

“HERE’S ME IN A NUTSHELL.”
THE TEXTUAL PERFORMANCE OF SELF IN MALE ONLINE DATING PROFILES

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“HERE’S ME IN A NUTSHELL:”

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ABSTRACT

Online dating has fast become an acceptable avenue through which to pursue romantic partners in the United States. Approximately one in ten American internet-using adults—16 million people—have personally visited dating websites (Madden & Lenhart 2006). Previous literature about online dating relies primarily on self-reported online dating behaviors as data and focuses on the differences between computer mediated communication and face-to-face interactions. This study adds to previous scholarship by analyzing the textual content posted in the free-write sections of dating profiles on Match.com. My sample consists of Match.com profiles of 60 white males from medium-sized Midwest metropolitan areas who have never been married and who do not have children. Erving Goffman’s theory of the performance of self has only been applied to our face-to-face encounters. However, findings from this study indicate that in many cases certain face-to-face dating behaviors such as “Small Talk” are reproduced in textual content in online dating profiles. Applying the relevance of Goffman’s theory of the performance of self to online textual exchanges suggests that the traditional and online dating behaviors can be quite similar regardless of whether they take place in physical or virtual space.

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Here’s Me in a Nutshell”: The Textual Performance of Self in Male Online Dating Profiles,” presented by Stefanie Lindsay, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We live in an increasingly technological age, and a great deal of the communication that goes on among friends and even among strangers occurs online (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is a form of written communication that utilizes a computer to exchange information via text (Walther, 1996). The impact of CMC has been a subject of study in recent decades, but in many respects it continues to elude our full understanding. One school of thought suggests that CMC is impersonal and does not facilitate meaningful interactions. A second posits that CMC interactions are just as personal as face-to-face interactions and may even surpass face-to-face interactions in some interpersonal aspects. Walther (1996) suggests that each of these opinions about CMC is valuable in certain contexts and attempts to integrate these two schools of thought by specifying some of the conditions that support each type of outcome. Early CMC research focuses on contexts like email, conferencing, and online chat, (Tidwell & Walther, 2002), as well as how the CMC process differs from traditional face-to-face communication (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). More recently CMC research has begun to focus on how CMC assists in maintaining existing relationships and in initiating new ones (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Madden & Lenhart, 2006).

Today, adolescents and young adults take full advantage of CMC in their daily lives. Ninety-three percent of teens aged 12 to 17, as well as 93 percent of adults aged 18 to 29 go online, compared to only one quarter of all adults (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). These younger age groups are also more likely than older age groups to rely on CMC to maintain and initiate relationships. Social networking and online dating have become two popular ways to utilize CMC in the realm of personal relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Madden & Lenhart 2006). Over seven in ten of adults aged 18 to 29 with internet access use social networking sites (Lenhart et al., 2010) and 18 percent of online adults aged 18-29 have participated in online dating (Madden & Lenhart, 2006).

Social Networking

Social networking sites like Facebook.com have increased in popularity in recent years. As of 2008, fully 72 percent of online adults aged 18 to 29 use these types of sites to stay connected with friends and acquaintances (Lenhart et al., 2010). Since its inception in 2004, Facebook.com has become one of the most successful social networking sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Lenhart et al., 2010) and as of September 2011 the site boasts 800 million users worldwide (AP 2011). With this growing recognition, it is important to understand the function of social networking sites in order to describe their impact on our social interactions. Boyd & Ellison (2007) define social networking sites as:

Web based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their connections and those made by others in the system (p. 1).

Facebook.com is utilized in many cases to display and maintain existing relationships. It was established as a way for Harvard students to connect to and communicate with other Harvard students. When it was initially expanded to the public domain, users had to have a .edu email address and were therefore connected only to their schoolmates and to other college students (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Facebook.com has since extended the scope of its member population, opening up to high school students in 2005, to professionals within corporate networks, and more recently to anyone who has an email address.

One reason that social networking sites have become so popular is that CMC provides a valuable resource in today's busy society, specifically for college students and other young adults. Members of this age group may not have the time or resources to maintain friendships that exist outside of their college networks. Social networking sites appear connect people who already have existing relationships, rather than connecting them based on their interests (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe (2008) find that college students who use Facebook.com as a means of connecting with schoolmates have a positive impact on social capital, or benefits derived from our social relationships.

Their longitudinal study that consists of 286 email questionnaires and 18 in-depth interviews finds that the site allows students to maintain their social ties with a large range of diverse friends with whom they might not be able to interact face-to-face regularly (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008).

Facebook.com users *maintain* relationships; therefore calling this type of CMC “social networking” is a bit ironic. “Networking” usually connotes relationship initiation. Social networking sites like Facebook.com actually allow users to display relationships that have already been established (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Despite the misnomer of social networking sites, the popularity of internet CMC remains high, and online relationship initiation has also increased in popularity. Millions of Americans now utilize the internet in dating-related activities and see online dating as a valuable way to initiate new romantic relationships (Madden & Lenhart, 2006).

Online Dating

Compared to the functions of Facebook.com, online dating sites like Match.com are used for the purposes of initiating a relationship between people who have not previously met (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Scharlott & Christ, 1995). A 2006 survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Research Project finds that 31 percent of American adults over 18 --approximately 63 million people--know someone who has participated in online dating, and three out of four internet users who classify themselves as single and looking for a romantic partner admit to using the internet in at least one dating-related activity (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Using the internet as a way to form new relationships provides online daters a unique opportunity to present themselves to potential romantic partners with the textual content in their profiles. The practice of online dating lets unacquainted individuals use the textual content of their dating profiles to “meet” new people with whom they have never interacted face-to-face. These online interactions are mediated with text and are filled with opportunities for self-presentation that differ from self-presentation techniques used in face-to-face encounters.

Previous research suggests that online daters use sites like Match.com to market themselves to potential romantic partners in ways not dissimilar from traditional print personal ads (Hardey, 2004; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Walther, 2006). CMC provides users the opportunity to put time and effort into crafting their online dating profiles in order to make the best first impression on their pool of potential romantic partners (Fiore, Shaw Taylor, & Hearst, 2008). Spending that time and effort creating online dating profiles allows online daters to post, explore, and recreate certain aspects of their identities and to present themselves to their potential romantic partners in a meaningful way (Yurchisin, Watchravesgingkan, & McCabe, 2005). This self-presentation is important when forming new relationships outside of the face-to-face context because the cues available in online interactions are strictly textual and are therefore limited to what information online daters deem important to post.

Over the years, research on face-to-face relationships has consistently shown that people tend to associate with others who are similar to them (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2005). Individuals tend to match up with others of similar age, education levels, race, religion, height, and intelligence (Brehm et al., 2005). This is no different in the context of online dating. There are many sociodemographic variables that influence single status and the likelihood that someone will participate in online dating (Sautter, 2010). While being likely to participate in online dating does not directly determine actual participation, online daters tend to come from similar demographic backgrounds and to look for others who share some of those same characteristics (Sautter et al., 2010; Fiore & Donath, 2005). Online daters tend to be highly educated and employed, and to live in an urban or suburban environment (Sautter et al., 2010; Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Based on these trends, there are inferences that can be made about the SES of online daters. For example, having regular access to a computer with internet capabilities is an essential component of online dating.

In addition to education, occupation, and living environment, age is also a factor that influences the likelihood that individuals will participate in online dating, with younger age categories more likely to partake (Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Lenhart et al., 2010). It is possible that presentation of self and the creation and recreation of identity that occurs within the online dating context is an essential component

of development for this young adult age group (Goffman, 1959; Yurchisin et al., 2005). Newman & Newman (2003) posit that identity serves as an anchor for later adolescents (aged 18 to 24) and provides them with an important experience of continuity in social relationships. Further, many adults under age 30 today choose to delay full transition into full-fledged adulthood in favor of obtaining higher education, saving money, or simply being indecisive (Kins & Beyers, 2010). This delayed transition into adulthood has also lead to delays in marriage, which in turn means that young adults tend to remain single longer than their older generational counterparts (Kins & Beyers, 2010; Taylor, 2010).

Scope of Thesis

When they are ready to initiate new relationships, some individuals may turn to online dating sites in their search for potential romantic partners. This study investigates the presentation of self on the dating site Match.com. There is a fairly large body of literature that discusses CMC on social networking and online dating websites, but much of it does not detail what online daters post or how they engage in the performance of self on their personal profiles. Many of the studies investigating self-presentation in the online context collect data by conducting surveys or interviews with online daters (Stevens & Morris, 2007; Scharlott & Christ, 1995; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Ellison et al., 2006, Yurchisin et al., 2005). While these interviews do provide pertinent information to our understanding of the phenomenon of online dating, they fail to examine what online daters actually post on their profiles (Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006; Yurchisin et al., 2005). The self-presentation techniques utilized by online daters are addressed in some of the previous literature (Yurchisin et al., 2005; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Walther, 2007); however the direct text from the profiles is rarely used.

I move beyond self-reports of online dating behaviors and investigate the actual textual content that online daters post on their profiles as they engage in the performance of self online. Building off of previous literature, my goal is to determine whether online daters engage in the performance of self with the textual content they post in their online dating profiles. Erving Goffman suggests that we as social actors engage in the performance of self in our daily lives, and applies his ideas solely to our face-to-face

interactions. I utilize Goffman's ideas about the presentation of self to investigate whether the same processes occur online. Using content analysis, I investigate the textual content posted in the "About Me" paragraphs of male online daters in the Kansas City area.

Match.com

To gain access to my data, I became a free member of Match.com. Match.com is one of the most popular websites created for the purposes of helping people initiate new relationships. Launched in 1995, Match.com has become one of the most well-known online dating sites with nearly 21 million users. With all of these users, Match.com boasts a high success rate. A 2009/2010 study for Match.com conducted by Chadwick Martin Bailey Research Firm found that Match.com has led to twice as many dates and twice as many relationships as the second ranked online dating website (Chadwick Martin Bailey, 2010). These statistics not only testify to the popularity of the Match.com, but they also solidify Match.com's prominent position in the internet search for potential romantic partners.

There are several ways that online daters can utilize Match.com in their search for relationships. The site offers free memberships that allow online daters to post information about themselves, to specify the type of person they are interested in meeting, and to browse through a list of potential "matches" fitting their specified criteria. While free memberships allow users to see how many times their profile are viewed, they offer limited communication capabilities that do not allow members to email or instant message their matches in order to set up a face-to-face meeting if that is their intention. Free members are only able to "wink" at or "like" the profiles of others that they think are interesting. These processes indicate that they are interested in another Match.com user.

Subscribing (paying) memberships on Match.com allow users to view the other users who have viewed their profiles and to communicate freely with one another. Only subscribing users of Match.com have the ability to communicate with other users. Match.com's best value plans require subscribing users to pay \$19.99 per month for six months minimum (about \$120 total). These six month memberships give users free mobile access and free email read notification as well as the ability to email, reply, and instant message other users. Members only interested in a one month membership must pay a total of \$34.99 for

that month. While it seems like a better deal per month, six month memberships lock users into participating in online dating for the full six months.

Regardless of membership subscription status, once a user posts information on their profile it can be viewed by any other user of the site. Free and subscribing members can view a large pool of profiles once they have specified the type of person in which they are interested. Subscribing members can send emails to any other Match.com user, but free members must subscribe before they are able to read the emails sent to them or to reply back. It is possible to set up a free profile on Match.com and later subscribe after receiving communication from other users. While subscribing members of Match.com are locked into their contract for a specified number of months, free members are able to browse through their “matches” with the opportunity to subscribe and initiate contact once they find another user in which they are interested. With all of this in mind, the process of searching for potential romantic partners online on the surface seems incongruent with face-to-face dating; however, the procedure and rationality of online and face-to-face dating are actually quite parallel.

Research Procedure and Outline

By creating a profile on Match.com without the intention of initiating a face-to-face encounter I by definition deceive and incompletely inform other Match.com users who potentially view my profile. I make it clear on my profile that I am not interested in initiating a romantic relationship, which is the intended use of online dating sites. Because I use my profile for research purposes, I am honest when filling out my demographic information and was clear about my intention to collecting data. I collect profiles from 60 Match.com users. Each profile is posted by white men aged 20-27 who have never been married and who do not have children. Once I collect the profiles for my sample, I perform a content analysis using pre-determined categories of disclosure derived from previous literature. Based on these categories, I code the free write “About Me” paragraphs included at the end of the Match.com profiles and look for patterns of disclosure.

This type of content analysis hinges on the information gleaned from previous literature on the subjects of CMC and online dating. Chapter Two focuses on recent literature in the areas of CMC and

online dating and lays the groundwork for developing the categories of disclosure I used for my content analysis. Chapter Two also includes the conceptual framework in which I develop an online application of Goffman's theory of the performance of self. Chapter Three explains my methodology and procedures for collecting data, and expands on the categories of disclosure I developed. Chapter Four reveals my findings, including both the sociodemographic characteristics and textual content collected from my sample. Chapter Five includes my analysis and a discussion of the findings as well as relevant observations about my experience of becoming a free member of Match.com.

This thesis project adds a significant and missing component in the literature about online dating. Rather than focusing on self-reported online dating behaviors, I analyze the actual textual content posted by online daters. By doing this type of content analysis, I am able to understand the types of disclosure that male online daters utilize when "marketing" themselves to their potential romantic partners. Additionally, this new application of Goffman's theory of the performance of self to our online interactions brings his ideas out of physical space, placing the possibility of meaningful encounters into virtual space. With the ever-growing presence of the internet in our daily lives, computers are important mediators in our social performances that require further examination as a place where relationships can be maintained and initiated.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, the single best predictor of whether two people will get together is physical proximity (Brehm et al., 2005), and a large majority of romantic relationships continue to begin with traditional, face-to-face interactions. Madden and Lenhart (2006) conducted interviews with over 3,000 Americans. Findings indicate that most internet users who classified themselves as married or in a serious relationship did *not* meet their partners online, with 72 percent of these internet users meeting their partners at work or school or through mutual friends (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Despite the historical importance of face-to-face interactions in meeting potential romantic partners, online dating has become a fast growing phenomenon in the United States. The emergence of online dating has generated significant differences in the way Americans communicate with their potential romantic partners. Online dating takes away the need for our interactions to occur in physical space and instead allows us to interact in virtual space, giving individuals the opportunity to form relationships with others with which they may not have ever interacted face-to-face (Merkle & Richardson, 2000).

Online Dating

Some previous literature compares the differences between CMC and face-to-face interactions. In their analysis of traditional and online dating contexts, Merkle and Richardson (2000) suggest that online dating involves an inverted social interaction. In traditional face-to-face encounters, individuals meet, exchange “Small Talk,” and gradually get to know one another over a period of time. In the online context, however, individuals exchange meaningful information about themselves in their online profiles and do not meet in person until after they get to “know” one another (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). Online communication begins with significant textual exchanges and gradually progresses into a face-to-face interaction. Because of the lack of nonverbal cues available in the online context, words and textual

cues are the only way that CMC interactants exchange information. These cues become ever more important when online daters are pursuing potential romantic partners.

Textual Cues

By engaging in CMC, individuals are able to circumvent the “nonverbal cues and superficial banter” that often occur during first-time face-to-face interactions (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). This banter or “Small Talk” can include starting conversations with low-risk discussion topics such as the weather, a sports game, or a new outfit. Such banter does little to help individuals get to know one another, but acts as filler if face-to-face interactants do not choose to disclose personal information in an initial encounter or are unsure what information to exchange. Because of the lack of superficial banter and nonverbal cues in CMC, online interactants are compelled to exchange more meaningful information quickly in their online interaction than they would in a first-time face-to-face encounter.

The exchange of meaningful information online differs from the exchange of information in face-to-face settings for several reasons. Suler (2004) posits that there are certain factors that interact with one another in order to create what he calls the “Online Disinhibition Effect.” Online daters are able to operate with a certain degree of invisibility, allowing them to avoid feeling judged by the people with which they are interacting online. The text posted online becomes the sole location where online interactions take place and that text takes on great importance throughout the interaction. It acts not only as the place where interactions take place, but as a security blanket of sorts that lessens some of the risks associated with traditional face-to-face dating.

Because the objective of online dating services is to connect individuals who are not already acquainted, (Hardey, 2004; Toma et al., 2008), online daters take great care to reduce the uncertainty that other online daters may feel about “meeting” someone in a first time online encounter. In a study of 158 individuals, Tidwell & Walther (2002) found that individuals who utilize CMC tend to “hyperpersonalize” their communication as a means to compensate for the lack of other nonverbal cues. CMC interactants are forced to be more direct and more interactive in their written exchanges, and seek to gain information about the person with which they are communicating by asking more questions and

engaging in more in-depth self-disclosure compared to face-to-face interactions (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). They ask questions that require responses whereas face-to-face interactants often exchange greetings, give statements of fact, and use filler items that do little to reduce uncertainty for the people with whom they are interacting (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Online dating contrasts with the awkwardness, risk, and possible physical embarrassment that can be associated with traditional dating (Hardey, 2004). Online daters are able to post information about themselves and to read information posted by others from the low-risk location of their personal computers. Without nonverbal cues, online dating influences both how daters communicate on their own profiles and how they pay attention to others' communication styles. In a series of four studies about the perceptions of online daters, Rosen, Cheever, Cummings, & Felt (2007) compare traditional and online dating. They find that traditional daters tend to value aspects such as personal information, personality characteristics, and education level (Rosen et al., 2007). Online daters on the other hand pay more attention to aspects such as written communication style and physical attractiveness if profile pictures are used (Rosen et al., 2007). Daters have adapted the qualities they consider in their potential romantic partners in order to fit the type of dating they are doing.

First Impressions

Interpreting the textual cues on personal profiles is a fundamental process for online daters. Online profiles have become the location where first impressions are made. Online daters have to be careful not only about how they analyze the profiles of the people in which they are interested, but about what they put on their own profiles. Ellison et al. (2006) found that online daters establish rules for evaluating others while applying those rules to themselves when they post information on their own profiles. This suggests that online daters are deliberate and systematic with what they post on their profiles and how they read the profiles of others in order to ensure that the first impressions they make are honest and lasting. Even small aspects of online profiles like spelling and grammar are important cues for potential mates when they consider the likelihood that they will initiate a relationship with someone they met online (Ellison et al., 2006). Poor grammar and misspelled words in online profiles may indicate a

person who is lacking in education. This could potentially turn off a prospective romantic partner who is looking for someone with a higher education. Paying attention to these little cues is an important exercise in “weeding out” individuals who are seen as poor matches for online daters.

The computer remains the main point of contact throughout much of the beginning of online relationships. As such, details like phone numbers are rarely exchanged on first meeting among online daters so the contact point remains computer-mediated until the daters are serious about their relationship (Hardey, 2004). Cues are limited strictly to text, and online daters take great care when crafting their profiles. Online daters are able to spend time and effort creating and revising their profiles in order to make the best impression to the other online daters who stop by their profile (Fiore et al., 2008). The motivations for investing this time and effort into creating profiles are unique to online dating. Users want to appear as attractive as possible to others who read their online profiles in order to captivate the attention of potential mates (Fiore et al., 2008). While accuracy is important to online daters because of the intended goal of an eventual face-to-face encounter, the investment put in creating online profiles leaves room not only for well-crafted, accurate descriptions, but for well-crafted misrepresentations as well.

Deception

Because the information in online profiles is posted in such a deliberate manner, one of the biggest concerns about online dating has to do with inaccuracies and deception (Toma et al., 2008). There are conflicting ideas as to just how much deception goes on among online daters, but it is clear that deception is expected on some level (Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006). An online survey conducted by Gibbs et al. (2006) suggests that online daters, while they are not likely to reveal that they have personally lied on their online profiles, fully expect that certain characteristics are often misrepresented by others. On the other hand, 81 percent of online daters interviewed by Toma et al. (2008) admitted to personally lying on their profiles, but only on a small scale.

It is clear that deception does occur in online profiles, although the degree of deceptions that exist is up for debate. While previous research indicates that small deceptions are common, most online daters

see these little deceptions simply as part of the game of online dating (Madden & Lenhart, 2006).

Because none of the deceptions result in physical harm, some researchers argue that the risks and payoffs of online dating are quite similar to those of traditional dating (Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Toma et al., 2008). In the context of online dating, the contact online daters make via the internet is made under the assumption that future face-to-face interaction is expected (Toma et al., 2008). Most often, the lies and deceptions in online profiles are not severe enough to hinder that interaction.

Extreme lies in online profiles seem to be rare, and the largest proportion of misrepresentations is about physical characteristics, not about personality traits (Toma et al., 2008). The online daters interviewed by Toma et al. (2008) admit to lying about things like their weight, height, and age, with men consistently overestimating height and women consistently underestimating weight. Individuals lie about these particular aspects of themselves for several reasons. First, in many cases, they wish to appear more attractive to the other online daters who are reading their online profile. Second, because they wish to engage in enhanced self-presentation with the intended goal of a face-to-face encounter. And third, because they wish to take advantage of the textual constraints of CMC by playing up the characteristics that other online daters are not able to ascertain without a face-to-face encounter (Toma et al., 2008).

Unintentional Deception

Despite the concerns about deception with malicious intent, some deception in online profiles is not necessarily intentional. Ellison et al. (2006) suggests that some misrepresentations in online profiles could be due to the limits of one's own self-knowledge. This type of deception is known as the "foggy mirror" (Ellison et al., 2006, p. 428). An example would be if a female labels herself as having an "average" body type when others perceive her as "skinny" or "athletic." Another type of unintentional misrepresentation occurs when online daters utilize their own concepts of their "ideal self" on their profiles. This occurs when online daters try to reconcile their need for positive self-presentation and for accuracy (Ellison et al., 2006). By posting their dreams and goals as if they were reality, online daters are providing inaccurate depictions of who they are today. This inaccurate depiction is by definition untrue because the dreams and goals posted have not yet come to fruition.

Furthermore, some online daters manipulate certain aspects of the information they post online to circumvent the constraints of the website interface (Ellison et al., 2006). Misrepresenting information on the closed-ended responses of their online profile can help online daters have access to a larger pool of potential matches. Online daters interviewed by Ellison et al. (2006) indicate that it is socially acceptable to lie about characteristics such as age so as not to be “filtered out” by other online daters. In the online context, written misrepresentations are no less inappropriate than dressing up in a way that makes us appear younger. Some researchers view the notion that people lie in the online context as simplistic. Ellison et al. (2006) explains that creating an accurate profile is a complex process “in which participants attempt to attract desirable partners while contending with constraints such as those posed by technological design and limits of self-knowledge” (p. 431). This complexity lends to the importance of studying CMC as a social interaction that has changed the way some individuals search for potential romantic partners.

Self-Disclosure

Brehm et al. (2005) define self-disclosure as “revelations about the self that a person makes to others” (p. 86). Online dating is an ideal environment for the “presentation of biographical narratives, providing individuals with an avenue through which they can reflect on and create a discourse about who they are and what they want in a relationship” (Hardey, 2004). The online format offers online daters an opportunity to put aside any insecurity they may have about meeting new people in traditional face-to-face settings (Suler, 2004; Stevens & Morris, 2007; Scharlott & Christ, 1995). CMC offers people anonymity and invisibility they would not be afforded in traditional face-to-face interactions. Online daters therefore become more comfortable disclosing information that they normally would not disclose early on in a face-to-face encounter (Suler, 2004).

Online self-disclosure varies among CMC participants based on the relational goals and intended outcomes of their online interactions (Gibbs et al., 2006; Suler, 2004). Because online dating is used to form new relationships, online daters actively seeking offline encounters have a greater desire to be honest and truthful on their profiles, even if those truths are less than positive (Yurchisin et al., 2005;

Hardey, 2004; Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006; Suler, 2004). Gibbs et al. (2006) conducted a survey of 349 Match.com users and found that disclosures among online daters who are serious about establishing a new relationship tend to be honest and realistic in their self-descriptions because all attributes, good and bad, will eventually be revealed in person. One emergent theme pulled from 11 in-depth interviews by Yurchisin et al. (2005) is the notion that being honest in online profiles meant including the characteristics of themselves that could be verified or supported by others. For example, one interviewee indicated that she based her profile on her own understanding of herself, but that all of her friends agreed with her descriptions (p. 471).

According to Hardey (2004), authenticity is a central component of online dating, and successful communication is based on the “development of trust among strangers” (p. 208). He goes on to say that the initial portrayal is not only rich in description, but also faithful to the “anonymous embodied self” (Hardey, 2004, p. 211). The faithfulness to the embodied self allows online daters to transition into face-to-face encounters without any surprises. Those individuals who disclose more, and consciously, about themselves bring “deal breakers” to the surface early on in the encounter and are likely to receive similar information from potential suitors (Gibbs et al., 2006). The content and amount of self-disclosure has an important meaning when online daters are determining which individuals to pursue. By being honest and disclosing more information, the process of relationship formation is fast-tracked in the context of online dating in a way that establishes all of the important information before the face-to-face interaction occurs (Merkle & Richardson, 2000; Gibbs et al., 2006).

Not only does content of online profiles impact the way that others view online daters, but the amount of information that individuals disclose online also provides important indicators about the person writing it. Rosen et al. (2007) conducted a series of studies about emotionality and self-disclosure in both traditional relationships and in online dating. In the fourth study of the series, 759 adults participated in an online survey, one section of which included examples emails with different levels of disclosure by an unknown female. Participants were asked to rate how they felt about each of the disclosures based solely on the amount and content that was included. Results indicate that participants view the women who

disclose more information in the email as more cheerful, open, less shy, and more sharing than women who disclose less (Rosen et al., 2007). While Rosen et al.'s (2007) study uses email disclosures, a case can be made that similar effects could be found for online dating disclosures. The fact that the first of potentially many online dating encounters are based strictly on what is posted in online profiles means that these cues of content and amount of self-disclosure are of the utmost importance when seeking to form a romantic relationship online.

Virtual Space vs. Physical Space

It is evident that many researchers have spent time investigating the differences between CMC and face-to-face communication (Gibbs et al., 2006; Merkel & Richardson, 2000; Suler, 2004). Other researchers, however, suggest that examining the dichotomy of online versus offline interactions is too simplistic to properly understand the types of interactions that are going on in the online context. Rather than focusing on the differences between these types of interactions, Wilson & Peterson (2002) suggest that more attention should be focused on the fact that communities, networks, and identities exist regardless of the ways in which community members interact.

CMC takes away the requirement for *physical* space in social interactions, but similar types of social interactions can occur in *virtual* space. While the location of certain interactions has shifted from physical space to virtual space, the interactions that occur in the context of dating in general are quite similar. These new, online communicative practices deserve ample attention from social scientists in order to “bring to bear our existing expertise on human communication and culture” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p. 462). Based on this understanding, this study will compare the textual exchanges in online dating profiles in order to determine how similar dating interactions occur in virtual space.

Practical Implications/Benefits of Online Dating

Following the assumption that online and face-to-face dating are similar interactions taking place in different spaces, it is not strange to suggest that online daters partake of some of the same benefits available to traditional, face-to-face daters. With the increased popularity of online dating, there is a

decreased stigma associated with the process (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). This growing stamp of approval speaks to the importance of the virtual space in our interpersonal interactions. What's more, many online daters actually have higher success rates than they otherwise had in face-to-face settings (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). These benefits lend to several practical implications that suggest that online dating is not a process separate from face-to-face dating, but is rather a reimagining of the long-held significance of the process of searching for potential romantic partners.

Positive Experiences

A majority of online daters report having positive experiences (Scharlott & Christ, 1995; Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Yurchisin et al., 2005). As online dating has become more popular, the stigma associated with finding a potential romantic partner online is decreasing. Online daters were once viewed as unable to find a date in the traditionally acceptable ways, causing many traditional daters to discredit them or view them as desperate for dates. This stigma, however, has diminished in recent years. Sixty-one percent of online adults do not view online daters as desperate (Madden & Lenhart, 2006), and online dating has become a socially acceptable way to form new relationships. This is evidenced by a study conducted in conjunction with Match.com that found that in the last three years one in five people have dated someone they met on an online dating site (Chadwick Martin Bailey, 2010). With the general approval of average internet users, online daters are able to make connections with people that they otherwise might not have been able to in an earlier time.

Finding a Romantic Partner

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, research shows that the best predictor of whether two people are likely to form a relationship with one another is still whether or not they interact in physical space (Brehm et al., 2005). Searching for potential romantic partners online takes away that need for physical proximity and decreases the challenges of finding a date in small cities, in new environments, or within busy lifestyles. Fifty-five percent of respondents in Madden and Lenhart's (2006) study reported that it was difficult to meet people in the city where they live. Online dating alleviates the need for people to interact in physical space and can therefore allow online daters access to

a larger pool of potential romantic partners with which they can interact in virtual space. Large dating sites like Match.com allow users to access a wide range of individuals categorized by age, race, and similar characteristics as stipulated by the user. What's more, 79 percent of online daters view online dating as a good way to meet new people, with male users and younger users being most accepting of this view (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Sites like Match.com provide daters the opportunity to meet new people that they may not have had access to within their traditional face-to-face encounters.

Not only can online dating provide single individuals with a larger pool of potential romantic partners, but many online dating sites can also eliminate a lot of the time and effort it takes to come across a potential romantic partner that meets specific criteria. In contrast to social networking sites that display existing relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2006), online dating sites match individuals based on their interests, and dating sites are often geared toward specific populations (Hardey, 2004). While Match.com boasts over 20 million users of various backgrounds, Christiansingles.com is the number one site for online daters from Christian backgrounds who are looking to establish long term relationships and marriages (2010). Websites like datingforseniors.com offer environments where singles over age 50 can meet other people over 50 who are in the same unique relationship situation (2010). Democraticsingles.net is dedicated to matching liberal, democratic singles looking to start relationships of all kinds (2008). The list goes on, and there are now thousands of online dating sites that cater to specific groups of people. Online dating is a treasure trove of opportunities to meet a wide range of people with a wide range of characteristics and interests.

Reduced Anxiety

In addition to the advantage of having access to more potential dates, the lack of nonverbal cues available online can be beneficial to individuals who are shy, who have dating anxiety, or who have appearance inhibitions that make it difficult to form relationships in the traditional face-to-face context (Scharlott & Christ, 1995). The anonymity afforded in the online environment gives online daters the opportunity to overcome these inhibitions. To individuals who suffer from dating anxiety, online dating

websites are considered a non-threatening environment wherein they do not have to worry about immediate, nonverbal cues that could potentially set them off (Suler, 2004).

Women and minorities are more likely to have symptoms of dating anxiety in traditional, face-to-face settings than are men or whites (Stevens & Morris, 2007). One common component of this anxiety for women in particular is the sex-role expectations placed on them. In the traditional “bar scene,” it is often expected that women should remain passive and wait for the men to “make the first move.” In a study by Scharlott and Christ (1995), 83 percent of female respondents felt that the anonymity of online dating services helped them feel more secure. This security translated into a greater willingness to take a more active role in relationship initiation that they are typically not afforded in traditional dating scenes (Scharlott & Christ, 1995). Being able to actively participate in the selection of a potential romantic partner is important when a long term relationship or marriage is the goal.

Online Dating Participation

Madden & Lenhart (2006) define online daters as “internet users who have gone to an online dating website or other site where they can meet people online” (p. ii). While this definition at face value seems simplistic, it suggests that there are important implications about exactly who is participating in online dating. There are certain sociodemographic variables that help determine who is likely to participate in online dating. Numerous studies indicate that online daters tend to be educated and employed, to have a higher than average income compared to the overall population, and tend to live in urban or suburban environments (Sautter et al., 2010; Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Histch et al., 2005). Although being likely to participate in online dating does not necessarily predict actual participation, these characteristics have a definite impact on who chooses to use the internet in the pursuit of a romantic partner (Sautter et al., 2010).

One possible explanation for the increase in online dating behaviors posits that it is simply a reflection of changing demographic patterns in the United States. With fluctuating household patterns, trends in internet use, and the decline of traditional means of meeting potential romantic partners, it is

only logical that online dating has become so popular in today's culture (Hardey, 2004). Over the last 50 years, there have been significant changes in the landscape of American families. While there has been a noteworthy decline in marriage in small groups, marriage continues to be the norm for individuals with a college education and high income level (Taylor, 2010). This desire to be married could undoubtedly influence college-aged students to utilize online resources to aid in the search for a romantic partner.

There are also trends within marriage that have influenced the way that Americans view the process of seeking out romantic partners. In marriage, love trumps money (Taylor, 2010). Adults participating in a marriage survey for PEW Research Center say that love, making a life-long commitment, and companionship are very important reasons to get married (Taylor, 2010). If previous research about finding potential romantic partners online is correct, then online dating is a significant way for individuals to "weed out" individuals with whom they could not have these types of meaningful relationships and match up with others who have similar morals and values.

Young Adults

Settersten and Ray (2010) suggest that adults under age 30 today have a wider range of life options than did previous generations of young adults. These options are reflected in the changing trends in marriage in the United States. Not only are young adults delaying marriage, but the incidence of cohabitation before or in lieu of marriage has increased (Settersten & Ray, 2010; Taylor, 2010). The meaning of marriage has been reformulated for twenty-somethings in today's society. Young adults do not view marriage as something to experience and partake in, but rather view it as a daunting task that requires a lot of work (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Thirty-nine percent of respondents to Pew Research Center's marriage study conducted for Time magazine agree that marriage has in fact become obsolete in today's society (Taylor, 2010). Whether it is for the pursuit of higher education or for fear of failure, it is clear that young adults' behaviors are impacting the state of relationships in the United States.

Based on the importance they place on education and complexities they give to marriage, today's young adults fit the criteria for being likely to participate in online dating. Statistics about online dating reflect this trend. Compared to other age groups, young adults have the largest proportion of online

daters, with 18 percent of online adults aged 18 to 29 having visited online dating sites (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). This may be due in part to where young adults fall in their transition into full-fledged adulthood. Research suggests that individuals within this 18 to 29 age category are taking longer to transition into adulthood than did previous generations of twenty-somethings (Settersten & Ray, 2010). This transition is manifested in living situation, education, work, and family (Kins & Beyers, 2010). Today, one half of 18 to 24 year olds still live with their parents (Settersten & Ray, 2010).

In many cases, staying at home longer is a symptom of the increased value placed on higher education for young adults. Education is more important than ever, and in today's market, a college degree is no longer a luxury but a necessity (Settersten & Ray, 2010). The college setting is ripe with opportunities to examine the beliefs and goals that have been internalized from childhood (Newman & Newman, 2003). These beliefs and goals are tested in higher education and work environments until they are ready to enter the world as full-fledged adults. The fact that young adults are seeking higher education and stable jobs before marriage suggests that young adults are "getting their ducks in a row" and then marrying, if they decide to marry at all (Settersten & Ray, 2010). This trend has a significant impact on when and how young adults seek romantic partners.

If young adults are delaying their transition into full-fledged, independent adulthood in order to pursue education and job opportunities, why does such a significant proportion of adults in this age group participate in online dating in the pursuit for romantic partners? One answer, simply put, ease and access. Ninety-three percent of adults aged 18 to 29 have internet access available to them, compared to only 74 percent of all adults over age 18 (Lenhart et al., 2010). Of those online adults under age 30, 72 percent admit to using social networking sites like Facebook.com to maintain their connections with friends (Lenhart et al., 2010). Young adults, despite their elongated transition to adulthood, tend to lead busy lives (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Utilizing social networking sites like Facebook.com and online dating sites like Match.com may seem logical in the pursuit of romantic partners because of the lack of resources and close ties young adults have during their transition to adulthood.

Yurchisin et al. (2005) suggest that online dating decisions are almost always motivated by a triggering event, a desire for personal growth, or a combination of the two. This suggests that individuals do not date online just for the fun of it, but rather begin the process with specific goals in mind. During our twenties, we seek a subjective sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency (Newman & Newman, 2005). Moving out of the parents' house, going to college, beginning a new career, and figuring out our identity are all important aspects of transition into adulthood. These aspects could also influence decisions related to online dating. Online dating offers young adults the opportunity to post and perform different aspects of their identity in such a way that they are able to grow, explore, and recreate who they wish to be as they enter adulthood.

Theoretical Perspectives

Online daters use various self-presentation methods when posting information about themselves in online dating profiles, and many of these tactics are similar to marketing techniques used in the business realm (Walther, 2006; Schau & Gilly, 2003). These impression management practices are utilized by the online daters who post them and are subsequently "consumed" by the individuals who read them (Schau & Gilly, 2003). This process of presentation and consumption is unique to online dating and other forms of CMC. However, despite the inverted nature of online dating, the process of online self-presentation may be similar to face-to-face that of encounters. One way to make sense of how online daters present themselves on their dating profiles is to understand online dating as the textual "performance" of an online dater's identity and sense of self.

Online Identity

Yurchisin et al. (2005) suggests that online dating is not simply a place to post identity, but consists of a process with which individuals can explore, create, and recreate their identities. There are countless influences that determine how we come about figuring out our identities, and these influences seem to be changing with society. As Bers (2001) put it, "What computers were in the 1980's to influencing new ways of thinking and learning...today they could be to values and identity" (p. 412). In

the online environment, the content posted in online profiles is bound to capture at least part of the content component of identity. That online content is then evaluated by others who read the profile and if it is determined to be significant, a new relationship could be established.

In our face-to-face interactions, identity is formed in part by the expectations placed on us by reference groups (Newman & Newman, 2003). In online dating however, it is not likely that our parents or teachers will be nearby to place these expectations on us. Because the online dating is an interaction with individuals who have not previously met, the expectations and the role they play in identity formation change. Online daters must rely on the feedback from other online daters when forming their sense of identity. The feedback that online daters in Yurchisin et al.'s (2005) study received from the contacts they made online also had an impact on their identities. Positive feedback from other online daters seemed to improve self-image and validate the information posted on informants' profiles (Yurchisin et al., 2005). This validation could serve as an indicator that online dating is in fact a valuable way to not only find someone with whom to begin a new relationship, but also a way to express one's identity and share it with others (Yurchisin et al., 2005; Gross, 2004).

Schau & Gilly (2003) conducted a study of people who created personal web pages. They found that informants were conscious of creating and displaying themselves on their personal web pages, and most had a desire to construct their website as an extension of their sense of self (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Each piece of content on an individual's personal web page is "purposefully chosen to match his objectives that are both social and professional" (Schau & Gilly, 2003, p. 394). For the people who visit personal web pages, the sites are "surrogates for the individual who produced them. In a world of personal web space, we are what we post" (Schau & Gilly, 2003, p. 402).

Erving Goffman's Performance of Self

The performance of self is based on our understanding of our individual identities. Newman & Newman (2003) posit that identity is a foundation that provides individuals an "essential experience of continuity in in social relationships" (p. 352). Identity is a construct that transcends online and offline boundaries so Ervin Goffman's ideas about the performance of self are a good reference point when

talking about posting content in online dating profiles. The content of online dating profiles has become a surrogate for the content we present in our face-to-face interactions. Goffman (1959) suggests that in the social world, we are all actors putting on performances for various audiences. These performances are deliberate tactics that we use to impress our definition of a particular situation onto the other people involved in that situation. Goffman (1959) defines face-to-face interaction as “the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence” (p. 15). According to Goffman (1959), this close proximity is an important variable in the performance of self in our daily lives.

During performances in the social world, the performer “gives” and “gives off” various messages to his audience. The impression a performer gives includes the “verbal symbols and their substitutes” which he uses to convey information about a given situation” (Goffman, 1959). This given information is traditional and narrow and is based strictly on what the performer says during his performance. The way we present ourselves to others is motivated by several outcomes. Strategic self-presentation relies on our efforts to shape others’ impressions in specific ways in order to gain influence, power, sympathy or approval (Brehm et al., 2005, p. 86).

The information that a performer “gives off,” on the other hand is less strategic and “involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor...” (p. 2). The impression given off is taken in by the audience under the assumption that the action was performed for reasons other than the information given by the performer (Goffman, 1959). The significance of what a performer gives and what he gives off is unique to face-to-face interactions. The information given off by a performer comes from the setting in which the performance is given. In order to contribute to the definition of a given social situation, performers often put on a mask or front.

As Goffman (1959) puts it, a mask “represents the conception we have formed of ourselves, the role we are striving to live up to. This mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be” (p. 19). This mask is enhanced by the environment around the social actor. The performer’s appearance, the setting of the situation, and the scenery around the performance greatly impacts the weight of the performance

(Goffman, 1959). These nonverbal cues in our social interactions, according to Goffman, are paramount in the performance of self. These performances are not only utilized to define a social situation as the performer sees fit, but they can also be used to affirm important aspects of society.

It is this affirmation of societal values that connects the performances that occur in face-to-face interactions with online interactions. The motivations behind the performance of self are not necessarily individually motivated. When an individual presents himself before others, “his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society... “(Goffman, 1959, p. 35). Despite declines in marriage rates and increases in marriage age, attitudes toward relationships continue to be positive (Taylor, 2010). This trend could be indicative of a lingering acceptance of relationship formation, regardless of how the relationships are formed.

Conceptual Model: Performance of Self... Online

If we work from the proposition that virtual space in online dating is very similar to physical space in face-to-face dating, it is conceivable that many of the same tools used to perform self in the face-to-face context can be used in the performance of self in the online context. It is not the *process* of searching for a potential romantic partner that has changed, but rather the *space* in which that process takes place. Online dating takes away the need for physical contact to be a requirement for first time encounters, and instead relies on virtual contact where people can communicate over the internet. However, we must not forget that these are still social interactions. Online daters are disclosing information about themselves just as face-to-face daters do. Today’s performance of self is therefore not limited strictly to face-to-face interactions. Framing the process of online dating in this way makes Goffman’s ideas about the performance of self in face-to-face interactions easily applicable to the performances of self in online dating.

I investigate whether Goffman’s ideas about the performance of self hold up in the online environment. Traditional, face-to-face dating and online dating are not two separate processes, but rather one process taking place in two different spaces. Using Goffman’s vernacular, text has become the new

“mask” in the process of online dating, giving online daters a chance to “give” and “give off” their definition of their particular situations. Because face-to-face daters and online daters are participating in the same process, it is hasty to suggest that their behaviors are different. In this technological age, the performance of self, particularly in the search for potential romantic partners, occurs not only in physical space but also in virtual space.

My goal is to integrate the literature about online identity with Goffman’s ideas about the performance of self as key components of our social interactions in virtual space. Goffman argues that social actors in the face-to-face environment “give” and “give off” certain messages to their audiences, but how do people do this online? It is possible that online daters “give” and “give off” impressions not by acting for the audience of their potential romantic partners, but rather by typing for them. If this is the case, the main difference between face-to-face performances and online performances is that instead of visual and verbal cues, online dating utilizes textual cues to achieve the same effect.

While the task of online dating seems very different from traditional face-to-face dating at surface level, these tasks are actually quite similar. Goffman (1959) says that “when a task is given a new front, we seldom find that the front it is given is itself new” (p. 27). Despite the lack of nonverbal cues and the front that traditional daters may use when seeking a romantic partner, online daters are still performing for their potential suitors. There are several tactics that social performers use to enhance their performance in social situations (Goffman, 1959). On the same token, online daters often use similar techniques to make themselves appear more attractive to their potential suitors (Hardey, 2004; Yurchisin et al., 2005; Ellison et al., 2006).

Hardey (2004) suggests that online dating is no different than newspaper dating or personal ads in that online daters are advertising themselves. The initial, textual portrayal online is not only a rich description, but is also faithful to the “embodied but anonymous self” (Hardey, 2004, p. 211). Most online daters to some degree have a desire to appeal to other online daters in order to attract online dating site users to their profiles (Yurchisin et al., 2005). As such, people take a lot of care when crafting their online dating profiles just as social actors take great care in their performances. Informants interviewed

by Ellison et al. (2006) suggest that they attempted to present themselves as attractive, engaging, and worthy of pursuit, as well as realistic enough that the eventual face-to-face meetings were not unpleasant or surprising.

Misrepresentations occur in online dating, but similar misrepresentations also occur in face-to-face encounters. Goffman (1959) suggests that it is necessary for social performers to take care when performing for an audience, and that we all have ample capacity and motive to misrepresent the facts when we are engaging in our social performances. Only “shame, guilt, or fear prevent them from doing so” (Goffman, 1959, p. 58). What’s more, Goffman (1959) suggests that we feel differently about performers who lie for different reasons. This could help explain the general acceptance of small deceptions in online dating profiles. Because online daters tend to lie about inconsequential things like age, weight, and height and not about things about character or personality (Toma et al., 2007), under Goffman’s (1959) conception, this deception in performance of self is less severe and is therefore likely to be ignored by the audience.

Goffman (1959) posits that when a performer knows that his audience is skeptical of the reality being impressed upon them, we often appreciate their tendency to call out the flaws as an indication that the whole show is false or fake. As social scientists, however, Goffman (1959) says that we need to appreciate the fact that “even sympathetic audiences can be momentarily disturbed, shocked, and weakened in their faith by the discovery that a picayune discrepancy in the impressions presented to them” (p. 51). If what Goffman (1959) suggests is correct in our face-to-face interactions, then why not apply this to our online interactions as well? Some online daters expect at least some level of deception on the online profiles of others (Gibbs et al., 2006; Toma et al., 2008), which makes them like the skeptical audiences to which Goffman is referring. On the other hand, it is important to understand that there are other online daters who take online profiles at face value and a major deception could be a shock to their system or could weaken their faith in the online dating process.

Goffman’s (1959) conception of the performance of self may be fruitfully applied to the process of online dating if it is similar to traditional dating in significant ways. My analysis of online dating

profiles will attempt to light some of the performance techniques utilized by online daters. I attempt to show that despite the differences between online and traditional dating, daters of both types of daters are performers. Online daters perform for their audiences not in face-to-face encounters, but in text. The viable fronts of online daters are their profiles as these are the masks which they present when performing their identities.

Goffman suggests that we as social performers attempt to impress our definition of a given situation onto the other people involved in that situation. In face-to-face interactions, the social actor uses his body, his environment, and his spoken words to convey his definition of the situation. In online dating, however, the text takes the place of many of these components, giving the written content of online dating profiles the power to encompass certain aspects of a first date in one or two paragraphs. This often motivates online daters to take great care when crafting the content on their profiles (Fiore et al., 2008; Ellison et al., 2006), and this lends to reiterate the importance of subtle textual cues like spelling and grammar when making an online first impression. By using text in lieu of nonverbal cues when performing self online, online daters have a unique opportunity to edit, refine, and craft their performances in a way that allows them to ensure that they are giving off an impression that is meaningful and significant in their search for potential romantic partners.

All of the text in Match.com profiles lends to the impression that online daters are trying to “give” to their potential romantic suitors. Information typed in “About Me” paragraphs about likes and dislikes, habits and beliefs, the type of relationships they are interested in initiating, etc., all relate back to the impression that online daters are “giving” to the audience of their readers. Online daters, despite the lack of environmental and nonverbal cues, are also able to “give off” impressions to the other Match.com users who read their profile. Goffman suggests that the impressions “given off” by social performers are consumed by the audience under the assumption that they are separate from the information the performer is trying to transmit. In the face-to-face context, the “given off” information is based on environmental and nonverbal cues unique to face-to-face encounters. However, because the process of dating has not

changed, I want to investigate whether the online textual cues are able to reproduce the experience of face-to-face dating.

Conversations, whether face-to-face or online, have to start somewhere and online daters likely have some of the same concerns when they are communicating with someone for the first time. If we are assuming the face-to-face performance of self is not dissimilar from the performance of self online, then we can also assume that the “Small Talk” and “superficial banter” seen in first time face-to-face encounters may also be present in many first-time online encounters. Banter on topics like the weather and questions about what you do for a living seem to give daters an “in” when it comes to beginning a conversation with a new person. Online dating may force users to disclose their personal information earlier on than in their face-to-face encounters, but in the search for a potential romantic partner the performance remains the same.

Online dating profiles are the stage for the performance of self in the search for a potential romantic partner. The text in turn becomes the environment where online daters can “give” and “give off” their definition of their dating situation. Rather than putting on a mask that can be enhanced by the environment surrounding a social actor in the face-to-face context, online daters use the text of their profiles to paint a picture of themselves. The meaning of this online text can create an impression of an online dater’s current state or status. It is possible that online daters use their words to describe their physical characteristics which are not evident in their online interactions. The bad habits and negative characteristics that play out in face-to-face encounters can also be put into text.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

A large proportion of the previous research about online dating utilizes data obtained from interviews or surveys completed by online daters (Stevens & Morris, 2007; Scharlott & Christ, 1995; Gibbs et al., 2006; Ellison et al., 2006; Yurchisin et al., 2005). While this data provides valuable insight into the phenomenon of online dating, the results are based on self-reports of online dating behaviors rather than on the textual content posted in online dating profiles. This project seeks to add to our understanding of how online daters describe themselves online. Therefore, I use the actual text posted in Match.com profiles. Building on Goffman's ideas about the performance of self, I read the textual content of online dating profiles to determine how the meaning of this content functions in a way similar way to the meaning of the physical performances of face-to-face encounters.

Sample

To access the textual data of online dating profiles, it was required that I create my own profile on Match.com. The initial step in creating an online dating profile involved answering closed-ended, check-box type questions by choosing from a list of options which best applies to your situation. This section is used to unveil basic information about who users are, their interests, and who they are interested in connecting with on Match.com. After answering the closed ended questions, Match.com users are asked to post a few sentences or a paragraph in a section called "About Me." Here they can use their own words to describe elements about themselves not disclosed in the closed-ended components of the profile. This allows certain aspects of their personalities to come to light in a way that they may not have when response choices are limited.

From the closed-ended questions, I collected demographic data race, age, marital status, and children of my "matches." My final sample of 60 matches consisted of white men aged 20-27 who have never been married and who do not have children. For this study, the size of my sample was based on the

number of pages in my final list of “matches.” I chose to use men for my sample because of the way that Match.com frames the initial steps of filling out a profile and becoming a member. Match.com assumes fixed gender and sexual orientation. My only options were to indicate that I am a “Woman Looking for a Man” or a “Woman Looking for a Woman.” For the purposes of this research, I limited my sample to heterosexual men who were looking to meet women.

Coding

To begin my content analysis, I used the text from Match.com profiles to see how well Goffman’s ideas about the performance of self in face-to-face environments apply to the online environment. In order to investigate the possibility that people perform with textual cues online similarly to the way they perform with nonverbal and other cues in face-to-face interactions, I performed content analysis by developing pre-determined categories of disclosure based on previous research about online dating and CMC. I defined and operationalized the variables within these categories before collecting data in order to minimize researcher bias. Once I developed the categories of disclosure, I then coded the text from each profile based on those categories. Using the actual text from the profiles, I color-coded and underlined certain parts of the content based on which category the disclosure fit into. I then coded for themes and patterns within each category and used an Excel spreadsheet to easily view which profiles contained my variables of interest, coding the profiles as zero (0) if they did not utilize one of the variables in the pre-determined categories, and one (1) if they did.

This type of content analysis utilized a mixed methods approach. My primary goal was to develop a qualitative analysis of the content posted in online dating profiles. I broke down the types of disclosures and the specific words and phrases that the online daters in my sample deemed important to disclose about them. This process allowed me to examine the meaning of the content posted in men’s profiles. However, there was also quantitative data to be gleaned from some of the responses such as sociodemographic characteristics as well as the number of profiles that utilized each of my variables of interest. From this data, I was able to determine whether or not the pre-determined categories based off of

surveys and interviews from previous literature were applicable to the textual content of online dating profiles.

I specified that I was interested in viewing the profiles of men aged 22-25 who had never been married, who did not have children, and who lived within 50 miles of Kansas City, Missouri in order to ensure that the men in my sample were demographically similar. Once I had this similarity within my sample, I then conducted an analysis of the free write “About Me” sections written by my matches. While the profiles are important, my main focus was to investigate the multiple meanings contained within the “About Me” paragraphs. Thus my analysis of the “About Me” paragraphs written by my matches involved a constant comparative method wherein I compared disclosures applicable to my variables of interest and noted relationships among these concepts (Babbie, 2002).

Accessing the Data

The process of becoming a member of Match.com is the same for everyone. The first component of a Match.com profile involves specifying your gender and who you are looking for. Match.com does not ask for information about biological sex, but rather assumes gender and sexual orientation. I specified that I am a “Woman Looking for a Man.” This assumes that I am a heterosexual female and will therefore be “matched” with men who are looking for women. While I could specify that I am a “Woman Looking for a Woman,” there are no options for individuals who identify as bisexual who may wish to be matched with men and women, or for individuals who are transgendered/transsexual who may not fit neatly into the category of “man” or “woman.”

The next screen that pops up asks for basic information: zip code, birthday, email address, and user name. Specifying a zip code allows Match.com users to indicate their geographic location and the geographic location of their potential matches. I used 64110, which is the zip code here at UMKC, and indicated that I am interested in finding men who live within a 50 mile radius of Kansas City. I chose the username Stefanie0303, using my name and birthdate. This username to some degree indicates my gender identity and gives the impression that I am not deceiving the individuals who may read my

Match.com profile because I used information disclosed directly on my profile. Choosing a different username without my name or birthdate could change the way I am perceived by my potential matches.

Closed-Ended Responses

Once username and location are specified, the first section of a Match.com profile consisted of closed-ended questions about my physical appearance/body type, background/values, lifestyle, astrological sign, relationship status, and interests. All of the responses to this section were given in a list or check-box format. For example, I was given a list of possible body types and asked to choose the one that best describes me. I was thereafter given a list of activities and asked to check all that apply to my interests. I answered each question as truthfully as possible; however, in several instances it was difficult to determine which of the activities and interests were applicable. This vague list of activities does not leave room to indicate the specifics of the relationship with the activity, but rather forces the online dater into a box as a “hiker” or “camper”. I have included a screenshot of the closed-ended questions in Appendix A.

The second closed-ended component of the profile is “About My Date.” I initially specified that I am a woman looking for a man, so all of the questions in this section were phrased about “him”. I was able to specify that I am interested in certain characteristics about my potential date’s appearance (height, eye color, hair color, ethnicities, etc.), as well as aspects of his lifestyle (religion, relationship status, children, etc.). Because I was interested in the dating habits of adults aged 18-29, I looked specifically at a small group of online daters within that category. I initially indicated that I would like to be matched with in white men aged 22-25. The age range of my final sample was wider (20-27) because of the matches made for me by Match.com.

It was also difficult to obtain a representative sample. For my pilot sample, I originally tried to come up with a representative sample from Kansas City of men from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. However, based on my specified criteria and the criteria specified by male Match.com users, a vast majority of my matches were white even when I included different racial/ethnic backgrounds in my

“About My Date” section. I used white men for my final sample because of the lack of minority men available to me from Match.com’s search engine criteria.

Free-Write Responses

The final component of the Match.com profile included opportunities for online daters to post information in their own words. I called this the “free-write” section, and this was the section where the bulk of the content analysis will be done. There are three components to the free-write section. First was a series of four questions which were designed as a way for online daters to expand on their interests and activities. The questions included “What do you do in your free time?”, “What are some of your favorite places?”, “Share a few of your favorite things,” and “What’s the last thing you read?” While these questions were prompted by Match.com, responses were not required and there is no minimum or maximum number of characters that had to be entered. If Match.com users do not wish to answer them, responses are not included on their public profiles. I did not answer any of the optional questions on my profile.

The second part of the free-write section was what Match.com called a “dating tagline.” This is a place where online daters were asked to post a phrase, motto, quote, etc. that described them. It was designed to be an attention grabber to attract other online daters to my profile. A minimum of two characters were required, and profiles could not be submitted unless text was entered. There was no maximum requirement so the dating taglines could vary drastically depending on what Match.com users wanted to post. I used the tagline “Graduate Student” on my profile because I wanted to be direct without divulging any more information about myself.

The final free-write section was the “About Me” paragraph which I used for the bulk of the data in this project. The space required a minimum of 200 characters, and prompted the online dater to describe who they were and what they were looking for on Match.com. The length and variety of paragraphs are completely up to the user who is posting. If desired, this section could disclose little more than a Tweet on Twitter. However because there is no maximum requirement, it is possible that some users will disclose a great deal of information. In order to ensure that I was not misinforming Match.com

users who could potentially come across my profile, I included a paragraph outlining my intentions in the “About Me” section of my Match.com profile. The paragraph read as follows:

“I am a graduate student at UMKC. I am writing my master’s thesis about self-presentation in the context of online dating. In order to collect my thesis data, I have created this profile. It is not my intention to form a romantic relationship, which is the usual purpose of online dating sites like Match.com. My intent is to collect data for my thesis that will bring to light some of the ways in which individuals depict themselves when utilizing online dating services. I will not record any identifying information from any data file. My goal is to collect data that will later be analyzed to help me understand how online daters use the internet to describe themselves to their potential romantic partners.”

Approval

Once I completed my Match.com profile, I was asked to submit it to their Customer Care Team for approval. This team goes through profiles before they go live on the site in order to ensure that there is no vulgar language or risqué pictures that will be posted on the profile, as well as to ensure that no identifying information like telephone numbers or addresses are posted where other users could contact their “matches,” thus bypassing the subscribing membership requirements. Because I created my online dating profile as a researcher, I was hesitant to include a profile picture so I submitted it without a photo. However, the Customer Care Team required me to post a picture of myself before my profile was approved. Once I attached my profile picture, my Match.com profile went live on the site on September 30, 2011 and I began my data collection. I have included a screenshot of my complete profile in Appendix B.

Collecting the Data

For my final sample, I specified in the “About My Date” section of my profile that I was interested in white men aged 22-25 who have never been married, do not have children, and who live within a 50 mile radius of Kansas City. Based on this criteria and the information I posted about myself, Match.com’s computer generated search produced a total of 1,098 potential “matches” from which I could choose. These matches were rated on how well they fit into the specified criteria, with the most

compatible matches listed at the top of the list. I was able to view my list of matches in a gallery format, which produced a total of 61 pages of potential matches, each page containing 18 profiles. To select a random sample from this list, I numbered each of the profiles starting in the top left of the gallery with number 1. I then rolled a set of dice 61 times to determine which profile from each page I would use for my sample. This gave me a sample of 61 online profiles which I collected for analysis.

Once I determined which match from each gallery page of the list to use in my sample, I directly transferred the “About Me” paragraphs into a Word document as they were typed on the profiles. This was to ensure that all spelling, grammar, and punctuation could be kept intact for analysis. Because I used information from the entire profile, I then took screenshots of the profiles and pasted those into a word document for my use. These screenshots contained all of the information posted on the Match.com profiles. I did not record any identifying information, usernames, etc. from my matches during analysis and I did not reproduce, duplicate, or copy any of the profile screenshots for anybody else. I gave each of the profiles a number by which they were thereafter identified. After collecting these screenshots, I noticed that one of my matches indicated that he was married and had children. This profile was discarded, leaving me with a final sample of 60 useable profiles. Because not all of the profiles exactly matched my specified criteria, my final sample consisted of white men who ranged in age from 20-27.

Managing the Data

I took screenshots of my matches’ profiles in order to preserve the profiles in their entirety on the day that I collected them. This was to ensure that in the event that I needed to refer back to the profiles, they were exactly the same as they were on the day they were collected. This also eliminated the possibility that some of the matches would edit, change, or delete their profiles during the time I did analysis. I compiled all of the information from the profiles in an Excel spreadsheet. This way I could see all of the characteristics of my matches at a glance. Rather than focusing specifically on how the check-box questions about interests, etc. were answered, I simply counted the number of items that were checked. On the optional questions about free time and hot spots I did the same thing, counting the

number of sentences written in these sections. These questions were optional, so if they were not answered I indicated zero (0) sentences.

Because I copy-pasted the “About Me” paragraphs into a separate document, I counted the number of sentences contained in each and put that number into the Excel spreadsheet as well. This way I could see how much information was being shared. It is possible that the online dater who has 25 sentences in his “About Me” paragraph also answered all of the optional questions and checked more interests. On the other hand, it equally possible that a person would only write 3 sentences in their “About Me” paragraph would opt out of answering the optional questions, and check only one or two interest boxes. I wanted to ensure that the data disclosed by my matches was analyzed not only by the amount of information available, but by the specific content and types of disclosure that men in Kansas City include on their Match.com profiles. This content includes attention to detail, amount of information, current state/status, physical descriptions, positive descriptions, negative descriptions, neutral descriptions, future goals/aspirations, and “Small Talk”. The specific content posted by my matches allowed me to extrapolate information about whether or not online self-disclosure on Match.com compares with research about different types of online and face-to-face disclosure.

Analytic Strategy: Constant Comparative Method

To analyze the data through content analysis, I read through each paragraph in order to get a general idea of how each paragraph is organized. Each time I read the “About Me” paragraphs, I looked for key words or phrases that are indicative of the types of self-disclosure discussed in previous research. While analyzing each profile multiple times during which process I also kept an open eye for patterns not addressed in previous scholarship. Each of these aspects of the profile were then highlighted and coded in order to examine trends across profiles.

I employed a constant comparative data analysis when reading through my matches’ profiles. Glaser and Strauss, who originally described this method, posit that there are four stages from data to theory (Babbie, 2002). The first two steps are imperative for my analytic strategy. Under this

conception, first researchers compare “incidents applicable to each category” and then they integrate “categories and their properties” (p. 372). The categories to which I am going to compare my matches’ disclosures are based on previous research. Once I determined my variables of interest, I read through each of my matches’ profiles and looked for specific “incidents” where findings from previous literature came to light. Once I knew which of my matches disclosed which types of information, I looked for patterns across profiles in order to determine whether or not there were relationships among certain types of disclosures.

Variables of Interest Based on Previous Literature

Based on previous literature, I came up with specific variables that have been found to be related to the types of disclosure posted in online dating profiles. These types of disclosure are important in understand how online daters engage in the performance of self when participating in online dating. As I analyzed the “About Me” paragraphs written by my matches, I paid close attention to aspects of online disclosure such as attention to detail, amount of information disclosed, descriptions of current state or status, aspirations/personal goals, and “Small Talk” in order to extrapolate the ways in which online daters perform for their audience in the online context. Using these variables expands Goffman’s ideas about the performance of self to incorporate textual content posted in online dating profiles.

Amount of Information

How much an online dater discloses on his profile influences how online daters perceive them in terms of personality and relationship desires. Rosen et al. (2007) suggests that some online daters view higher self-disclosures as indicative of more positive and open people. Further, individuals who are serious about forming long-term romantic relationships are more likely to disclose more information because they seek to display their authentic selves (Rosen et al., 2007). Based on this idea, it is possible that online daters who have longer paragraphs are more serious in their pursuit of a romantic partner. By contrast, online daters who have shorter paragraphs may not be interested in long-term relationships but are simply looking for a friend or short term hook-up.

I operationalized the concept of “amount of disclosure” as the number of sentences contained in the “About Me” paragraphs written by my matches. Because the text in the “About Me” paragraph must include a minimum of 200 characters but has no maximum limit, I anticipated finding a wide range of variation in the amount of information included by my matches. While the number of sentences written by my matches may not be indicative of *meaningful* disclosure, the number of sentences on online profiles will provide a glimpse into how much these online daters have to say about themselves.

Attention to Detail

Without nonverbal cues like body language, online daters are forced to use text to make their first impression on potential romantic partners. Ellison et al. (2006) and others suggest that online daters pay attention to subtle cues on others’ profiles, and that many times online daters take great care when crafting their own online profiles. Respondents to Ellison et al.’s (2006) survey suggest that grammatical errors and misspellings provide a clue as to how educated a person is (p. 424). Further, online dating is characterized by an increased ability to manage self-presentation. This means that online daters have ample time and opportunity to craft well written, well thought-out paragraphs to make their first impressions on their potential romantic partners, which is a chance they do not have when making their face-to-face first impressions.

I operationalized the variable of “attention to detail” as the spelling or grammatical errors contained within the “About Me” paragraph, as well as how many times phrases like “by the way” or “Laughing out Loud” were abbreviated using texting lingo (BTW, Lol, etc.). The writer of a profile with no spelling or grammatical errors and that does not include texting lingo will be considered to have paid great attention to detail on their profile. Writers of paragraphs with more than two spelling or grammatical errors will be considered to have paid little attention to detail. This finding could indicate how much time the online dater spent proofreading their paragraph and how much of their attention they focused on editing.

Descriptions of Current Status or State

My initial assumption was that the disclosures by my matches would be written in a variety of tenses, indicating things like “I am a student,” or “I hope to become a lawyer.” As such, I originally framed my expected responses in a way that suggested that online daters would use their “About Me” paragraphs to describe their “now selves” and their “future or potential selves” (Yurchisin et al., 2005). While certain aspect of “now selves” and “future or potential selves” may be addressed, I changed my framework to include the various types of disclosure that encompass my matches’ current states or statuses. These descriptions may include the state/status of physical appearance, positive attributes, or negative attributes.

Physical Descriptions

It is possible online daters choose to describe their physical characteristics on their profiles. Much of the research about online dating focuses on the attractiveness of photos posted on online profiles. Results from Fiore et al.’s (2008) study indicate that while a large majority of online daters consider a good profile picture to be a marker of high attractiveness ratings, the attractiveness of photos was “about more than a strong jaw-line or a symmetrical face” (Fiore et al., 2008, p. 8). Photos of men were rated more attractive when they looked genuine and trustworthy, extraverted, and not too warm or kind (Fiore et al., 2008). Because I only utilized text in this analysis, I could not help but wonder if it possible that online daters describe their physical appearance in order to attract others with their words rather than their pictures.

While one of the initial questions when creating a Match.com profile includes indicating body type, describing it in your own words gives it a lot more power than simply checking the box that best describes you. I operationalized the variable of “physical descriptions” as phrases that include descriptive words about the writer’s appearance, looks, build, body type, etc. I noted mentions of height, weight, and hair color, etc., as well as words like handsome, attractive, or muscular, etc. While photos were rated as being attractive when they showed men who looked genuine or trustworthy, for many online daters,

physical attraction is an important component of lasting relationships. Including physical descriptions may help online daters determine whether or not they are interested in a face-to-face encounter.

Positive Descriptions

Hardey (2004) suggests that online dating is not dissimilar from newspaper marketing in that online daters often market themselves in a way that sets their profile apart from other online profiles. Self-descriptions often include elements of marketing because online daters have a desire to appeal to others and to get attention from other dating site users (Yurchisin et al., 2005). By playing up their positive characteristics, online daters are able to ensure that others who view their profile will like what they read and potentially be interested in a meeting face-to-face. Focusing on these positive characteristics could influence other online daters to initiate contact based on the assumption that the online dater in which they are interested in seems like a nice person.

I operationalized the variable “positive descriptions” as words or phrases that describe positive emotional revelations about the disposition of the writer. These revelations could include using descriptions similar to the characteristics seen as important to attractiveness ratings in profile pictures. Descriptors such as trustworthy, honest, genuine, or kind could serve to play up these positive attributes even if they were not seen in profile pictures. Including these characterizations may aid getting other online daters to choose certain profiles over others in the pursuit of potential romantic partners. It is possible that the “About Me” paragraphs could include any combination of physical and emotional descriptions.

Negative Characterizations

The positive characterizations often work in tandem with a need to be accurate and honest on online profiles. I also looked for negative characterizations in the “About Me” paragraphs written by my sample. Interviews by Ellison et al. (2006) suggest that online daters describe themselves as “attractive, engaging, and worthy of pursuit,” but many also choose to be realistic and honest enough that the eventual face-to-face encounter with their potential romantic partner is not a surprise (p. 429). Further, Yurchisin et al. (2005) and Gibbs et al. (2007) suggest that being honest online includes characterizations

of themselves that can be verified and supported by friends or family members, even if those characterizations are negative.

I operationalized the variable of “negative characterizations” as negative emotional revelations about character or mentions of bad habits, etc. Did the online dater only mention the positive aspects of himself discussed earlier, or did he mention things like being a procrastinator, being noisy, or being shy/reserved? By including these negative descriptions in their online profiles, online daters are able to bring “deal breakers” to the surface so that the potential face-to-face encounter does not reveal surprise (Gibbs et al., 2006).

Aspirations and Future Goals

In addition to descriptions of current state or status, online daters could also disclose information about their aspirations and goals, both in relationships and in personal growth. The “About Me” paragraph is framed in such a way that Match.com asks for information about “Who You Are and Who You are Looking For.” This prompt indicates that the “About Me” paragraph should include a thought or two about the type of relationship that the user is interested in forming. At the same time, research indicates that posting information about personal growth may be helpful in solidifying an online dater’s identity. When online daters post information on their profiles that contain aspects of their identities that they do not currently possess but hope to possess in the future gives online daters the chance to “test the identity waters” and gives online daters the opportunity to explore their identity (Yurchisin et al., 2005).

I operationalized the variable of “aspirations and future goals” in relationships as whether my matches indicate that they are interested in a long-term or short-term relationship. Under this operationalization, it is possible that my matches may indicate that they are looking for someone to make a real connection with, or they may indicate that they are just looking to have fun and to be casual.

I operationalized the specific component of “aspirations and future goals” for personal growth as words or phrases that indicate that the online dater is interested in somehow exploring new aspects of their identities. Phrases like “I’m willing to try new things,” or “I’m trying to learn more about myself” indicate that the online dater desires to strengthen his personal character. I also looked for phrases about

personal goals that indicate a direction for future states/statuses such as “I want to finish law school and become a lawyer,” or “I eventually want to join the Peace Corp.”

Low-Risk Discussion Topics

The theoretical framework for this project revolves around Goffman’s ideas about the performance of self. I argue that while Goffman applied his ideas about the performance of self solely to our face-to-face encounters, it is possible that Match.com users utilize the same types of tools in their online encounters. As such, I expect to find certain types of disclosure in the “About Me” paragraphs that reproduce some of the superficial banter that often occurs in first time face-to-face encounters. Impersonal disclosure on low-risk topics like work or living situation, and “Small Talk” in online dating profiles could suggest that the performance of online dating is not dissimilar from the performance of face-to-face dating.

Previous literature suggests that computer mediated communication forces interactants to disclose personal information earlier on in an online encounter than they would in a first time face-to-face encounter (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). While this finding is significant, my argument is that Goffman’s ideas about the performance of self are applicable to the online environment. This means that it is possible that online daters may reproduce the superficial banter from their face-to-face encounters in their online dating profiles. Rather than in-depth, personal descriptions about their character or feelings, my matches may include neutral topics that do little to articulate who they are.

I operationalized the variable of “low-risk topics” as descriptions of mundane, everyday information about online daters’ daily lives. Descriptions about what they do for a living, how long they’ve lived in the Kansas City area, or their favorite movies, while definitely important, are practical depictions of the online dater who wrote them, but do little to portray their character. While this information is disclosure in that the online dater deemed it valuable to reveal, where a person works is not in-depth information that informs the reader about the writer’s innermost thoughts.

Variables of Interest Based on Pilot Sample

“Small Talk”

Face-to-face communication is characterized by “Small Talk” and “Superficial Banter” that often get in the way of learning new information about the person with which you are interacting (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). This is due to the inverted nature of CMC suggested by Merkle & Richardson (2000). First dates often begin with conversations about everyday topics like the weather and face-to-face interactants learn about one another gradually over a period of time. In the online context however, meaningful information is disclosed on online profiles, taking away the *need* for this type of banter. Online daters therefore get to know one another before ever meeting face-to-face.

Again, going along with my assumption that Goffman is applicable to online dating, it is possible that my matches could include some of the “Small Talk” from first time face-to-face encounters into their first time online encounters. The conversation has to start somewhere. I operationalized the variable of “Small Talk” as superficial topics like the weather, introductory statements/questions like “Where do I begin?”, and closing statements like “That’s me in a nutshell.” All of these components are important to the amount of information disclosed by my matches, but much like neutral topics they do little to describe the character of the writer.

Research Issues and Challenges of This Project

There were several issues I came across as I began that data collection process on Match.com. Most of these difficulties were due to the specifics of Match.com’s website interface. While I was able to specify that I wanted to be matched with men who met specific criteria, I ultimately did not have control over who I was matched with. I was at the mercy of the websites computer program that compared my specifications with the specifications of male Match.com users. Many of the men in the first pages of my potential matches were labeled as 97 percent matches with my specified criteria, and the men on the last few pages of my list of potential matches had a percent match in the 70’s. None of the men in my list of potential matches were a 100 percent match with the criteria I specified.

Additionally, the nature of this project hinges on the content posted on heterosexual men's Match.com profiles. Match.com assumes gender and sexual orientation, leaving no room for individuals who identify as bisexual or transgendered. My only option was to indicate that I was a "Woman Looking for a Man" or a "Woman Looking for a Woman." Because I indicated that I am a woman looking for a man, it is assumed that I am a biological female and that I have a heterosexual orientation. While there are websites geared specifically toward individuals who identify as bisexual or transgendered (for example bicupid.com or transpassions.com), Match.com (which is one of the largest and well known dating sites) does not give online daters the option to search their site for these types of potential romantic partners.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Final Sample

Demographics Findings

I purposefully controlled some of the demographic characteristics of my sample. When I created my profile, I specified that I wanted to be matched with white/Caucasian men, who have never been married, and who did not have children. All of the men in my final sample of 60 fit these criteria. While I initially indicated that I was interested in being matched with men aged 22-25, the ages of the men in my sample were skewed toward the mid-to-late twenties. The men ranged in age from 20-27, and 63 percent, 38 men, were in the 25-27 age range. My final sample consisted of one 20-year-old (accounting for less than two percent of my sample), five 21-year-olds (around eight percent), three 23-year-olds (five percent), six 24-year-olds (ten percent), seven 22-year olds (around 11 percent), seven 26-year-olds (around 11 percent, thirteen 25-year-olds (22 percent), and eighteen 27-year-olds (30 percent).

My matches indicated that they lived in urban or suburban environments. Some of this is to be expected. I specified that I was interested in men who lived within a 50 mile radius from Kansas City. Nineteen men, around 32 percent of my sample, indicated that they were from Kansas City Missouri, and one indicated that he was from Kansas City Kansas. Other urban/suburban locations included cities like Olathe Kansas (three), Lenexa Kansas (three), Blue Springs Missouri (four), Lawrence Kansas (four), Lees Summit Missouri (four), Shawnee Mission Kansas (four), and Independence Missouri (six).

Education and Occupation/income

Education level and occupation were questions asked at the beginning of a Match.com profile in the check-box format. Match.com users were given several options to choose from and asked to check the option that best fits their situation. Options to select for education included “High School,” “Some College,” “Associates Degree,” “Bachelor’s Degree,” “Graduate Degree,” and “PhD/Post-Doctoral.” If no box was checked, the automated response was “I’ll Tell You Later.” The education level of my sample was fairly high. Seventy-five percent of my sample (45 men) indicated that they had at “Some

College” or greater. Ten men (just under 17 percent of my sample) indicated that they had a high school education, and the remaining five (eight percent) did not answer the question, so Match.com provided the response “I’ll Tell You Later.”

Similar to the question about education, Occupation was asked in a check-box format and Match.com users were asked to check the occupational category that best fits their situation. Choices ranged from retail/food service occupations to technical/science/computers/engineering and self-employed. If no box was checked, the automated response was “I’ll Tell You Later.” The assortment of occupations among my sample was wide. Forty men (just under 67 percent of my sample) answered the question about occupation. Seven men (around 12 percent) indicated that they have some “Other Occupation” not listed as a choice, seven indicated that they were students, and six (ten percent) did not answer the question, so Match.com provided the response “I’ll tell you later.” Based on answers to the question about occupation, income levels for my matches also varied, ranging from less than \$25,000 to \$75,001-\$100,000 per year, although around 43 percent of my sample, 26 men, did not answer the question about income, so Match.com provided the response “I’ll Tell You Later.”

Religious Beliefs, Political Ideologies, and Children

Faith/religious affiliation was another drop-box question that had a wide array of categories from which to choose. Options checked by the men in my sample included “Agnostic,” “Christian/Catholic,” “Christian/Protestant,” “Christian/LDS,” “Christian/Other,” “Spiritual but not religious,” and “Other.” Other possible options included “Jewish,” “Muslim/Islam,” “Atheist,” or several incarnations of Buddhist. If no box was checked, the automated response was “I’ll Tell You Later.” Nearly 48 percent of my sample, 28 men, indicated that they associated with some incarnation of Christianity (eleven Catholic, eight Protestant, eight Christian/Other, and one LDS). Seven of my matches (around 12 percent) indicated that they were agnostic, three men (five percent) said that they were “Spiritual but Not Religious,” and two (around three percent) indicated that they practice some “Other” religion. The remaining 20 matches (33 percent) did not answer the question, so Match.com provided the response “I’ll Tell You Later.”

Among the 55 men who answered the question about political views, responses avoided extreme ends of the spectrum. Possible responses to choose from included “Ultra Conservative,” “Conservative,” “Middle of the Road,” “Liberal,” “Very Liberal,” “Non-Conformist,” and “Some Other Viewpoint.” Fifty percent of my sample, 30 men, indicated that their political views were “Middle of the Road,” and none indicated that they were “Ultra Conservative” or “Very Liberal.” Similar numbers of men indicated that they were “Liberal” (eight, or around 13 percent), or “Conservative” (six, or around ten percent). Two men (three percent) indicated that they were “Non-Conformist,” and two that they held “Some Other Viewpoint.” Only five men (around 8 percent) did not answer the question, and the response was “I’ll Tell You Later.”

Along with race and age, when setting up a Match.com profiles, users are asked to indicate whether or not they have children. All of the men in my sample specified that they did not currently have children. Once this question is answered, Match.com also asks whether or not you might like to have children in the future. Options for this check-box question included “Definitely,” “Someday,” “Not Sure,” “Probably Not,” “No,” and “No, But it’s OK if My Partner Has Kids.” Only three of my matches (five percent) indicated that they did not want children or that they were “Not Sure.” Nearly 92 percent of my sample (55 men) indicated that they want kids. Thirty-six men (60 percent) specified that they want children “Someday,” and nineteen indicated that they “Definitely” (nearly 32 percent) want children in the future.

Profile Pictures

After I submitted all of *my* demographic information on my Match.com profile, I was sent an email indicating that I needed to include a picture of myself. However, seven of my matches did not include pictures on their profiles and none of these men described their physical appearance in their “About Me” paragraphs.

Typed Responses in Free-Write Sections

After the initial check-box, closed-ended questions about demographic characteristics, the second part of a profile on Match.com involved open-ended, free-write sections where users had free reign to post whatever they wanted without prompts from the website. There were four optional questions where Match.com users could write about what they do for fun, their favorite places, favorite things, and the last thing they read. Then Match.com users were asked to come with a profile tagline, viewable at the top of their public profiles. The final, and most important component for this study, was the “About Me” paragraph where online daters could write as much as they wanted about whatever they deemed important to disclose to their potential romantic partners. I analyzed the “About Me” paragraphs using the pre-determined variables of interest I developed from previous literature. For the purposes of these findings, all text from these typed responses was copied verbatim from the profile where it was posted. All spelling, grammatical, or typing errors are original to the profile it came from.

Prompted Questions

In addition to the check-box questions with a list of responses to choose from, Match.com profiles include 4 optional questions where users can type a few sentences or a list of responses about what they do for fun, their favorite “hot spots,” their favorite things, and the last thing they read. While these questions are prompted by the website, they are not required, and there is no minimum or maximum number of characters that must be entered. Twenty men (33 percent) did not answer any of the optional questions. Results show that over half of the men did answer the optional questions responded to each of the 4 questions. Of the 40 who did write in optional responses, 3 (7.5 percent) only answered one question, 6 (15 percent) responded to two of the questions, 7 (17.5 percent) responded to three of the questions, and the remaining 24 men (60 percent) men who answered the optional questions typed in responses to all four questions. The remaining 17 men answered various combinations of the optional questions.

A total of 36 men (60 percent of the total sample) answered at least one of the optional questions. Thirty-six men answered the first question about what they like to do for fun, 31 answered the question

about favorite “hot spots” to go to/visit, 32 men answered the question about their favorite things, and 33 men answered the question about the last thing they read, even if only to say that they do not read much. The format of the responses varied across the sample. Some men simply generated lists while others wrote several sentences about why they liked to visit Omaha or that they do not read very much. Because these questions were included before at the beginning of the profile, few men expanded on their responses in their “About Me” paragraphs.

Responses to “For Fun”:

“I love being outdoors exercising or just relaxing. I’ve also been getting into watching classic movies and of course I listen to music all the time.” (Profile 106)

“Since I got out of the army and moved back home I’ve been going to school. I can visit friends now too that I haven’t seen in a while. I like going to Lawrence, pnl, and manhattan. People might disagree but kc is fun if you know where to go.” (Profile 114).

Responses to “Favorite Hot Spots”:

“I mostly hangout in Zona Roas, it is a fun little area and is only a mile away from my house. I like Westport too. Would love to return to Birds in LA and the Great Tap room in Denver. (Profile 111)

All American Fitness and Sidepockets” (Profile 117)

Responses to “Favorite Things”:

“-My favorite type of food is Bar-b-que
-Love to go shopping at Bass Pro Shops and Cabela’s
-I enjoy watching sports and playing cards
-Enjoy spending time with my family” (Profile 109)

“Musically I willing to give anything a shot I prefer most metal or indie rock, county ehh not so much. I like Dexter, Burn Notice, and pretty much any sci fi who ever.” (Profile 235)

Responses to “Last Read”:

“The Lords of Discipline.” (Profile 104)

“The last book I actually finished was The Dark Tower VII by Stephen King... and that was about three years ago. Every book I’ve read since, I usually stop on the last chapter. Weird, I know.” (Profile 103)

Tagline

While a majority of the questions before the final free-write section are multiple choice, the tagline is a required component of the profile that is viewed at the top by anyone who reads the profile. A minimum of two characters is required, but there is no maximum. This tagline was designed as an attention grabber to attract other Match.com users to view your profile. Taglines varied widely across my sample. Some men used a quote made by someone else, some made jokes, some described themselves, and others simply used their names.

“Hi” (Profile 107)

“Hey! Mr. Right here, I heard you were looking for me?”
(Profile 241)

“The world you desire can be won, it exists, it is real, it is possible, it is yours--Ayn Rand from Atlas Shrugged “(Profile 255)

“Farm Boy checking this out” (Profile 109)

“UMKC Graduate seeking intellectual individual that shares the same drive for life” (Profile 128)

Variables of Interest Based on Previous Literature

Amount of Information

The amount of information posted in the “About Me” paragraphs written by my sample varied widely. The minimum required length of the “About Me” paragraph on Match.com is 200 characters, which is little more than a tweet on Twitter.com, and there is no maximum limit on the amount of

disclosure in this free-write section. The lowest discloser in my sample only wrote two sentences about himself, while the highest discloser wrote 42 sentences. Average disclosures in the “About Me” paragraphs were definitely on the low side. Forty-five men wrote fewer than ten sentences, and only 15 wrote more than ten sentences in their “About Me” paragraphs.

Attention to Detail

I considered good spelling and grammar as a measure of the amount of attention my matches paid to their profile when they were writing their “About Me” paragraphs. Overall, the spelling and grammar in the “About Me” paragraphs from my sample was fairly high quality. Just under one quarter of my sample, 13 men, had spelling/grammar errors, and most of those errors were minor, encompassing things such as missed apostrophes in contractions, marginal misspellings (“raedy” instead of “ready”), or uncapitalized proper nouns. Despite the relatively low incidence of horrible spelling/grammar mistakes, there were 2 paragraphs in particular that are great examples of what I consider a lack of attention to detail.

“i like those tht like me as well and i like to make her laugh or cry with joy not sadness thts not my thing to do to ppl cause i dnt like seeing girls cry its just hurting i think and if i can find someway to help i will try” (Profile 261)

“hi whats up look im not looking for no haters so if that what u on pice out. i like to tack me girl out,have fun,do whatever she wants to do, so if thats u and u know what your looking for. get at me and we can see what up.” (Profile 258)

While there are several thoughts going on, there is not a single punctuation in the entirety of the first paragraph. Notice the use of abbreviations such as “ppl” instead of using the word “people” or “tht” instead of using the word “that.” It is clear that the men who wrote these paragraphs did not do a lot of editing or take care when compiling their thoughts in these “About Me” paragraphs.

Descriptions of Current State or Status

Physical Descriptions

Because a large portion of the research about online dating focuses on the level of attractiveness of profile pictures, I was curious to find out whether or not men talked about their physical appearance in their “About Me” paragraphs. One of the first questions when you set up a profile on Match.com is a drop-box question about body type. Based on the inclusion of this question, the importance placed on profile pictures, and the responses from my sample, it is clear that these particular men do not talk about their physical appearance in the free-write section of their profile. Only 4 of the men mentioned their physical looks. Two of these descriptions were brief and generic, with one man calling himself “fit” and the other saying he was “athletic.” Profile 246 was the exception, giving a specific description of his appearance:

“I’m 5’8 athletic/toned/stocky, tan dark brown hair hazel eyes and they sometimes change colors on their own to like a grey or a blue. Kind of depends on what I’m wearing.” (Profile 246)

Interestingly, portions of the wording in this description were taken verbatim from the questions asked at the beginning of the profile. Athletic/toned and stocky are possible responses to the closed ended question about body type.

Positive Descriptions

Thirty-four of my matches (nearly 57 percent of my sample) used at least one positive adjective to describe themselves in their “About Me” paragraphs. The words used the most included Kind/Caring (used by 2 men), Nice (used by 3 men), Honest (3), Hard-Working (8), Laid back/Easy-Going (14), and Fun/Funny (19). Overall, most of the men who used these types of positive descriptions only used one or two of these words and talked about other things in their “About Me” paragraph. The ones that used several of these descriptors did so in one sentence, and except for Profile 251, these other three men had their descriptors at the very beginning of their “About Me” paragraphs before bringing up a new topic.

“I am a funny, caring, honest, and hard-working guy.” (Profile 248)

“I’m an easy going, laid back guy who works hard but loves to have fun.” (Profile 105)

“Well just an easy going caring guy that will be there for you when you need me.” (Profile 116)

“A few words that would describe me are outgoing, laid back, down to earth, fun, hardworking, loyal, talkative, honest.” (Profile 251)

Negative Characterizations

Six of my matches (ten percent) described some of their negative characteristics in their “About Me” paragraphs. Five of those men indicated that they were at times shy, quiet, or reserved and that they felt that this could give off the wrong impression about them to others who are meeting them for the first time. Three of these 6 men admitted to having bad habits like being too competitive. As these negative descriptions played out in the “About Me” paragraph, they were often followed up by a sentence or two explaining why that characteristic is not such a bad thing or that the writer was working to fix it.

“I’m shy at first and it often gives people the wrong idea about me. I used to not like that I was shy but now I believe the world needs more shy people. I think shy people are just too considerate of other people and if everyone was like that there would be a lot less people yelling at cashiers in grocery stores.” (Profile 104)

“I’m very open minded and always looking to experience new things, though I may not be the best initiator of doing so... I’m looking for someone to draw me out, various events in my life have made me somewhat shy and hesitant to venture out, but now the willingness and desire has arrived!” (Profile 244).

Aspirations and Future Goals

The variable of aspirations and future goals may be the antithesis of the descriptions of current state and status. Rather than focusing on how they are now, some previous literature indicates that some online daters disclose information about their future or potential selves (Yurchisin et al., 2005). About 27 percent of my sample, 16 men, included examples of a desire for personal growth or personal goals in their profiles. Only 6 men (ten percent) specifically indicated that they are trying to grow as individuals, mentioning specific personal goals to further their place in life. Nine men in this category (15 percent) mentioned that they liked to try new things. I considered this a component of the desire for personal growth, although it is nonspecific.

“I am always striving to surround myself with good people simply to learn from them and grow as an individual.” (Profile 119)

“I want to eventually get into the law enforcement field, emergency medicine is fine and all, I just want to be more proactive in my career. I haven't completely ruled out the fire service, but I do know I can't stay on strictly the ambulance for the rest of forever. Ill retire, and hopefully either teach history or something law/medical related.” (Profile 124)

“My dream (god-given I believe) is to make electronica worship music. I would love someone who is a musician (singer at the very least) who can part with me on my dream to make electronica worship music.” (Profile 250)

With regards to aspirations and future goals in relationships, two of men specifically indicated that they were interested in a long term relationship and that they wanted to start a family someday. One man specifically stated that he was not looking for anything serious. And 8 men indicated that they were looking for a woman to share with or a woman to spend time with.

“looking for a lasting friendship or more....”(Profile 259)

“I'm not looking for anything serious. I will most likely be leaving the area soon because I've been here way too long for the military.” (Profile 102)

“I’m the kind of guy that loves to have a good time such as living life to the fullest and laughing. I’m interested in somebody to share that with.” (Profile 109)

“I’m looking for a relationship that is real. Raw and passionate, honest with no abandon. I want a family. A big one. A house with a big yard for lots of big puppies. Simplicity is key, but refinement is a must...” (Profile 124)

Low-Risk Discussion Topics

Forty-seven of my matches (78 percent) disclosed low-risk topics about certain aspects from their daily routines. These topics encompass everyday things like work, school, and hobbies to where you are from, or your favorite band. I consider these low-risk topics because not only are they things that are often disclosed in first time face-to-face encounters, but many of the neutral topics disclosed in the “About Me” paragraphs are attributes that may have been disclosed earlier on in the profile with the initial drop-box questions. Only 3 of my matches (five percent) posted their real name (as opposed to their profile username) and only 6 men (ten percent) posted their age in their “About Me” paragraphs.

By far the biggest proportion of low-risk disclosure was about hobbies/activities and work. Thirty-three men (55 percent of my sample) posted information about what they like to do in their free time in their “About Me” paragraphs. Recall that 36 men responded to the first optional question about what they like to do “For Fun.” An overlap of 21 men responded to both the optional “For Fun” question and posted content about their hobbies in their “About Me” paragraphs. Twelve men typed information about their hobbies in their “About Me” paragraphs and did not respond to the optional “For Fun” question. In addition to hobbies and activities, 21 men (35 percent) talked about where they worked or how they liked their job, and 8 men (13 percent) specified whether they like to go out or stay in for an evening.

“i enjoy being outdoors hunting/fishing, working on vehicles, and farming.” (Profile 243)

“When I am away from work I love traveling and listening to/ playing music. I am usually spending time with my family and friends as often as possible. A few more of my hobbies would include; anything outdoors, going to concerts, art shows, movies, exploring new places, reading, playing sports and so many more things. I try and stay active all year by playing on as many softball, volleyball and basketball leagues as I can; if I am not on a team somewhere then I am usually in a gym a few times a week.” (Profile 255)

I work at a small company in Lawrence that develops and sells research equipment and I am extremely fortunate to enjoy what I do.” (Profile 123)

A moderate number of my matches disclosed information about their living situation. Eleven men (18 percent) talked about where they were from, 14 (23 percent) mentioned where they live now, and 3 men (five percent) talked about how they just bought or moved into a new house. A similar number of men posted information about their education level, with 15 men (25 percent) mentioning what school they went to or their major in college.

“...I recently came form Texas and moved into my first house.” (Profile 257)

“I live in independence, with my two best friends. I work for a famous computer company, where I'm training for my certifications.” (Profile 108)

“I'm 24. I grew up in shawnee but I now live in Edwardsville. I've been going to school at jccc for about a year and a half now.” (Profile 114)

“So, I moved to KS for a job about 2 years ago. I'm originally from Pittsburgh, PA, and graduated from Penn State University.” (Profile 123)

Nine men (15 percent) talked about some of their favorite things. A lot of the neutral disclosures with regards to hobbies or activities were fairly general (for example “I like to listen to music”). If a specific band or type of music was mentioned, I inferred that it was a favorite even if the writer of the

profile did not specifically say “my favorite band is...” In addition to favorites, 4 men (around 7 percent) made mention of their pets.

“I am a huge dork. I love to read but I mostly read Star Wars books (please don't judge). Also I have read the Harry Potter series at least 3 times and have listened to the series once on audio book.” (Profile 111)

“An I'm half Irish half Italian an I'm a huge red sox fan” (Profile 127)

“I love my three big dogs, a lot. My job is rewarding and allows me to see things as they really are. I love my truck, but I want a Harley someday soon.” (Profile 124)

Variables of Interest Based on Pilot Sample

“Small Talk”

Nearly 72 percent (43 the 60 profiles in my sample) used certain types of non-personal disclosure and “Small Talk” in their “About Me” paragraphs. As I read through the paragraphs I analyzed, I realized that my original conception of “Small Talk” was too simplistic, and that the variable “Small Talk” could be broken down into four types: Weather, “Textual Ice-Breakers”, closing remarks, and “Chit-Chat.” First, to my surprise, 4 of my matches actually talked about the weather. The weather is a sort of cliché topic of discussion in face-to-face interactions when the interactants do not know what else to talk about.

“I'm a warm weather fanatic (comes with growing up in Arizona) who enjoys the lake, hiking and just generally being outdoors.” (Profile 105)

“I'm not such a big fan of this damn hot summer.” (Profile 125)

I also found many examples of an opening statement, or “Textual Ice-Breaker” as I am calling it, that my matches used to start the online conversation with the people who would be reading their profiles. Some of these ice-breakers begin with questions and are short and simple, while others talk about some of the difficulties that come out when describing yourself on an online dating profile. Rather than jumping right

in and disclosing important information about themselves in their “About Me” paragraphs, these men began their paragraphs with a statement similar to the types of ice-breakers that face-to-face interactants might use in their first time encounter.

“Hey what's going on? (Profile 101)

Not sure where to start...”(Profile 130)

“I admit that I’m not a writer, but here’s me in a nutshell.”
(Profile 236)

“Here is where I am supposed to describe myself so total strangers can evaluate and judge me. I believe we are the summation of our stuff, our tastes, and our knowledge.” (Profile 129)

In addition to the “Textual Ice-Breakers” at the beginning of the “About Me” paragraphs, I found many examples of closing remarks. Many of these closing statements spoke directly to the reader, and served to end the conversation and close out the online encounter. The language in these closing remarks was quite similar across the profiles. Several of the men in my sample gave the reader instructions about what to do if they were interested in meeting. Seven men (around 11 percent) told the reader “if you want to know more about me, just ask.” Five men (eight percent) made a statement about “if you’re interested, send me a message.” Along the same lines, 3 men (five percent) used the language “hit me up,” and 3 men (five percent) included a statement saying “don’t be shy.”

“If you're bored and want to grab some food or hang out, let me know. Please don't be shy, send me a message if you're interested.” (Profile 102)

“If you have any other questions or wanna get to know me just hit me up.” (Profile 238)

“I've been a member for almost 2 months now and I'm losing hope...I'm sure there's someone out there!” (Profile 246)

“There is a lot to learn about me and nothing I'm afraid to talk about. If you want to share a laugh and at least make a friend, come say hi ☺”(Profile 247)

The “Small Talk” that I did not expect to encounter was what I call “Chit-Chat.” In addition to the openers and closers, 16 of my matches spoke to the reader and candidly engaged in “Chit-Chat.” The overall feeling of this “Chit-Chat” was very casual conversation with a close friend. While this “Chit-Chat” does not necessarily disclose meaningful or personal information about the writer, it serves to bring the reader in by making it sound like the writer is speaking directly to them.

“I play a lot of video games which has always been a deep rift between men and women but for the life of me I don't understand it. There's no apparent reason why one sex would like them more than the other but I guess it's the same reason girls often play with dolls growing up and boys often get trucks and dinosaurs. Anyway, *don't worry girls; I know when to put them down.*” (Profile 104) [Emphasis added by me]

“I enjoy going out and having fun, *I guess who doesn't though.*” (Profile 125) [Emphasis added by me]

“I should warn you I am a total dork at times, so if you can't be silly, goofy, or if you just take life too seriously, click back now.” (Profile 247)

“I would like to think that I am not a very complicated person but after reflecting on what to write here I have discovered that I am a train wreck. *Damn these profiles!* Instead of sitting here and writing a really long and boring story about my life I decided to just give you a bunch of random facts about me.” (Profile 129) [Emphasis added by me]

Unanticipated Findings

There were several types of disclosure that I did not anticipate to find in the “About Me” paragraphs written by my sample. I developed my final list of variables of interest based on previous findings gleaned from surveys and interviews with online daters and pilot sample data. Some of these previous findings dealt with attitudes toward the process of online dating, and I did not expect that these

attitudes would be included as content in online profiles. Attitudes toward relationships and families, reasons and purposes for participating in online dating, and commentary on the process of deciding what to post, while addressed in previous research, are not variables that I anticipated to be posted in the “About Me” paragraphs I read.

Relationship Goals

While I included aspirations and future goals in my variables of interest, I did not anticipate that most of the mentions of this variable from my sample would be specific to relationship goals rather than personal aspirations. As discussed previously, two men specifically indicated that they were interested in forming long-term relationships and one man specifically stated that he was not interested in starting anything serious. Interestingly, 75 percent of my sample, 45 men, did not mention their own personal aspirations or goals at all, but instead mentioned the type of relationship they were interested in ending up with as a result of participating in online dating.

Most of my matches who mentioned relationship goals wrote them as a way to essentially describe their perfect woman. These responses differed from the criteria selected in the closed-ended “About My Date” section. When online daters specified their “date” earlier in the profile, the criteria was primarily based on the demographic information, and included the closed-ended check-box responses to questions about education, occupation, political views, religious beliefs, etc. Of the 45 men who talked about their relationship goals, 37 talked specifically about the girl they were interested in meeting, focusing on characteristics such as personality that were not specifically available earlier on in the profile. I considered this aspect of describing the girl they are looking for as an important part of aspirations and goals because 35 of the 37 men who described their ideal woman focused on personality traits such as having a sense of humor or being open-minded. Only 2 men specifically described the physical appearance of their ideal woman.

“I also like a gal to have some manners and to not be rude to others. She needs to have some spunk and enjoy the simple parts of life. I want a woman who understands who she is and is ok with that” (Profile 110)

“I'd really like to meet a fun good looking girl to do things with and who share the same interests. And the girl I'm looking for definitely needs a sense of humor, to be positive, and fun to be around.” (Profile 114)

“I would like someone with a lovely spirit. Someone who has a gentle and tranquil spirit, and someone who is loving, youthful, joyful, outgoing, patient, humble, encouraging, someone who builds up, loves the Lord, and who can make me laugh.” (Profile 250)

“I am searching for someone that is strong willed and loyal at the same time. I would like to find someone that would be comfortable traveling the world, camping in a tent for weeks at a time or getting dressed up for an evening at an opera or symphony performance. Passion for music and education is also something I find very attractive. I am hoping to find someone that loves life and is able to keep an open mind towards the world. Confidence would also be another quality that I hope that I can find.” (Profile 255)

“I would prefer a woman who is tall (I am 6'4 myself). Tattoos and piercings are a plus to, i have 3 tats and 2 lip peircings with gauged ears. Want to know anything else just ask!” (Profile 235)

Family First

In conjunction to the number of men who specified that they were interested in a long term relationship or that they wanted to start a family of their own, 17 of my matches (28 percent) mentioned that their family and friends were important to them and that family comes first. This disclosure about the importance of family and friends can be taken into a broader concept as an indication that these men are nurturing, caring, loving, etc.; however, the fact that over half of my sample disclosed the importance of their family could reflect previous literature that making a life-long commitment and seeking companionship are important reasons cited for pursuing marriage (Taylor, 2010).

“I'm always there for my friends and family, and I would do anything for them.” (Profile 236)

“I have a huge heart, I love animals, kids, and look forward to being a father one day. My family and friends mean everything to me, I would do anything for them all.” (Profile 247)

“and my family and friends come first 99% of the time.....”
(Profile 259)

New to the Area/New to Online dating

In addition to the number of men who described the type of relationship they were interested in forming by using Match.com, five of my matches (8 percent) specifically mentioned that they were new to online dating or that they did not know anyone in the area. This could be placed under a broader category about why they decided to begin the process of looking for potential romantic partners online. These mentions about being new to the area aligns with previous research that suggests that many online daters feel that it is difficult to meet people in the city where they live or to meet new people in a new city (Madden & Lenhart, 2006).

“Landed in Kansas City this past summer and figured this would be a great place to meet some good people.” (Profile 126)

“So I just moved to KC. I really don't know anyone yet. So I thought this might be a good way to meet new people. I'm looking for someone to hang out with and explore the city with a possibility to become more if the connection is there.” (Profile 251)

“Just moved to the Kansas City area from Cincinnati not too long ago to be closer to my Family. Don't really know anyone yet other than the people I go to school with.” (Profile 101)

External Verification

In some cases, the men in my sample sought to verify the authenticity of what they posted in their profiles. Five men (eight percent) testified that what they were posting in their “About Me” paragraphs could be verified people who know them first-hand. This directly falls in line with Yurchisin et al.,’s (2005) assertion that in the online context, people often disclose information about themselves that can be

verified by family or friends so that the initial face-to-face encounter will not be a surprise to the person that online daters are communicating online. Mentioning that his claims about his own character could be verified by friends or family may serve as a plus to the woman who reads this man's profile and is interested in potentially meeting him face-to-face.

“My friends might describe me as a young man that knows what he wants and goes for it. You only live once.” (Profile 118)

“Friends would describe me as respectful, athletic, funny, intelligent, and a gentleman.” (Profile 119)

Commenting on the Process

One surprising finding involves my matches' comments on the difficulties associated with the online performance of self. Previous literature suggests that online daters have a unique opportunity to edit and refine their online disclosures (Fiore et al., 2008; Ellison et al., 2006). Based on what my matches posted, it is evident that these online daters did put a lot of effort into deciding what information to post in their “About Me” paragraphs. Not only was the level of attention to detail fairly high among my matches, but 8 (13 percent) described the difficulty they felt in deciding what to post.

“Hmmm...this is the difficult part.” (Profile 241)

“Im not sold on talking about myself cuz it seems i ll sound like everyone else but ill try.” (Profile 256)

“What with being a journalism major, one might think this would be easy, but it is proving not to be. I'll give it the old college try though.” (Profile 245)

“I struggle trying to talk about myself on these things.” (Profile 247)

These statements, all given at the beginning of the “About Me” paragraph, show that my matches put a lot of thought into what they wanted to post, and suggest that it may be difficult to blindly post something

without the nonverbal cues available in face-to-face encounters. Editing and proofreading are an integral part of using text to form a first impression, and my matches did not seem to take the task lightly. What's more, the writer of profile 120 decided not to disclose too much information in his "About Me" paragraph for fear of not having anything to talk about in an eventual face-to-face encounter. This is the entirety of his paragraph.

"I am a pretty modest person when it comes to talking about myself, so this might be short. Also, I don't want to say too much and then have nothing to talk about later.
With that being said, I am awesome.

-fin-" (Profile 120)

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate how male Match.com users engage in the performance of self in with the textual content of the free-write sections of their online dating profiles. I analyzed 60 profiles posted by male online daters from the Kanas City metropolitan area. The sociodemographic characteristics of the men in this sample resemble those found in previous literature about online dating participation--higher education level, occupation, and urban/suburban living environment. Despite the small sample size, there are some important findings from this study that may help social scientists understand how the online and face-to-face dating are not contradictory experiences, but are rather similar encounters that take place in different spaces.

This study challenges Goffman's application of the performance of self solely to our face-to-face encounters. As findings show, certain aspects of face-to-face dating can be reproduced in online textual exchanges such as those found in the free-write sections of Match.com profiles. The men in this study provide online examples of dating interactions often found in first-time face-to-face dates. Despite previous assertions that online daters are able to avoid "Superficial Banter," the men in this study include "Small Talk" and low-risk exchanges similar to those used in first-time face-to face encounters. By utilizing Goffman's ideas about the performance of self to understand our online encounters, we as social scientists can better understand our social interactions regardless of whether they take place in physical or virtual space. This brings our old understandings of social interactions into the 21st century.

Major Findings

While I limited my sample to men under age 30 to gain insight into the online dating behaviors of this target age group, the sociodemographic characteristics of the men in my sample fell in line with previous literature about who is likely to participate in online dating (Lenhart et al., 2010; Sautter, 2010; Madden & Lenhart, 2006). After comparing the responses to the closed-ended questions at the beginning

of their Match.com profiles, it is clear that the men in my sample tended to be highly educated, employed or in school, religious to some degree, politically neutral, and interested in having children at some point in their adult lives. The sociodemographic implications of using the internet to search for a potential romantic partner are noteworthy. Online daters who are less educated, less religious, or unemployed for example may be less likely to participate in online dating, however, if they did, it is possible that their disclosures may be different from those who are more educated, religious, or employed.

Demographic Findings

Eighteen percent of 18-29 year olds have admitted visiting online dating sites (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). The men in my final sample ranged in age from 20-27, however 38 out of 60 men (63 percent) were in the 25-27 age range. This noteworthy age trend has several important implications. The skew toward older men could be a representation of the computer generated search program used by Match.com. None of the men I was “matched” with fit my criteria 100 percent, in part because Match.com combined the criteria I specified with the criteria that male online daters specified about who they would like to be matched with. Combining the criteria of so many potential matches makes it difficult for online daters to have complete control over the other Match.com users with which they are matched. This age trend could also be an indication that men over 25 are more likely participate in online dating than men in their early 20’s. Because I did not have access to specific statistics about the average age of Match.com users, I can only speculate about the weight of this second possibility.

Numerous researchers have found that online daters tend to be highly educated, employed, and tend to live in urban or suburban environments (Sautter et al., 2010; Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Histch et al., 2005). The education level, occupations, and living environments of the men in my sample mirrored this previous literature about online daters. This finding reinforces to the assertion that certain types of people are more likely than others to participate in online dating. Having at least some college, living in an urban or suburban environment like Kansas City Missouri or Olathe Kansas, and having a job are indications that most of the men in my sample have had at least some exposure to computers.

One of the most noteworthy sociodemographic findings has to do with religious beliefs and childbearing. A majority of the men in my sample indicated that they were religious to some degree. Of the 40 men (nearly 67 percent of my total sample) who answered the closed-ended question about faith, 28 (40 percent of this group) indicated that they subscribed to some incarnation of Christianity. Further, 92 percent of the men in my sample, 55 men, indicated that they “Definitely” wanted children or that they wanted children “Someday.” With all of this in mind, it is possible that age, religiosity and attitudes toward childbearing are related.

Anticipated Findings

Based on the pre-determined categories of disclosure I developed from previous research about online dating, it is clear that many important components of CMC are utilized in the context of the “About Me” paragraphs I analyzed. However, while these findings do support some previous conclusions, they do not completely reinforce previous literature in several respects. Despite the claim that online daters tend to disclose more information in a first-time online encounter than do traditional daters in their first-time face-to-face encounters (Merkle & Richardson, 2000; Suler, 2004), there was a wide range in the level of disclosure in the paragraphs I analyzed. The least prolific self-discloser (Profile 261) wrote two sentences, while the most prolific (Profile 250) wrote 42 sentences, and only 15 men (25 percent of my sample) wrote more than ten sentences in their “About Me” paragraphs. This indicates that having the opportunity to get to “know” someone online with text as the only means of interaction does not necessarily equate to longer “About Me” paragraphs or more disclosure.

Despite the relatively short “About Me” paragraphs, a vast majority of the men in my sample displayed close attention to detail in what they posted. Only two of the paragraphs showed more than a few major spelling and grammatical errors indicating that little or no editing took place before these particular paragraphs were posted. Most of the spelling and grammatical errors that I did find were minor and included things like typing “raedy” instead of “ready,” errors that could be common to anyone who typed too fast or missed a few keystrokes. Ellison et al.’s (2006) claim that online daters tend to develop rules for analyzing the online profiles of others while applying the same rules to what they post on their

own profiles seems to hold some weight. While two thirds of the paragraphs in my sample were fewer than ten sentences, those sentences tended to be written carefully.

As far as the types of information disclosed in the “About Me” paragraphs, if the information was asked in the closed-ended check-box format at the beginning of the profile, generally it was not disclosed in the free-write section at the end of the profile. With the exception of Profile 246, none of the men in my sample disclosed information about their physical appearance (a question asked in a check-box format), except to briefly say that they were “fit” or “athletic.” Only three men disclosed their actual names in their “About Me” paragraphs (as opposed to their profile user names) and only six men disclosed their age in their free-write section. This is an indication that the men in this sample wanted to disclose new information that was not already available to the other online daters who viewed their profile, and that the “About Me” paragraph was a place to disclose information other than demographics in order to avoid repeating themselves.

Slightly more than two thirds of the men in my sample referred to low-risk topics often discussed in first-time face-to-face encounters. This finding is critical to my theoretical argument that Goffman’s ideas about the performance of self are applicable to our online interactions. Exposing things like where they work, their living situation, or their favorite things, while it does tell potential romantic partners about the person, does little to disclose important information about their character or personality. Most of these low-risk topics revolve around hobbies/activities and free-time or work/job situations. There were also several instances of “Small Talk” often found in first-time face-to-face encounters. Four men actually referenced about the weather in their “About Me” paragraphs. All of these low-risk discussion points offer individuals who are meeting for the first time an opportunity to have a conversation without disclosing higher risk information such as insecurities, goals, or aspirations. Disclosing these low-risk topics could lessen the fear of judgment online daters may feel from the potential romantic partners that may be reading their profiles.

A majority of the disclosures in the paragraphs I analyzed were written about the current state or status of the writer, including the low-risk topics discussed above. Some previous literature about online

dating posits that online daters often disclose information about their future or potential selves, their goals and aspirations (Yurchisin et al., 2005). Slightly less than one quarter of the men in my sample included aspirations for personal growth or personal goals in their “About Me” paragraphs. This desire was expressed as a willingness to try new things or to grow as a person. Several men also gave specific personal goals like “to make electronica worship music” (Profile 250), or to “get into the law enforcement field” (Profile 124). While this discussion of future or potential selves did occur among some of the men in my sample, three quarters of the men in my sample did not include this component in their “About Me” paragraphs. The opportunity to discuss and explore potential and future selves does not appear to be a widely held goal among the men in this sample.

Rather than writing out their own personal goals and aspirations, most of the men in my sample discussed the type of relationship they were looking for or the type of woman they were seeking to meet on Match.com. These discussions ranged from “I’m not looking for anything serious” (Profile 102) to “Im looking for a relationship that is...Raw and passionate, honest with no abandon...”(Profile 124). The most interesting component of the relationship goals disclosed by my sample was the tendency to discuss the ideal woman with which they would like to be matched. More than half of my sample specifically reflected on the girl they were interested in meeting on Match.com, describing her personality or her willingness to share in certain aspects of relationship life.

Rather than stating that they were interested in a long term relationship, 37 men specifically described their ideal match. This supports previous research suggesting that online dating gives daters access to a wider pool of potential romantic partners and the ability to “weed out” those people who they know they are not interested in dating (Taylor, 2010). By specifically describing the type of person with which they would like to be matched, the men in my sample were able to avoid the extra legwork reading through and discarding the profiles of women who did not fit their specific criteria.

Unanticipated Findings

Some of the content in the “About Me” paragraphs I analyzed that yielded unanticipated findings. A portion of these findings were discussed in previous literature from surveys and interviews with online daters but were not expected to be posted as textual content in online dating profiles. For example, Madden & Lenhart (2006) suggest that many online daters find it difficult to meet potential romantic partners in traditional ways either because of busy lifestyles or because of a lack of opportunities in new cities. While this aspect of online dating is discussed in previous literature, I did not expect such a blatant narration of these practical aspects of online dating to be posted in the “About Me” paragraphs. Five of my matches made specific mentions of being new to the Kansas City area and of utilizing Match.com as a way to meet new people. This indicates that online dating may be an important tool in the search for potential romantic partners when it is difficult to meet people through traditional face-to-face avenues.

Additionally, just over one quarter of the men in my sample posted in their “About Me” paragraphs that their families were very important to them. Not only the families they come from, but the families that they wish to have in the future. Seventeen men made some indication in their “About Me” paragraphs that their families are important to them and that they come first, saying things like “My family and friends mean everything to me...” (Profile 247). Wordings like this point to the importance of the families in which these online daters were raised. Seventy-five percent of the men in my sample mentioned the type of relationship they were interested in potentially forming with other Match.com users, and only one man indicated that he was *not* interested in forming a long-term relationship.

This finding works in conjunction with a number of men who indicated that they were interested in beginning long-term relationships. Even without specifically stating that they are interested in long term relationships, men who indicate that their families are so important imply that they value all that comes with having a close-knit family. This could also be linked to the large number of men who indicated that they were interested in having children at some point in their adult lives. Based on the trend of not reiterating information in the free-write section that was asked in the closed-ended format, checking the option that they “Definitely” want kids, or that they want kids “Someday,” implies that

family is an important asset to a majority of these men regardless of whether or not they explicitly wrote it in their own words.

One finding that I was surprised to find was a search for external verification of what the men in my sample posted in their “About Me” paragraphs. Yurchisin et al. (2005) suggests that online daters tend to disclose information about themselves in their profiles that can be verified by close friends or family members so that the eventual face-to-face encounter with their potential romantic partners does not come as a surprise. This information was gleaned from interviews with online daters, and again, I did not expect to find it typed as content in the “About Me” paragraphs I analyzed. Five men in my sample used phrases like “my friends would describe me as...” as a way to substantiate their descriptions of themselves by including people who know them first-hand. This is a way for online daters to reassure potential romantic partners that they are not lying on their profiles and implies that friends are important in verifying their most significant characteristics. This process of external verification serves not only as a safeguard for the online dater who posted the information, but as a reassurance to the potential romantic partners who are undoubtedly seeking to reduce uncertainty about their matches before a potential face-to-face encounter.

While the type of analysis I used in this project did not allow me to know explicitly whether the information posted by the men in my sample is accurate, it is clear that some of these online daters thought a great deal about what they were posting. Through the external verification from others who know them first-hand, these men showed that my original conception of “Attention to Detail” may have been too simplistic. While I operationalized “Attention to Detail” as simple spelling and grammatical errors, in their own words, the men in my sample revealed the amount of effort they put into crafting their “About Me” paragraphs. Attention to detail is not limited to the scope of the paragraph itself, but rather hinges on the meaning of what is posted. By verifying the information they post, the men in my sample are showing attention to external (spelling/grammar) as well as internal (content) detail in their “About Me” paragraphs.

In addition to appearing honest to their potential romantic partners, many of the men in my sample expressed the difficulties of deciding what information to post in their “About Me” paragraphs. These meta-commentaries provide a glimpse into the difficulties of deciding which information should be posted in online dating profiles. Online dating provides a unique opportunity for daters to spend a great deal of time crafting their profiles in order to make them appealing to their potential romantic partners (Fiore et al., 2008). This opportunity to craft a well-written paragraph could make the free-write section of a Match.com profile seem daunting. Eight men (13 percent of my sample) described the difficulties they were having deciding what to post in their paragraphs. Profile 241 in particular starts out by saying, “hmmm...This is the difficult part,” which indicates that he is thinking about what is important enough to disclose in this first encounter he may have with his potential romantic partner. These types of statements affirm Fiore et al.’s (2008) assertion that the unique characteristics of CMC influence the way that online daters go about “introducing” themselves to their potential romantic partners.

Connected to the difficulties of deciding what to post in their profiles, some of the men in my sample utilized conversation starters common to face-to-face interactions as a way to break the ice and begin an interaction with their potential romantic partners. Tidwell & Walther (2002) posit that online daters are able to circumvent the “nonverbal cues and superficial banter” that often accompanies first-time face-to-face encounters. In CMC, text becomes the sole vehicle through which information is exchanged so that text must be chosen and edited carefully. Merkle & Richardson (2000) further suggest that online interactions are inverted, starting with meaningful disclosures and gradually working toward a face-to-face encounter. Despite these assertions, a large proportion of the paragraphs in my sample displayed many examples of superficial banter throughout. Almost two thirds of my sample used “Small Talk,” including discussions about the weather, “Textual Ice-Breakers” like “Hey, What’s going on?,” or closing remarks like “Don’t be shy, hit me up if you’re interested.” While CMC takes away the *need* to engage in superficial banter, 72 percent of the men in my sample included it to some degree anyway, indicating that superficial banter and “Small Talk” is not unique to face-to-face interactions.

Young Adults

Certain types of disclosures posted by the men in my sample were motivated by several significant factors related to their position in their own life course. Yurchisin et al. (2005) suggests that online dating decisions are almost always motivated by a desire for personal growth, a “triggering event,” or some combination of the two. Profile 111 describes a desire for personal growth.

“I wish I could say that I know exactly what I am looking for in a relationship, but I don't. I just keep an open mind and am looking forward to find out who is out there. I feel friendship is the key to a great relationship. So first and foremost I am looking for a friend and if something else grows out of that awesome.”
(Profile 111)

The desire for personal growth is an important feature of a young adult's transition into full-fledged adulthood. Newman & Newman (2005) propose that during our twenties, we seek a subjective sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Online dating gives young adults the opportunity to post and perform different aspects of their identities and personalities in such a way that they are able to grow, explore, and recreate the type of full-fledged adult they are striving to be. Being able to “test the identity waters” (Yurchisin et al., 2005) and try out certain aspects of their adult identities in the seemingly low-risk environment of online dating gives young adults the opportunity to try out certain aspects of their adulthood before beginning the more uncertain task of face-to-face dating.

In conjunction with their transition to full-fledged adulthood, the data shows that it is equally probable that some of the men in my sample have experienced triggering events that motivated them to participate in online dating. The five men that indicated that they were new to the Kansas City area could be describing once such event. Moving to a new city could be the trigger that motivated these men to utilize Match.com to meet new people in an unfamiliar city.

“So I just moved to KC. I really don't know anyone yet. So I thought this might be a good way to meet new people. I'm looking for someone to hang out with and explore the city with a possibility to become more if the connection is there.” (Profile 251)

What's more, participating in online dating can eliminate some of the daunting legwork of searching for romantic partners. Sites like Match.com allow users to access a wide range of individuals categorized by age, race and similar characteristics stipulated by the user and give daters the opportunity to meet new people that they may never have met within their traditional face-to-face encounters. This type of online interaction is no doubt appealing to new residents because it gives them the opportunity to meet people if they are not familiar with the traditional social scene.

A second possibility relates to changing trends in marriage and family for young adults in recent decades. Young adults today tend to delay marriage until their educational and occupational goals are met. Most of the men in my sample were 25 or older. Recent generations of young adults are attempting to "get their ducks in a row" before marrying, if they marry at all (Settersten & Ray, 2010). I originally specified that I was interested in being matched with men age 22-25, and was actually matched with an overwhelming number of men in the 25-27 age range. While the possibility exists that men in their early twenties do not want to be matched with a 25 year old like me which would take me out of their pool of potential matches, the abundance of men in their mid-to-late twenties serves as an indication that online dating participation rates are higher among the older men in the young adult category. It is possible that the men in my sample, being over 25, have completed their higher education and achieved their occupational goals. The triggering event in this case is the accomplishment of these goals and now these men are seeking to accomplish this new aspect of full-fledged adult life: meaningful relationships.

In addition to meaningful relationships being a step in the transition to out of young adulthood, childbearing may be an equally important achievement on the path to full-fledged adulthood. Fully 75 percent of the men in my sample indicated that they "Definitely" want to have children, or that they want to have children "Someday." We have all heard the adage about the "biological clock" that begins to tick as we age. While this clock has historically been reserved for women, because most of the men in my sample were closer to 30 than to 20, the biological clock may be ticking for them as well. Obtaining higher education, securing a job, being in a committed relationship, and having children (in that order) could be the selected path of these men as they transition into full-fledged adulthood.

Theoretical Implications

I suggest that Goffman's ideas about the performance of self in physical space that occur in our face-to-face encounters can be applied to our online interactions that occur in virtual space. My data supports this position. Goffman posits that we "give" and "give off" various cues to impress our definition of a particular situation upon an audience. In the "About Me" paragraph, disclosures about work, school, likes/dislikes, etc are all part of the information that online daters are trying to "give" to their potential romantic partners. After my content analysis of these "About Me" paragraphs, however, it is evident that male online daters also "give off" important cues separate from the information they are giving to their potential romantic partners. The main difference between face-to-face dating and online dating is that in our face-to-face encounters daters use their environment and other nonverbal cues to "give off" their definition of a situation, and in online dating, daters use text to achieve a similar effect.

On face-to-face first dates, rather than saying, "I'm nervous about meeting you for the first time," daters may shift their weight in their seat or avoid eye contact. Similar cues are "given off" by online daters in the text of their "About Me" paragraphs. Profile 130, for example starts out by saying "Not sure where to start..." and Profile 236 says "I admit that I'm not a writer, but here's me in a nutshell." These types of disclosure are not pertinent information that these online daters are trying to "give" to their potential romantic partners, but are rather tools that these online daters are using to "give off" the impression that they may be struggling to find a place to begin "giving" the information about themselves. The information that online daters "give off" in their "About Me" paragraphs indicate that the performance of self in dating are similar regardless of whether they take place in physical space or virtual space.

This new application of Goffman's performance of self is not limited to the "giving" and "giving off" of information among online daters. Previous research on CMC and online dating suggests that because of the lack of nonverbal cues, online interactants are forced to engage in more meaningful disclosures earlier on in their interaction than do face-to-face interactants (Tidwell & Walther, 2002); however in many cases, some of the behaviors expected in face-to-face first dates were posted in "About

Me” paragraphs I analyzed. Most of the men in my sample utilized some form of “Small Talk” in their paragraphs, and to my surprise, four men actually wrote about the weather, which is a cliché discussion topic when interactants are not disclosing personal or meaningful information. The dating interaction is still taking place, and the conversations seem to start in much the same way as they do in first-time face-to-face encounters.

What’s more, while face-to-face daters often have to come up with ice-breakers to get a conversation going, several men in my sample used what I have called “Textual Ice-Breakers” to begin the conversation with their potential romantic partners. Beginning an online conversation with phrases like “Hey, what’s goin on?” (Profile 101), or “Let’s see...”(Profile 244) on the surface makes little sense. If we equate these “Textual Ice-Breakers” in online dating and the ice-breakers utilized by face-to-face daters, it suggests Goffman’s performance of self is not limited to our face-to-face interactions at all. In addition to the “Textual Ice-Breakers,” several men wrote directly to whoever was reading their profile, giving them instructions about how to go about procuring a second “date,” saying things like “Don’t be shy,” or “Hit me up if you are interested in learning more about me.” All of this goes to show that the performance or the script of traditional dating is retains similar elements to online dating behaviors.

Reflections on My Online Dating Site Use Experience

By creating my own profile on Match.com to access the data for this study, I developed a unique understanding of the process of online dating. Despite the fact that I did not create my profile with the intention of actually meeting a potential romantic partner, I took the process seriously and found it to be more difficult than I anticipated. The first section of a Match.com profile asked several closed-ended questions about things like body type, interests/hobbies, and exercise habits. While I did not have to come up with the responses to these questions on my own, navigating which response was the “correct” one for me was tricky. For example, when asked my body type, I know that I am not “Slender” or “Athletic and Toned,” but should I classify myself as having a “Few Extra Pounds” or as “Curvy?” On the same token, when given a long list of activities and asked to check all that apply to me, how should I

answer that? I do not often play cards but I have always wanted to learn how to play poker. Does that mean that playing cards is an “interest” of mine, or does that label only apply to the activities I actually participate in regularly?

As a researcher, I did not craft a well-written paragraph about myself as if I were actually participating in online dating on Match.com. While I did write a paragraph about my intentions as a researcher and proofread it for the proper spelling and grammar, I was slightly removed from the process. Despite the fact that my own paragraph included my intentions as a researcher, I could not help but ask what sort of effort it would take to construct such a paragraph. How do I describe myself to the potentially thousands of other Match.com users who may access my profile? Profile 129 from my sample seemed to have the same struggles. He started out his “About Me” paragraph:

“Here is where I am supposed to describe myself so total strangers can evaluate and judge me. I believe we are the summation of our stuff, our tastes, and our knowledge.

I would like to think that I am not a very complicated person but after reflecting on what to write here I have discovered that I am a train wreck. Damn these profiles! Instead of sitting here and writing a really long and boring story about my life I decided to just give you a bunch of random facts about me.”

Because I spent such a great deal of time analyzing the “About Me” paragraphs written by the men in my sample, I was filled with questions about not only what was posted, but why it was posted. Were I not participating in online dating as a researcher, how would I go about describing myself to people that I have not met but may want to meet in the future? The process of using the free-write section of a Match.com profile to explain myself to total strangers with the intention of actually meeting one of them face-to-face seems daunting. Personal curiosity lead me to my research questions and to this type of project, but after completing this type of content analysis, I am now wondering if it is worthwhile to pursue online dating as a means to the end of a potential date. Not only is it slightly overwhelming to determine which information about myself to post on a Match.com profile, but it is also intimidating to search through lists of over 1,000 potential matches and determine which profile is the right “match” for

me. Previous research indicates that online daters have time to craft well thought-out, well written online profiles (Fiore et al., 2008); however, all of this time and effort could lend to unwanted stress that I do not think I would have to worry about if I met someone through mutual friends or at school. Personally, I like the idea of gradually getting to know someone over a period of time better than having to put all of the important information out there at first and hoping someone likes it enough to want to meet me face-to-face.

One of the most surprising things I noticed as I collected data was the extent to which free memberships on Match.com, while appealing to those who do not wish to pay \$19.99 or more per month, are actually quite useless in terms of “meeting” a potential romantic partner. As a free member, I can view my list of potential matches and their profiles, but cannot initiate contact with them or read their emails if they want to contact me. As of December 13 2011, my profile has been viewed 254 times; I have received 2 emails from other Match.com users, and 1 “wink.” I have also received 155 emails from Match.com and Chemistry.com (Match.com’s sister site) in my personal email account telling me that I have been “checked out” by other users and that I have new matches waiting for me to view their profiles. I have been inundated with profiles and potential “dates” with whom I cannot communicate unless I become a subscribing member. For the purposes of this project and for online daters who are casually looking at the types of men available, free memberships may be the route to go; however, if online daters are serious about initiating romantic relationships and arranging face-to-face encounters, they must put in the money along with their effort.

Limitations of this Study

Because my sample is small and homogeneous in many ways, it is difficult to generalize many of my findings to larger populations. Developing a representative racial/ethnic sample was problematic. When I conducted my pilot sample, I used census data to create a representative sample for the racial/ethnic makeup of the Kansas City area. However, based on the availability of my “matches,” this proved difficult simply because the vast majority of my “matches” were white even when I included

black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and East Indian men in my potential pool. One possibility could be that the minority male Match.com users do not wish to be matched with white women, which would take me out of their pool of potential matches. This may also be attributed to the assertions by previous research about the sociodemographic makeup of online daters, and could shed light on the links between race and socioeconomic status.

Additionally, because of the number of online daters in my sample, the generalizability is also limited. My sample included the profiles of 60 men simply because of the constraints of the search process on Match.com. I had over 1,000 potential matches available to view, and viewed these matches in a gallery format that generated 61 pages from which I selected one match from each page. I did this because it was a simple way to compile a sample from such a large list. While this sample helped me to examine the possibility that Goffman is applicable to online interactions, my overall findings are based on the online postings of a very specific group of men who have very specific characteristics.

Secondly, I intentionally limited my sample to men who are not married and do not have children in order to have a sample that likely has similar end goals related to their participation in online dating. Completely single men who are otherwise unattached are likely to have similar attitudes about their participation in online dating and to post different types of things in their “About Me” paragraphs. It is possible that divorced men desire different outcomes from their online dating experiences. It is possible that having children could change these men’s desires for more children with a future. The findings of this analysis can only provide clues into the online dating habits of this very specific group of male online daters.

Suggestions for Future Research

Online dating is a phenomenon in American culture that can be studied through many avenues. The scope of this research was limited to the self-presentation of male online daters aged 20-27 in the Kansas City area. Investigating the profiles of female online daters of the same age and geographical location would provide interesting insights into whether gender influences how online daters engage in

self-presentation techniques. What's more, investigating online daters in different geographical locations (i.e. urban versus rural online daters or online daters from the Midwest versus West Coast or Northeast) could also provide some noteworthy information about how different groups of individuals choose to present themselves in the online environment.

There are also several suggestions for future research that can shed some light on some of the new trends in online dating that have been observed in recent years. While the age group of 18-29-year-olds have the largest proportion of online daters within (Madden & Lenhart, 2006), older adults are partaking in CMC for relationship maintenance and initiation at increasing rates (Stephure, Boon, MaKinnon, & Deveau, 2009). These older online daters may use completely different self-presentation techniques simply because their own self-knowledge and identity is more solidified than it is in the emerging adult category. Doing a content analysis of "About Me" paragraphs written by older age cohorts and comparing them to those profiles of younger people could wield interesting findings about how the performance of self may change with age.

Furthermore, the data presented in this project came from one of the most popular online dating sites that cater to a very broad spectrum of online daters. Similar studies of dating sites catered to online daters with specific interests, religious beliefs, or circumstances may produce very different results altogether. Jdate.com is a site for Jewish daters, republicanpassions.com is a site for conservative republican singles who are interested in long-term relationships, and singleparentmeet.com is a site devoted to online daters who have children. Conducting a similar type of content analysis on dating sites geared toward specific populations could generate a completely different type of online performance.

Finally, because I only analyzed the text posted in online dating profiles and did not have any communication with online daters, there is no way for me to test the accuracy of the information posted. For the purpose of this project, I did not have to; however, while the men in my sample deemed certain types of disclosures as important to disclose in their profiles, I have no way of knowing the extent to which they may have embellished the truth or flat out lied. Interviews with the online daters in my

sample would add a new component of disclosure that would definitely add to previous literature about deception in online dating, but this is a component that I did not have the time or resources to fulfill.

Practical Implications and Conclusions

One of the biggest implications about this whole project has to do with the way that Match.com assumes fixed gender and sexual orientation. The initial questions about “who you are and who you are looking for” are quick to force first-time online daters into a box of heteronormativity. First, Match.com does not ask for biological sex, but rather asks if you are a “Man” or a “Woman,” implying that gender is more important than sex. As a woman, my only options were to indicate that I am a “Woman Looking for a Man” or a “Woman Looking for a Woman.” By choosing the option “Woman Looking for a Man,” I was matched with men who were looking for women. I did not purposefully choose a sample of heterosexual men, but rather heterosexual men were chosen for me based on how I answered this initial question. For the purposes of this study, I could not view the profiles of men and women without changing the connotations about my own sexual orientation.

Match.com boasts 21 million users worldwide and is one of the most well-known online dating services in the United States. The site’s affirmation of heteronormativity is a very important indication that Match.com does not cater to people from all walks of life. There is no option for individuals who identify as bisexual or transgendered on Match.com’s main website. While there are undoubtedly entire websites devoted to these specific cohorts of individuals, as one of the most popular online dating sites, Match.com appears to be selective in the categories of individuals who they will allow to participate in online dating.

Additionally, Match.com profiles are set up in such a way that further contact is presumed. When filling out the closed-ended questions at the beginning of the profile, if a box is left empty (for example if an online dater does not wish to discuss his income or religious affiliation on his profile), rather than displaying a phrase like “no answer” or “no response,” Match.com automatically fills the blank with the phrase “I’ll Tell You Later.” Online daters cannot choose this response, but the response is filled in for

them if they leave an answer blank. This implies that a future communication is an important step in getting to know everything about potential romantic partners. The use of this language adds to the assertion that online dating sites are primarily utilized to initiate contact among people who have not previously met (Hardey, 2004; Toma et al., 2008). By saying “I’ll Tell You Later,” even if the response is generated by Match.com, potential romantic partners could assume that further contact is necessary to get to know more about the matches in which they are interested.

The inclusion of the phrase “I’ll Tell You Later” also presumes that in order to successfully disclose additional personal information to a potential romantic partner, Match.com users must be subscribing members. Free memberships on Match.com do not allow users to initiate contact with other users. Free members can only “wink” at or “like” the profiles of other users. Free members cannot even read emails sent by other online daters until they subscribe and submit their payment information. While free memberships on Match.com are appealing to online daters who just wish to “see what’s out there,” those online daters who are more serious about forming serious relationships must subscribe and pay in order to partake in all of the services Match.com offers and make further contact with potential romantic partners.

This study contributes to the breadth of literature about online dating. By analyzing text as a mode of interaction, I have shown that Goffman’s conception of the performance of self is not limited to our face-to-face encounters. Therefore we do not need to start from scratch when analyzing online dating behaviors because similar encounters occur online. Understanding that our online interactions are similar to our face-to-face interactions, at least in the context of dating life, provides social scientists with a familiar framework with which to understand our modern interactions. This new, online application of Goffman will continue to improve our understanding of our social interactions regardless of whether they take place in physical or virtual space.

APPENDIX A

Closed-Ended Questions

Interests: [edit](#)

- Alumni connections
- Book club
- Camping
- Coffee and conversation
- Business networking
- Cooking
- Dining out
- Fishing/Hunting
- Gardening/Landscaping
- Hobbies and crafts
- Movies/Videos
- Museums and art
- Music and concerts
- Exploring new areas
- Nightclubs/Dancing
- Performing arts
- Playing cards
- Playing sports
- Political interests
- Religion/Spiritual
- Shopping/Antiques
- Travel/Sightseeing
- Video games
- Volunteering
- Watching sports
- Wine tasting

Sports and exercise: [edit](#)

- Aerobics
- Auto racing / Motorcross
- Baseball
- Basketball
- Billiards / Pool
- Bowling
- Cycling
- Football
- Golf
- Dancing
- Inline skating
- Martial arts
- Running
- Skiing
- Soccer
- Swimming
- Tennis / Racquet sports
- Walking / Hiking
- Weights / Machines
- Yoga
- Other types of exercise
- Hockey
- Volleyball

Political views: [edit](#)

- No Answer
- Ultra Conservative
- Conservative
- Middle of the Road
- Liberal
- Very Liberal
- Non-conformist
- Some other viewpoint

Sign: [edit](#)

- No Answer
- Don't display my sign
- Capricorn
- Aquarius
- Pisces
- Aries
- Taurus
- Gemini
- Cancer
- Leo
- Virgo
- Libra
- Scorpio
- Sagittarius
- I don't believe in astrology

Exercise habits: [edit](#)

- No Answer
- Never
- Exercise 1-2 times per week
- Exercise 3-4 times per week
- Exercise 5 or more times per week

[cancel](#)

Pets: [edit](#)

	I have	I like but don't have	No opinion
Birds	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Cats	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Dogs	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Exotic pets	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Fish	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Horses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

APPENDIX B

My Complete Profile

match.com

[SUBSCRIBE](#)
[Home](#)
[Search](#)
[Matches](#)
[Connections](#)
[Messages](#)
[Profile](#)
[Account](#)

Stefanie0303

[email 4](#)
[matches 8](#)

[mobile](#)
[invite friends](#)

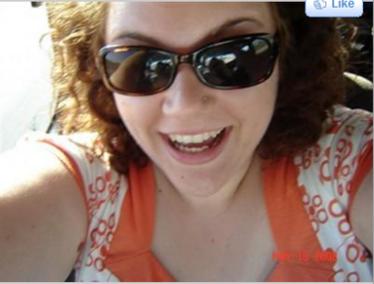
Find Love. Guaranteed. [GO](#)
KNOW WHO'S INTERESTED! - [SEE WHO VIEWED YOU](#)



Stefanie0303
Graduate Student

[+ FAVORITE HER](#)

Her Story
Photos
Our History



[Like](#)

IM me now!
25 year old woman
Kansas City, Missouri, United States
seeking men 22-25
within 50 miles of Kansas City, Missouri, United States

Relationship: Never Married
Have kids: No
Want kids: Not sure
Ethnicity: White / Caucasian
Body type: A few extra pounds
Height: 5'5" (165cms)
Faith: I'll tell you later
Smoke: Occasionally
Drink: Social Drinker

EMAIL HER

WINK FOR FREE

GET HER NUMBER

IM HER NOW

[+ See more like her](#)
[Forward her to a friend](#)

[Block from contact](#)
[Block from search](#)
[Report a concern](#)

[Browse other members' profiles to see more...](#)

[SUBSCRIBE AND SEND](#)

ABOUT HER & WHO SHE'S LOOKING FOR

[HIGHLIGHT OFF](#)

I am a graduate student at UMKC. I am writing my master's thesis about self-presentation in the context of online dating. In order to collect my thesis data, I have created this profile. It is not my intention to form a romantic relationship, which is the usual purpose of online dating sites like Match.com. My intent is to collect data for my thesis that will bring to light some of the ways in which individuals depict themselves when utilizing online dating services. I will not record any identifying information from any data file. My goal is to collect data that will later be analyzed to help me understand how online daters use the internet to describe themselves to their potential romantic partners.

[...read less](#)

Interests:	I'll tell you later
Sports and exercise:	Bowling, Walking / Hiking
Exercise habits:	Exercise 1-2 times per week
Pets:	I have Dogs
Political views:	Liberal
Sign:	Pisces
College:	University of Missouri-Kansas City, Kansas City, MO

[Reveal less](#)

ABOUT... HER HER DATE

[HIGHLIGHT OFF](#)

APPEARANCE:		
Height:	5'5" (165cms)	3'0" (91cms) to 8'11" (272cms)
Body type:	A few extra pounds	No preference
Eyes:	Hazel	No preference
Hair:	Light brown	No preference
LIFESTYLE:		
Smoke:	Occasionally	No preference
Drink:	Social Drinker	No preference
Occupation:	Student	No preference
Income:	Less Than \$25,000	No preference
Relationship:	Never Married	Never Married
Have kids:	No	No
Want kids:	Not sure	No preference
BACKGROUND/VALUES:		
Ethnicity:	White / Caucasian	White / Caucasian
Faith:	I'll tell you later	No preference
Languages:	English	No preference
Education:	Graduate degree	No preference

[Reveal less](#)

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VITA

Stefanie was born on March 3, 1986 in Kansas City, Missouri where she still lives today. She attended public schools and graduated from Winnetonka High School in 2004. Stefanie went on to earn her BA in sociology with minors in psychology and English from Baker University in 2008. After taking a year off to work, Stefanie began the master's program at UMKC in the fall of 2009. After graduation, Stefanie plans on finding a job in the professional sector and earning a living helping others.