 adults that BPD was "...the only disorder that specifically predicted romantic relationship dysfunction..." (p. 886). Linehan's (***) biopsychosocial theory (as cited in Selby et al., 2014) states that emotional invalidation in early childhood may result in behavioral dysregulation, such as inappropriate anger and emotional lability later in life. Other theories exist describing the circumstances in which an individual could develop BPD during childhood. Another includes a child having to resort to polar extremes to have their needs met and this strategy becoming a 'functional' way of

communicating their needs to others in their interpersonal sphere (Selby et al., 2014). Individuals with BPD tend to have more romantic relationships, more conflict in those relationships, and higher rates of abuse and unplanned pregnancies than persons who do not have a diagnosis of BPD (Selby et al., 2014). BPD is also associated with a lower likelihood of being married and a higher number of breakups. However, a better understanding of the individual's personality pathology (i.e., how any given individual will react to a stimulus given prior examination of their temperament) has been found to be a better indicator of potential interpersonal dysfunction than conventional measures for BPD (Daley, Buge, & Hammen, 2000).

Similar to other psychological disorders that involve negative or “undesirable” emotionality, BPD is often stigmatized. This stigma has been generalized to the public due to pejorative language previously used in the psychological community to describe the treatment of an individual with BPD (Aviram et al., 2006). Additionally, this stigmatization of BPD may appear in broader society and communities because certain features of the disorder can involve disturbing behavior. Aviram et al. (2006) state that stigma, in conjunction with the behavior inherent to the disorder, can cause even clinicians to engage in “self-protective behavior such as distancing” that can cause a patient to perceive withdrawal or abandonment, further impeding treatment (p. 251). This is relevant to dating and romantic relationships as well because without prior exposure or adequate education involving BPD, a neurotypical individual may distance themselves from an individual with BPD because of social stigma (Avrim et al., 2006). Given the challenges that BPD generally and emotional lability specifically have been found to pose to all interpersonal interactions, including dating and romantic relationships, as well as the existing societal stigma of BPD, it is important to further study how people react to individuals displaying BPD features such as emotional lability in the context of dating.

Social Media and Romantic Relationships

The internet is an integral aspect of life in the 21st century, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, as well as dating applications like Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr, have become a staple of our time. In the United States, a total of 75% of people use dating sites, and roughly 8.4 million individuals were registered for an active dating profile (Eichenberg, Huss, & Kusel, 2017). Often, social media is utilized to seek partnership because of underlying shyness or anxiety concerning meeting individuals offline, face-to-face (Stevens & Morris, 2017). In order to appear more appealing to potential partners on these platforms, individuals often, without knowing it, rely upon “self-generated cues” (interests or hobbies the individual’s profile displays) which others use to determine their overall dating interest in the individual (Bradley, Roberts, & Bradley, 2019). The altered form of language known as “textspeak” has also been shown to change how an individual is perceived by making the posting individual appear more emotionally appealing to a partner (Baker & Carreno, 2016). The stages of dating someone online has been found to differ from traditional methods of romantic relationship initiation in person, such as how they speak versus how they type posts, which may change how an individual perceives the individual interested in them; however, the developmental periods during which both boys and girls begin to seek out romantic partnership generally remain the same (Eichenberg, Huss, & Kusel, 2017).

Social media profiles and posts are increasingly relevant to dating as potential and existing dating/romantic partners view and monitor each other’s social media accounts. For example, Bradley, Roberts, and Bradley (2019) state that “self-generated cues” such as textual or image content in a Facebook post contributes to an individual’s rank in their own social network, including the likes and followers they will receive. Further, they argue that viewers of the social

media profile, such as an interested romantic partner, will use a combination of these cues to determine likability and/or attraction (Bradley et al., 2019). Fullwood, Quinn, Chen-Wilson, Chadwick, and Reynolds (2015) found that individuals who use ‘textspeak’ (using ‘u’ instead of ‘you’ or ‘wat’ instead of ‘what’) while utilizing social media are viewed as more emotionally stable when compared with individuals who use more formal language. This is an example of a “self-generated cue” that is used by others to determine likability and interest in dating through a social media profile.

Social media can be operationalized as a network of individuals utilizing the internet with the ability to share information, such as posts, pictures, and minute details concerning a person’s everyday experiences. According to Fox and Anderegg (2014), “This flow of information allows users to accomplish significant information seeking and uncertainty reduction about potential or current partners, often without their knowledge,” making social networking sites integral when hoping to date a person (p. 685). Considering how individuals use social media in relation to dating in this age, it is clear that perception (how peers view popularity and one’s previous romantic partners) on social networking sites is important to potential partners. Therefore, it can be preferable for people to eliminate undesirable aspects from their profile or posts. Further stated in Fox and Anderegg (2014), “Individuals develop norms and expectations for romantic behaviors based on observation, social experiences, and media consumption” (p. ***). Therefore, observations of non-neurotypical behavior can be detrimental to individuals with BPD who display characteristics of emotional lability on social media.

Facebook™ is one of the largest and most well-known of the various global social media platforms that have arisen over the course of recent years (Toma & Choi, 2015). On this site, individuals reveal details about their lives to potentially hundreds of ‘friends’ who may live in

different countries across the globe. Etiquette for Facebook indicates that conversations be civil and that no slurs or hate speech be used on the platform (Toma & Choi, 2015). Expansion and proliferation of Facebook friends can be utilized to search for new romantic partners or connect one with romantic partners from other dating apps or social media platforms (Toma and Choi, 2015). Ultimately, Facebook gives the user the agency to seek out new friends and potential romantic partners, observe their profiles, and determine one's interest in dating them.

There are marked advantages to using dating applications for individuals who have difficulty meeting romantic partners in real life or have anxiety around interpersonal relationships, such as individuals with BPD. Some individuals choose to meet romantic partners online because the internet is less threatening than face-to-face interactions. Stevens and Morris (2007) found that "gating features" such as height, weight, self-presentation, and most importantly personality, are reasons that individuals with interpersonal difficulties may instead seek out partners online by looking at a Facebook™ profile instead of in-person since these are controlled for until real-life contact is established. Some individuals with the BPD characteristic of emotional lability may seek out partners using social media in order to avoid "gating experiences," which could cause them to appear unfavorable. Because of the sheer number of individuals who use social media on a daily basis, some of whom are potential romantic partners, self-presentation becomes important, especially for an individual with BPD. For individuals who express the characteristic of emotional lability, Facebook, or social media in general, may seem to be an open forum for ideas and tirades concerning a myriad of different topics. However, when using social media for the purpose of dating, these characteristics can be perceived as 'undesirable' to those unaware of their true roots.

Further research indicates that technology involving social media usage, can increase negative behaviors amongst adolescents and young adults due to one partner monitoring these social media cues more closely than the other (Baker & Carreno 2016). This increased monitoring leads to interpersonal conflict, not unlike the dysregulation that occurs in individuals with the characteristic of emotional lability.

Though more research is required, current theories on the stages of relationship development suggest that the desire for romantic affiliation begins in adolescence when same-sex peer groups change into mixed-sex peer groups (Baker & Carreno 2016). Interactions from the mixing of peer groups is hypothesized to set individuals on a path of seeking romantic attachment. Mid-adolescence sees the onset of dating. Here individuals will begin to form two-group pairs who functionally date within the context of the peer group. These are not yet exclusive dyadic relationships as they rely upon group functionality to form and continue existing. It is in late adolescence that individuals begin to break from these mixed-sex peer groups and form generally exclusive romantic relationships (Baker & Carreno 2016). This is where functional dyadic relationships – independent of a group dynamic – are formed between two young adults. Without more in-depth empirical research pinpointing exact ages and time frames when these emotional reactions should occur is difficult, if not impossible because of the numerous extraneous variables present.

The process of online dating varies greatly from individual to individual. Traditionally there is a period of initial contact followed by informational exchange and an extended duration of getting to know the person (Eichenberg, Huss, & Kusel, 2017). Interactions usually transfer to private messages and are higher in frequency than previous messages when the relationship is progressing well. Researchers found that when compared to traditional offline romantic

relationships, which are often characterized by dates, these relationships initiated online were more continuous and intense in engagement during the initial interactions (Eichenberg et al., 2017).

A major milestone often cited is the transition from interacting over text message to interacting over telephone calls, where anxiety can be registered by either party, unlike on the internet where there are no audio-visual cues (Eichenberg et al., 2017). This trade of phone numbers can also be considered a confidence assessment in the feasibility of the relationship. When one of the individuals interested in dating takes the initiative, it gives the ‘go-ahead’ cue to their potential partner. This transitory state can be unsettling to some, with individuals feeling disappointment or alienation (Eichenberg et al., 2017). However, it is equally possible that one may feel a sense of intimacy or even heightened emotional connection after a period of anticipatory waiting. After these steps are worked through, individuals typically continue with their first date. This is a crucial step in any dating paradigm and can potentially decide the relationship’s future. This can be a unique experience when dating through social media, as the individual met in person may be very different in personality or appearance from the one expected (Eichenberg et al., 2017).

The Current Study

The research reviewed above suggests it is important to understand dynamics related to dating and social media among individuals with BPD and specifically the feature of emotional lability, which is an area past research has rarely addressed. Additionally, there is a lack of research regarding initial dating contact between individuals with features of BPD such as emotional lability and neurotypical individuals. The vast majority of the research about individuals with BPD and romantic relationships focuses on those already in committed romantic

relationships, leaving a gap in understanding dynamics that take place in early stages of dating. It was the goal of the current experiment to contribute to these gaps in the literature by examining the specific effect of the BPD characteristic of emotional lability on others' dating interest. In this study, instead of collecting data on individuals with BPD, as many past studies have done (Jeung et al., 2018), I sought to test neurotypical individuals' romantic perceptions of a potential dating partner displaying the BPD feature of emotional lability on social media.

The independent variable in my experiment is display of emotional lability in social media posts (versus the lack thereof). The dependent variable is participants' perceptions of and interest in dating the individual whose social media profile they are reading. Thus, I tested whether participants would report differences in the 'date-ability' of a hypothetical potential romantic partner whose social media posts either portray emotional lability or do not portray emotional lability. I hypothesized that the participants exposed to the Facebook profile posts portraying emotional lability would view the hypothetical person as a less desirable romantic partner than those who are exposed to the Facebook profile posts that do not portray emotional lability.

The broader goal of this research was to promote a more comprehensive understanding of the romantic interpersonal interactions that may be experienced by people with BPD both generally and specifically through social media platforms. Understanding dating and BPD is important for comprehending how best to support individuals who struggle with managing dating relationships along with this condition. Findings will help to provide practitioners further insight in how to assist their clients with emotional lability in managing interpersonal relationships.

Methods

Participants

For this experiment, I recruited 80 participants ranging from 18 to 30 years of age, who were diverse in terms of sex, gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Of the total 80, only 58 met the inclusion criteria for the study, which were an interest in dating and being between 18 and 30 years of age, and also completed the entire study. The age restriction was because the literature suggests that this age bracket is most likely to engage in online dating (Jeung et al., 2018). Participants were recruited online using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as through email. The recruitment blurb invited individuals who were between 18 and 30 years of age and interested in dating to participate in a completely anonymous online study testing “Preferable Romantic Characteristics as Displayed Through Social Media” that took participants roughly 5-10 minutes to complete.

Of the 58 participants, 13 (22.4%) identified as male, 43 (74.1%) identified as female, 1 (1.7%) identified as non-binary, and 2 (3.4%) identified as gender non-conforming. The mean age of the participants was 20.40 ($SD = 1.37$). In terms of race/ethnicity, 35 (60.3%) participants identified as White/European, 7 (12.1%) identified as Black/African American, 7 (12.1%) identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 13 (22.4%) identified as Asian, and 1 (1.7%) identified as “Other.” For sexual orientation, 43 (74.1%) identified as heterosexual, 2 (3.4%) identified as gay/lesbian, 11 (19.0%) identified as bisexual/bi-curious, 2 (3.4%) identified as queer/questioning, 2 (3.4%) identified as pansexual, 1 (1.7%) identified as polysexual, 1 (1.7%) identified as graysexual, 1 (1.7%) identified as asexual, and 2 (3.4%) identified as “Other.”

Procedure

Potential participants interested in the study clicked on the survey link included in the recruitment blurb, which brought them to the study administered through the survey platform Qualtrics. The first thing they saw was an online consent form, which explained that they could

leave the study at any time they wished and that there was no risk involved in taking the survey. If they indicated that they were willing to participate, they choose “Agree,” and participants were brought to preliminary screening questions asking if they were interested in dating and if they were within the age range of 18-30. If they did not meet the inclusion criteria, they were shown a page thanking them for their interest and participation and explaining that they did not meet the inclusion criteria. If they met both of these inclusion criteria, they were then presented with demographic questions asking their specific age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and racial/ethnic identity.

At this point, participants were presented with a scenario in which they were asked to imagine that they met someone who they found attractive. Participants were not told ahead of time that they were going to be randomly assigned to see one of two different Facebook profiles and sets of posts, or that emotional lability may or may not have been displayed in what they saw. This deception was used to control for biases that could threaten the internal validity of the study, such as participants sympathizing with or wanting to appear unbiased toward the hypothetical person displaying emotional lability. In order to control for subjective ideas of attractiveness and other physical features, photos were not used on the fabricated profiles or posts. The experimenter also avoided usage of the actual Facebook website and simulated the format using text on Qualtrics.

In the scenario, the fabricated individual has asked the participants out on a date, and before they choose whether to go on a date with the person or not, they decided to look at that person’s Facebook profile and posts in order to learn more about them. All participants were asked to read through a profile and posts from the last week to decide if they were interested in dating the person. Participants were randomly assigned by Qualtrics to either the experimental or

control condition. The Facebook profiles in both of the conditions were identical (see Appendix A for full profile). However, in the experimental condition, some of the posts indicated emotional lability. The control condition did not have these posts indicating emotional lability, but it had the same posts as the experimental condition that do not indicate emotional lability (see Appendix A for posts in both conditions). After participants reviewed the profile and posts, they were asked to respond to items about their interest in dating the person whose profile and posts they read. Finally, participants were shown a debriefing statement fully explaining the experiment's true purpose and design, and then were thanked for their participation in the study.

Materials

Sociodemographic questions. Participants were asked to report their age, gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Experimental manipulation. In the experimental condition, participants were exposed to posts characteristic of the trait of emotional lability in individuals with BPD. For the purpose of this experiment, it allowed participants in this condition to experience aspects of an individual with the BPD feature of emotional lability through their social media posts. Example posts indicating emotional lability include, "I'm so angry at [blank], I will never talk to them again, I hate them...etc.," followed by a post right after that says, "I love [blank] more than life itself" (see Appendix A for full set of posts). In the control condition, all of the posts included in the experimental condition that did not indicate emotional lability were kept, but posts that indicated emotional lability were not included. This was done to make the two conditions as similar as possible except for the display of emotional lability, therefore controlling for any extraneous variables that could arise if different posts were used between the two conditions. An example of

a post that was identical in both conditions is, “I had breakfast at R&R Coffee this morning and loved it!”

Interest in dating. After viewing the Facebook profile and posts, participants were asked to respond to 4 items created for this study about their interest in dating the individual whose Facebook profile and posts they viewed (e.g., “I would be willing to go on at least one date with this person”; “This person seems like someone I could safely confide in were we in a romantic relationship”; see Appendix B for all 4 items). A fifth item was also included to check how emotional the fabricated individual seemed in the two conditions. These items were answered using a Likert scale scored 1 (strongly agree) through 7 (strongly disagree). The four items assessing dating interest shared a high internal reliability ($\alpha = .93$), with higher scores indicating less interest in dating.

Results

In order to analyze my collected data, I used the program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to compute the study’s descriptive statistics and perform a t-test. Of the 58 participants included in analysis, there were 30 (51.7%) individuals in the control condition for the study and 28 (48.3%) individuals in the experimental condition. The overall mean on dating interest for the whole sample was 4.32 ($SD = 1.65$).

The t-test comparing interest in dating between the experimental and control condition was significant, $t(56) = 2.45$, $p = .018$. The mean on interest in dating among participants in the experimental condition (those exposed to posts displaying the BPD characteristic of emotional lability) was higher than the mean on interest in dating among participants in the control condition, with higher scores indicating less interest in dating. Specifically, the mean on dating interest for the control condition was 3.83 ($SD = 1.90$), and the mean on dating interest for the experimental

condition was 4.84 ($SD = 1.21$). These means are presented in Figure 1. The results supported my hypothesis, indicating that participants were less interested in dating the person whose posts displayed emotional lability than the person whose posts did not display this characteristic.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of the characteristic of emotional lability on others' dating interest in the context of social media interaction. Prior research has mostly examined the combined symptomology of BPD, while this study focused exclusively on the characteristic of emotional lability and its implications for dating in the social media saturated environment of today's world. This research aimed to assist clinical practitioners in better understanding the effects of emotional lability on others' dating interest in the context of social media. This can inform their clients who have been diagnosed with BPD and are seeking potential romantic partners through online dating services or social media platforms. I aimed to fill gaps in the literature regarding emotional lability in the context of social media specifically. My hypothesis stated that participants would be less interested in dating someone whose social media posts displayed emotional lability than someone whose posts did not display this characteristic. The hypothesized pattern was found, as participants had more interest in dating the person with Facebook posts not displaying emotional lability than the person with these posts. Past research has found that the BPD characteristic of emotional lability is associated with negative emotionality, short relationships, anger, and increased relationship turmoil (e.g., Daley, et al., 2000). Therefore, results of this study are consistent with previous research, suggesting emotional lability is harmful to relationships, and the results extend this past research to the context of social media and initial interest in dating someone based on their social media posts.

Potential reasons for this outcome can be found in the existing literature. Individuals with BPD often have difficulties in both interpersonal and romantic relationships due to the trait of emotional lability. This characteristic causes individuals, even during initial contact, to display many varied emotional states over a short amount of time (Schoenleber et al., 2016). Because this range of emotions includes emotions that are not ‘positive’ (e.g., anger or depression), then other individuals tend to shy away from a person with BPD (Avrim et al., 2006). Research indicates that 10% of individuals diagnosed with BPD commit suicide and that 75% of the ‘most lethal’ attempts result from dysfunction within interpersonal relationships (Miano et al., 2017). Additionally, BPD is the only personality disorder specifically characterized by unpredictable behaviors (Avrim et al., 2006). These actions can be destructive, or self-harmful in nature, which might increase stress and anxiety in potential romantic partners. These combined stressors, especially during the initial contact phases of dating, are largely considered ‘undesirable’ traits. When these characteristics are displayed through social media for potential partners to view, it is a clear sign of emotional upheaval, which helps to explain why others’ dating interest would then decrease.

Events in early childhood are thought to be key precipitators to the development of BPD in an individual during later life and a root cause for their interpersonal dysfunctions (Lazarus et al., 2018). Individuals with BPD often have intense fears of abandonment and rejection, which research suggests stem from early childhood trauma or sexual abuse (Lazarus et al., 2018). As such, insecure attachment and trustworthiness seem to play significant roles in why individuals with BPD might display emotionally liable characteristics. Because of early adverse childhood events causing an insecure attachment, individuals often create “...maladaptive interpersonal cognitions and behaviors....” (Miano et al., 2017, p. 282). These cognitive schemata generalize

to their respective interpersonal relationships and cause an untrustworthiness bias. A neurotypical individual would likely be more interested in dating a person without BPD because those individuals show heightened trustworthiness when compared to persons with BPD (Miano et al., 2017). Because of the intrinsic role trust plays in romantic relationships, this aspect of emotional lability in an individual with BPD is likely to cause severe romantic dysfunction.

Because of the increasing usage of social media in our society, the context of this experiment is particularly relevant and may increasingly be so. Emotional lability in the current study was displayed through posts with often incongruent or contradicting emotional states in the place of face-to-face human interaction. Based on my findings in this study, online reactions to the characteristic of emotional lability may be very similar to those reactions that happen in person.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

A strength of this study was a high internal reliability for the items I created to access interest in dating ($\alpha = .93$). Other strengths of this study are its design, which made it easily accessible online through Qualtrics, was experimental, did not vary anything between conditions except displays of emotional lability, and presented participants with the Facebook posts in a way that was clear and concise, making the study easily understandable for the participants. Additionally, various potentially extraneous variables were controlled for, such as attractiveness or height, by asking the participant to image they met an individual that they found attractive and not including a picture or other details about physical appearance with the profile. The simplified presentation of two distinct sets of posts for the experimental and control conditions expands on Jeung et al.'s (2018) design by focusing on one specific BPD trait (emotional lability) instead of testing dating interest or relationship stability generally in individuals with BPD.

A limitation of this study is that it included only 58 participants total, with a higher concentration of women (74.1%), than men (22.4%), or “Other” gender groups (less than 10%). This is a limitation to the study because of the small sample size, meaning that these statistics are not a representative sample of individuals in the real world. Also, it is unknown whether a primarily male sample would react the same under the same circumstances or if there would be any significant differences between genders.

Another significant limitation is time. A study with more time and resources could carry out this experiment over a longer period, months even, to get a more accurate understanding of the relationship between dating interest and emotional lability. Previous studies from the literature have used a 14-week time span to conduct studies or even multiple years, in order to examine the longitudinal effects of emotional lability on continuous dating interest over time (e.g., Bhatia et al., 2013, Lazarus et al., 2018). However, the deception in this experiment would have to somehow be eliminated and another control for bias established due to ethical issues. These adjustments may offer clearer insight into the feature of emotional lability and its effects in a more natural environment. Having resources to offer an incentive to recruit more participants, such as money or other compensation, might also have results in a higher number of individuals willing to participate in the study.

An ideal future experiment could access individuals diagnosed with BPD and have excerpts from their social media profiles as the experimental condition for the study. Having access to a clinically diagnosed population could increase the accuracy of the condition posts. This would also increase external validity so that the results in this experiment may be generalized into a more natural environment. Further adjustments to increase external validity could include having the Facebook profile presented on the actual Facebook™ website in order

to put the participant into the mindset of them browsing on the social media platform. This was not done in the current study for logistical reasons, as it was more realistic to ask the participant to imagine that the individual had already approached them and that they had already found this individual attractive. With a fully funded team of researchers, this experiment would be able to provide a more detailed glimpse into the interaction of emotional lability and dating interest in the context of social media.

Future studies could also expand recruitment and inclusion criteria in an effort to test the generalizability of results. For example, future studies could expand beyond university students to invite a broader population and range of life experiences. Expanding inclusion criteria to include individuals under the age of 18 may also provide a different view of the data not captured in this study, such as whether younger individuals are more accepting of individuals displaying emotional lability because of their less stabilized hormones and brain chemistry during puberty (Baker & Carreno, 2016).

Future researchers could also use different experimental manipulations to express emotional lability. For example, the differences between the posts displaying emotional lability and those not displaying emotional lability could be more evident. An example would be having each post cycle through one emotion and in the follow-up survey, asking if they noticed that emotional characteristic in said post. Based on the current findings, I further hypothesize that similar results would be found across various social media platforms, such as Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, and future research is needed to test this.

Implications

The results of this study can inform practitioners' methodologies for assisting their clients with BPD when they are romantically interested in another individual. This may allow them to

more closely examine their social media profiles and adjust their language to control the display of emotional lability. The results of this study can impact the treatment of individuals who display emotionally liable characteristics. These results can help practitioners and clients alike by deconstructing examples of their behaviors and posts over social media in order to teach stronger emotional regulation techniques, help individuals on social media platforms to better recognize the characteristic of emotional lability, and to reduce the stigma that individuals with BPD face, all to more readily assist clients with BPD and emotional lability to manage interpersonal interactions more efficiently.

For example, an individual with BPD could review their social media profile with a clinical practitioner to identify their displays of emotional lability and explain how other people may see these displays. From there, the client and clinician could devise a person-specific treatment plan involving them learning new and varied methods of emotional regulation, both for in-person interactions and online, over social media. Psychotherapy in this fashion, cognitive behavioral or CBT, has been the most successful according to Nysæter and Nordahl (2008) when compared to treatment as usual. This approach to psychotherapy will teach new forms of emotional regulation, and in controlling the individual with BPD's range of emotional lability, likely increase others' interest in dating them.

Additional implications for this study include spreading awareness about BPD in order to reduce overall stigma related to the disorder. As discussed earlier in the article, BPD is often stigmatized due to the characteristic of emotional lability (Avirim et al., 2006). In order to overcome this stigmatization, providing individuals both within and outside of the psychological community with adequate information concerning BPD and the feature of emotional lability is essential. This includes, but is not limited to, providing the correct language and terminology to

refer to an individual with BPD or a person who experiences emotional lability. In the process of systemic de-stigmatization, a goal of many in the broader psychological community, it is hoped that the necessary information will be considered and more neurotypical individuals will be able to better understand and accommodate individuals with BPD.

Conclusion

This experiment found that participants more interested in dating someone who did not display emotional lability in their social media posts than someone who did display this feature of BPD. This research has implications for clinicians working with clients with BPD, individuals with BPD, and neurotypical individuals who may consider dating someone with BPD. Further research should continue to explore the impact of emotional lability and other features of BPD on others' dating interest.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental*

- disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). The Personality Inventory DSM-5 (PID-5) Self-Report Form (full version). Retrieved from <http://www.psychiatry.org/practice/dsm/dsm5/online-assessment-measures>
- Aviram, R. B., Brodsky, B. S., & Stanley, B. (2006). Borderline Personality Disorder, Stigma, and Treatment Implications. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry, 14*(5), 249–256.
- Baker, C. K.; Carreno, P. K. (2016). Understanding the role of technology in adolescent dating and dating violence. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 25* (1), 308–320.
- Bhatia, V., Davila, J., Eubanks-Carter, C., & Burckell, L. A. (2013). Appraisals of daily romantic relationship experiences in individuals with borderline personality disorder features. *Journal of Family Psychology, 27*(3), 518–524. doi:10.1037/a0032870
- Bouchard, S., Godbout, N., & Sabourin, S. (2009). Sexual attitudes and activities in women with borderline personality disorder involved in romantic relationships. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy, 35*(2), 106–121. doi:10.1080/00926230802712301
- Bradley, S. W., Roberts, J. A., & Bradley, P. W. (2019). Experimental evidence of observed social media status cues on perceived likability. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 8*(1), 41–51. doi:1037/ppm0000164
- Centifanti, L. C. M., Thomson, N. D., & Kwok, A. H. (2016). Identifying the manipulative mating methods associated with psychopathic traits and BPD features. *Journal of Personality Disorders, 30*(6), 721–741. doi: 10.1521/pedipass:[]2015 29 225
- Daley, S. E., Burge, D., & Hammen, C. (2000). Borderline personality disorder symptoms as

- predictors of 4-year romantic relationship dysfunction in young women: Addressing issues of specificity. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 109*(3), 451–460.
doi:10.1037/0021-843X.109.3.451
- Eichenberg, C., Huss, J., & Küsel, C. (2017). From online dating to online divorce: An overview of couple and family relationships shaped through digital media. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal, 39*(4), 249–260. doi.org/10.1007/s10591-017-9434-x
- Fullwood, C., Quinn, S., Chen-Wilson, J., Chadwick, D., & Reynolds, K. (2015). Put on a smiley face: Textspeak and personality perceptions. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 18*(3), 147–151. doi.org/10.1089
- Jang, K. L., Dick, D. M., Wolf, H., Livesley, W. J., & Paris, J. (2005). Psychosocial Adversity and Emotional Instability: An Application of Gene-Environment Interaction Models. *European Journal of Personality, 19*(4), 359–372. doi:10.1002/per.561
- Jeung, H., Walther, S., Korn, C. W., Bertsch, K., & Herpertz, S. C. (2018). Emotional responses to receiving peer feedback on opinions in borderline personality disorder. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment, 19*(4), 249–271. doi:10.1037/per0000292
- Kurzban, R., & Weeden, J. (2005). Hurrydate: Mate preferences in action. *Evolution and Human Behavior, 26*, 227–244. doi:10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2004.08.012
- Kuhlken, K., Robertson, C., Benson, J., & Nelson-Gray, R. (2014). The interaction of borderline personality disorder symptoms and relationship satisfaction in predicting affect. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment, 5*(1), 20–25.
doi:10.1037/per0000013
- Lazarus, S. A., Scott, L. N., Beeney, J. E., Wright, A. C., Stepp, S. D., & Pilkonis, P. A.

- (2018). Borderline personality disorder symptoms and affective responding to perceptions of rejection and acceptance from romantic versus nonromantic partners. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 9(3), 197-206. doi:10.1037/per0000289
- Miano, A., Fertuck, E. A., Roepke, S., & Dziobek, I. (2017). Romantic relationship dysfunction in borderline personality disorder—a naturalistic approach to trustworthiness perception. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 8(3), 281–286. doi:10.1037/per0000196
- Nysæter, T. E., & Nordahl, H. M. (2008). Principles and clinical application of schema therapy for patients with borderline personality disorder. *Nordic Psychology*, 60(3), 249–263. doi.org/10.1027/1901-2276.60.3.249
- Selby, E. A., Braithwaite, S. R., Joiner, T. E., Jr., & Fincham, F. D. (2008). Features of borderline personality disorder, perceived childhood emotional invalidation, and dysfunction within current romantic relationships. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(6), 885–893. doi:10.1037/a0013673
- Schoenleber, M., Berghoff, C. R., Tull, M. T., DiLillo, D., Messman-Moore, T., & Gratz, K. L. (2016). Emotional lability and affective synchrony in borderline personality disorder. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 7(3), 211-220. doi:10.1037/per0000145
- Stevens, S. B., & Morris, T. L. (2007). College dating and social anxiety: Using the Internet as a means of connecting to others. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 10(5), 680–688. doi.org:10.1089/cpb.2007.9970
- Toma, C. L., & Choi, M. (2015). The couple who Facebooks together, stays together: Facebook

self-presentation and relationship longevity among college-aged dating couples. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 18(7), 367–372.

doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015.0060

Wright, B. L., & Sinclair, H. C. (2012). Pulling the strings: Effects of friend and parent opinions on dating choices. *Personal Relationships*, 19(4), 743–758. [doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2011.01390.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2011.01390.x)

Scenario (same for both conditions)

Imagine that you have recently met someone who you found attractive and were potentially interested in dating, but with whom you are not well acquainted and have not yet gone out on a date. After exchanging contact information when you met, this person has asked you out on a date for this upcoming weekend. Because of how you met, you already know that you find the person attractive and have at least some things in common; however, before making a decision about whether to go on a first date with them, you decide to follow them on Facebook to learn more about them.

Instructions: Please read through the individual's Facebook profile and posts from the last week before you met them carefully, looking specifically for characteristics that you would and/or would not want in a romantic partner.

Facebook Profile (same for both conditions)

Biography: Positive person with a big heart 😊

Studies At: Pace University; Communications Major

Brithday: May 22nd 1997

Lives In: New York City, NY

From: San Francisco, California

Works At: Starbucks

Favorite Color: Green

Facebook Posts (Experimental Condition)

Facebook Post #1 (Day I; Morning): Had a great breakfast at R&R Coffee! Their non-fat latte with Caramel is *SOOOOOO* good! This is how you start a day off right! Drop by and give these folks some love, ya'll! Also, super excited to see Panic at the Disco with my sister tonight, lmk if any of you are going to be there too!

Facebook Post #2 (Day I; Noon): Ugh, I am **over** people in this city. If I have to sit on one more crowded, hot, train with smelly people who can't use deodorant I'm going to LOSE IT. I hate this city. Can't wait to leave for the summer... DAY RUINED!! 😞

Facebook Post #3 (Day I; Night): Just got back from a wild night! Saw Panic at the Disco perform at MSG, it was so crowded and hot but I loved every minute it! Got to meet Brenden Urie backstage and it was dream come true! This is why I love NYC, there's nowhere else in the world like it! 😊

Facebook Post #4 (Day II; Morning): I've got a massive hangover, but last night was worth it! Shout out to Cassie (AKA the world's **BEST** sister) for an awesome time!

Facebook Post #5 (Day II; Noon): Why is it always one thing after another!? After a great night and making plans for today, my sister just bails on me for no reason!? Do people really not want to be around me THAT bad? TBH if any of ya'll feel the same way you can unfriend me. BYE.

Facebook Post #6 (Day II; Night): If anyone's in the mood to hang out tonight, DM me! I'm putting together a group to head to Mags. Feeling in a friendly mood and I want to go out with squad!

Facebook Post #7(Day III; Morning): Heading to work this morning and I saw this cute old married couple holding hands and it made me feel really lonely. Has anyone actually had any success with Tinder? Really thinking about putting myself back out there!

Facebook Post #8 (Day III; Noon): Why can't couples in public just keep their hands to themselves!? Is it really that hard? If that's what all couples are like, I'm *glad* I'm single.

Facebook Post #9 (Day III; Night): Decided to try Tinder for the first time! Wish me luck! 😊

Facebook Posts (Control Condition)

Facebook Post #1 (Day I; Morning): Had a great breakfast at R&R Coffee! Their non-fat latte with Caramel is *SOOOOOO* good! This is how you start a day off right! Drop by and give these

folks some love, ya'll! Also, excited to see Panic at the Disco with my sister tonight, lmk if any of you all are going to be there too!

Facebook Post #2 (Day I; Night): Just got back from a wild night! Saw Panic at the Disco perform at MSG, it was so crowded and hot but I loved every minute it! Got to meet Brenden Urie backstage and it was dream come true! This is why I love NYC, there's nowhere else in the world like it! 😊

Facebook Post #3 (Day II; Morning): I've got a massive hangover, but last night was worth it! Shout out to Cassie (AKA the world's ***BEST*** sister) for an awesome time!

Facebook Post #4 (Day II; Night): If anyone's in the mood to hang out tonight, DM me! I'm putting together a group to head to Mags. Feeling in a friendly mood and I want to go out with squad!

Facebook Post #5 (Day III; Morning): Heading to work this morning and I saw this cute old couple holding hands and it made me feel really lonely. Has anyone actually had any success with Tinder? Really thinking about putting myself back out there!

Facebook Post #6 (Day III; Night): Decided to try Tinder for the first time! Wish me luck! 😊

Appendix B

Dating Survey (All participants will be asked after reviewing the Facebook profile and posts)

Instructions: Answer the following items in response to the Facebook profile and posts that you just read through.

**1****2****3****4****5****6****7****Strongly Agree****Strongly Disagree**

- 1: I would be willing to go on at least one date with this person.
- 2: I would like get to know this person better.
- 3: This person's Facebook posts demonstrated characteristics that I would like to see in a romantic partner.
- 4: This person seems like someone I could safely confide in were we in a romantic relationship.