

"Gendering" the Self in Online Dating Discourse

Melonie Fullick
York University

ABSTRACT Online dating has become an increasingly acceptable way for "singles" to meet appropriate partners. The author uses discourse analysis to explore the use of language in the construction of gendered identities in 20 online profiles, comparing the norms of gender presentation and communication with the ways in which language is used to signal various kinds of gendered "selves." Dating sites require users to develop a new literacy of self-presentation, one that reinforces and re-inscribes the tendency toward promotionism that permeates contemporary social life. In this context, how are Internet and social media users tapping into existing social and cultural resources and putting gender norms to work in their representations of self? How do online dating sites provide insight into an ongoing, reflexive process of self-promotion and self-construction?

KEYWORDS Discourse; Gender; Mediated; Internet; Sexuality

RÉSUMÉ Les services de rencontre en ligne sont devenus un moyen de plus en plus acceptable pour les célibataires de chercher des partenaires convenables. Dans cet article, l'auteure a recours à l'analyse du discours afin d'explorer, dans vingt profils en ligne, l'utilisation du langage pour la construction d'une identité sexuée. L'auteure compare les normes de présentation et de communication de genre avec la manière dont le langage est utilisé pour afficher diverses sortes de soi sexués. Les sites de rencontre obligent les utilisateurs à développer une nouvelle présentation de soi qui renforce et réinscrit une tendance à ce type de promotion qui est si présent dans la vie sociale contemporaine. Dans ce contexte, comment les utilisateurs d'Internet et des médias sociaux utilisent-ils les ressources sociales et culturelles qui sont à leur disposition et comment incorporent-ils les normes de genre dans leurs représentations de soi? Comment d'autre part les sites de rencontre permettent-ils de mieux comprendre les processus continus et réflexifs de la promotion et de la construction de soi?

MOTS CLÉS Discours; Genre; Médiation; Internet; Sexualité

Introduction

Over the past 15 to 20 years, Internet-based dating has become a tool utilized by increasing numbers of "singles" in their search for romantic partners. Unlike the print personals of the past, which were restricted in form due to the space constraints of paper publications such as newspapers, online dating advertisements—or indeed, profiles, as they have become—are enabled by the more flexible medium of the Internet. As such, they have the capacity to support large amounts of text through

Melonie Fullick is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University, Winters College, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3. Email: melonie.a.fullick@gmail.com .

which users can construct more nuanced versions of their “presenting selves” (Goffman, 1959). Online dating sites, like many other Internet-based social media tools, operate through a mode of communication that requires users to develop a new and complex literacy. This literacy of self-presentation reinforces and re-inscribes the tendency toward promotionalism that permeates contemporary economic, cultural, and social life.

This article explores the ways in which one facet of our (romantically marketable) selves, gender identity, is both demonstrated and reflexively constructed within the particular textual arena of online dating profiles. Gender identity is a central aspect of the way we present ourselves to others and is particularly important to online dating, given the nature of this as a gendered and mediated activity wherein forms of discourse both address and assume the existence of audiences and their cultural competencies. Given the nature of this communicative context, how is it that users of the Internet and social media are tapping into existing social and cultural resources and putting gender norms to work in their representations of self? How is gendered (promotional) representation tied to consumerism/consumption, and how does this in turn reflect affiliations and identifications of culture, class, place, and age? How does the example of online dating provide insight into this process of self-promotion and self-construction?

I approach these questions through a discourse analysis of 20 dating profiles taken from a popular website, Nerve.com. I use gender theory and discourse analysis to show how identity is being constructed and projected as gendered in various ways by these individuals, looking to earlier studies of print and online dating advertisements, in particular Jagger (1998) and Coupland (1996), as a starting point for my analysis. I argue that due to long-term shifts in the way we signal our identities or identifications, and to changes in the format of the advertisements (from print to Internet “profiles”), gender identity is “indexed” primarily through references to other, lifestyle-affiliated categories as well as through more direct discursive cues. Examples discussed in my analysis include descriptions of one’s self and of one’s desired partner; signification of lifestyle through references to activities and practices, consumer items (such as food, technology), and culture (books, music, films); and implicating the state of one’s body through references to physical activity and appearance.

Theoretical outline and context

Dating and the Internet

Online dating sites are Internet tools designed to facilitate “connections” between users who are seeking romantic and/or sexual partners. Some popular examples include eHarmony, Plenty of Fish, Match.com, and Lavalife. Online dating profiles are a useful object of analysis for a number of reasons. Their use has become increasingly popular, especially among younger Internet users, as indicated by the plethora of specific or niche sites that have sprung up (Whitty, 2007b). There is much less stigma attached to online dating than in the past, and this is a kind of self-perpetuating phenomenon in that the more acceptable the practice becomes, the more people participate—creating a “critical mass.” Paap and Raybeck (2005) argue that an increase in the pace of our (Western, industrialized) lifestyle has helped to decrease the stigma

attached to advertising oneself to strangers either in print or online. In a 2001 study by Brym and Lenton (2001), the researchers found that "1.1 to 1.2 million Canadians [had] already visited an online dating site" (p. 3), and that the "market" showed potential for expansion to over 2 million. By 2010, Canadians were among the most active users of dating sites worldwide (Oliveira, 2010).

The search for a mate has in recent times become "more and more complicated ... [In]creasing geographic and occupational mobility has meant access to fewer stable interpersonal networks," including decreasing affiliations with religious institutions (Paap & Raybeck, 2005, pp. 4–5). The number of single people has also increased, in the U.K. and in the United States as well as in Canada, expanding the "market" for online dating services (Brym & Lenton, 2001; Hardey, 2004; Jagger, 1998; Shalom, 1997). Yet "single people are more mobile due to the demands of the job market, so it is more difficult for them to meet people for dating" (Brym & Lenton, 2001, p. 3). This is perhaps why, on the Nerve site, two of the categories from which users could select were "willing to relocate" and "travels to."

It is possible that online dating, and self-advertising for romance in general, could be "a 'natural' response to a particular configuration of societally-imposed, modern life circumstances—time-pressured, work-centred, mass-mediated" (Coupland, 1996, p. 190). Brym and Lenton (2001) found that "career and time pressures are increasing, so people are looking for more efficient ways of meeting others for intimate relationships" (p. 3). As a group, online daters were not—in any study—found to be any less socially astute, or indeed less eligible, than non-users; on the contrary, "in Canada, Internet users are younger, better educated, more likely to be employed in the paid labour force, and more likely to earn [a] higher income than Canadians in general" (p. 3). Their reasons for using dating sites include increasing their options and meeting more people with similar interests (Whitty, 2007b); finding partners for long-term relationships or casual sex; convenience (working around difficult schedules or busy lives); and as a more palatable substitute for the "usual" ways of meeting people, such as bars (Whitty & Carr, 2006). However, whether or not online dating, with its promise of expanded "choice" of partners, actually yields more positive results than "traditional" practices is debatable (Wu & Chiou, 2009).

Facilitated by the medium of the Internet, dating advertisements have undergone a significant change during approximately the last 15 to 20 years. They now feature much more text and usually a photo. Lists of "check the box" questions can do away with the need for explicit categorizations such as "S[ingle] W[hite] F[emale]." This complicates the process of constructing a (gendered) image for the dating marketplace, since users can no longer rely on signalling broadly using a relatively simple code. Instead, they are more likely to be tailoring their profiles to specific audiences.

A new kind of literacy is required to "sell" the self in this environment, because online dating profiles are complex texts that require "unique [communicative] skills and strategies" (Whitty, 2007a, p. 57). Users must employ not only their specific knowledge of the Internet as a medium, but also their skills at constructing an appropriate self-presentation through textual and visual cues. Given that there is a higher degree of possible control over "impression management" in online communication, it seems

unsurprising that people “are very strategic in the ways they present themselves online” and that they “are very aware of the need to construct a profile that not only attracts others, but will also attract their ‘ideal’ romantic partner” (Whitty, 2007a, p. 58; Whitty, 2007b, pp. 7–8).

In developing a working knowledge of the genre, users of online dating sites reference familiar rhetorical strategies from promotional forms such as advertising, public relations, and even job ads (e.g., Horning, 2007; Vitzthum, 2007). They also draw on other people’s profiles as available resources that provide models for appropriate style and content (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & Brown McCabe, 2005). Although the “anonymity” of the Internet presents more potential for deception and misrepresentation, one’s online façade cannot be too far distant from the identity presented in “real life,” because there is always the possibility of meeting another user in person and being “found out,” then rejected (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Whitty, 2007a).

Some dating sites are now being subsumed under—or are perhaps merely cross-pollinating with—the category of “social networking” sites, where the goal is to make broader social and professional connections rather than to meet romantic partners exclusively (Horning, 2007, p. 71). This transformation is unsurprising given the popularity of sites such as Facebook and MySpace, with their incorporation of multimedia elements (photo albums, blogs, videos) and running “updates” from online friends added to a visible personal network. With online dating, “the trend is to bundle more services into the sites” and to increase site interactivity and “community” with features such as recommendations and ratings from other site members, as well as sound, photos, and videos (Vitzthum, 2007, p. 88; Whitty, 2007a, p. 61). Nerve’s latest incarnation reflects this shift, incorporating the popular feature of status updates.

Gender, identity, and consumption

Dating profiles give us a view of identity construction and presentation in a context of self-promotion and self-revelation. For the purposes of this analysis, identity is not viewed as a monolithic category, something static that is developed and reaches a fixed, recognizable point of “completeness.” Schouten (1991; cited in Yurchisin et al., 2005, p. 736) defines identity as “the cognitive and affective understanding of who and what we are.” This sense of self, of being, changes and develops over time, in a reflexive process that is influenced by the person’s social and cultural surrounds. Internet communication as social interaction becomes a part of users’ identity-building practices, and as Internet use and access becomes more widespread, these practices of mediation and negotiation are recognized as playing an increasingly important role in our social and psychological lives (Turkle, 1995).

Gendered variations on the theme of identity have been signalled in different ways as their cultural and economic contexts have shifted over time. Giddens (1991) “identifies the late modern potential for consumers to buy a lifestyle, by making consumer decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat” (cited in Coupland, 1996, p. 188). Giddens argues that this represents one of the ways in which the ethos of the marketplace has permeated and penetrated into our everyday, intimate lives. Thus, the “sources of identity and a sense of the self are derived less from work and production than from consumption and leisure” (Jagger, 1998, p. 798). Gender is an

aspect of this self that is also articulated through the selection of specific lifestyle markers and consumer choices (Vitzthum, 2007).

Consumption, in turn, "is driven by desire, and this desire is overwhelmingly gendered. Fashion, cosmetics, vehicles, homes, furnishings, gardens, food, leisure activities—all are extensions of the self" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 29). An example of this kind of referencing would be the proportion of categories provided by Nerve's profile form that are concerned with forms of consumption, from food to entertainment to clothing (see Appendix). A dating profile also styles its creator as a "product," while showing what kind of "product" s/he is seeking (or what kind of subject/object s/he desires) in return. Thus while users are marketing themselves, a part of this promotionalism involves signalling what one chooses to consume, which in turn makes one worth consuming (as a "product"). In this kind of environment, it would seem unsurprising to find people objectifying potential partners as accessories, items to match to a chosen lifestyle.

"Performative" approaches to gender are based on the assumption that "gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do" (West & Zimmerman, quoted in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 10). Gender must be "performed" repeatedly and consistently over time, and this "stylization of the body" includes language and other forms of communicative practice (Butler, 1990). Those individuals whom we recognize and acknowledge as "women" and "men" present themselves convincingly as such not only through the use of markers like clothing and jewellery, hair and makeup, but also through language, voice modulation and tone, gesture, and overall communicative style. This kind of referencing can be effected through textual practice, by generating inferences about one's physical presentation as well as by making direct statements about it, and by employing communicative strategies that are likely to be recognized as gendered in particular ways.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) describe traditional, binary gender stereotypes for masculinity and femininity in terms of the ideally gendered heterosexual couple: physically, the man is usually taller and darker; the woman is shorter in stature and smaller, often lighter in complexion. This reflects how "women and men are required to complement each other—to be 'opposite' rather than merely 'different,'" an assumption that reflects and reinforces the binary perspective (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 49). In her content analysis of print dating advertisements, Jagger (1998) codes a number of personality traits as "masculine" (p. 801): intelligence, assertiveness, strength of character, and those characteristics associated with being ambitious and hard-working. "Feminine" traits include empathy; coquetry; passivity; the appearance of being nurturing, intuitive, and talkative; and related correlates. It is useful also to note that "Feminine" qualities such as weakness and dependency are frequently eroticized" (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 49), whether they are possessed by women or by men.

Despite the representation of particular stereotypes, there are many available "versions" of heterosexual masculinity and femininity, and indeed "the general range of possibilities in terms of what it means to be a 'man' or 'woman' in postmodern consumer society has possibly been extended or enlarged" (Jagger, 1998, p. 811). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) discuss the ways in which acceptable masculinity has

changed over time, arguing that “physical power” has become less potent than “technical power” (pp. 47–48) in the emerging global knowledge economy. The ideal of the masculine body, the gendered norms of male work, and the template for the male role in romantic relationships have all changed in ways that reflect new cultural and socio-economic trends. Jagger (1998) points to shifting definitions of “ideal” masculinity as no longer just those relating to traditional stereotypes; women also now want men who are “warm,” “sensitive,” and “loving” (p. 797), as well as being, for example, good “providers.” Though these traits are associated with stereotypical femininity, they can also be a part of “new subjectivities for men” (p. 810) as expressed in various contexts, including dating ads.

Femininities, too, have shifted somewhat as expectations of women have changed over time. Women are more or less fully integrated into the workforce in Westernized countries such as Canada (though wages and workplace experiences still differ), and they have moved into more and different areas of public and economic life. However, women are still expected to exhibit some level of “delicacy,” and “assertiveness is [still] not part of the dominant female gender script” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 49)—as most female politicians can attest. In pursuing intimate relationships, women are expected not to be too “forward” or (be seen to) give up sex too easily or to use sexualized language, because “female sexual behaviour translates as ‘loose’ and ‘unfeminine’ behaviour” (Paasonen, 2007, p. 50). Widely available cultural “scripts” for romance tend to reflect a deeply embedded heteronormativity, one that reinforces for women the notion that life is not complete without a romantic relationship (with a man) (Paasonen, 2007).

Indexing meaning in a changing genre

Because of the complexity of referencing and the variation across cultural norms and individual communicative styles, there is no way to provide “a simple straightforward mapping of linguistic form to social meaning of gender” (Ochs, 1993, p. 146). To address this difficulty, Ochs employs the concept of indexicality, wherein “to ‘index’ means to ‘point to’ something” (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 56). As such, a linguistic feature can be “associated with [a] specific social [position], and ... a speaker, in using [it] becomes associated with the positions that those linguistic features point to” (p. 56). Successful readers “become good at inference, or going beyond the information given to form a concept in their mind” (Shalom, 1997, p. 188). Communicative features also touch on multiple meanings simultaneously, which allows for complex inferencing and a great deal of potential creativity. For example, a choice of forms, features, or references is unlikely to indicate only that the person using them is “feminine”; it will reference a specific kind of femininity.

Ochs (1993) argues that “referential indexes are far fewer than non-referential indexes of social meaning, including gender” (p. 146). This means that “the relationship between language and gender is almost always indirect, mediated by something else” (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 57). For example, lifestyle indicators (work, leisure activities, and so on) are used as ways of generating inferences about gender, class, and other aspects of selfhood through assumptions made about the preferences expressed. This shows how “social meaning may be reconstituted through other social meanings” (Ochs,

1993, p. 152) and that consequently, people can “mobilize the [gendered] inferences” involved in referencing various lifestyle and consumer choices (Kitzinger, 2006, p. 176).

Past research about online dating has included both quantitative and qualitative work that addresses the theme of gender norms online. One revealing quantitative study by Hitsch, Hortaçsu, and Ariely (2005) tracked the online activity of 23,000 users on a U.S. dating site and found that they reproduced recognizably gendered patterns of selection, both in self-presentation and in the traits sought in a partner (such as height, weight, and income).

Some of the qualitative research, such as Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino (2006) and Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006), uses theories of gender and sexuality to inform hypotheses about gendered behaviour in online contexts. When users have virtually no limit on the amount of information they can provide in an ad, they can use other methods of signifying gender to supplement what is provided by basic demographic details and also by the inclusion of a photograph. Use of a photo is still highly strategic because of its status as “proof” of claims made in the profile about physical appearance; photos are important because proof of the body is important (Whitty & Carr, 2006). Images are also used to signify aspects of identity (Whitty, 2007a).

Sources and method

Nerve.com is a site based in the United States, with geographic search features and an international site readership. Founded in 1997, Nerve is not solely a dating site, but more of a content hub in the form of “a website and eMag dedicated to sex, relationships, and culture” (Empson, 2012). Because Nerve had an emphasis on content with the dating section as a subsection, it was (and is still) more likely to be attracting users who are part of the young, progressive, “hip” audience that the site seems to target for its blogs and advice columns. Although there were many other dating sites available, one reason I chose Nerve as the source for my sample was its target audience, members of which seemed likely to be more Internet-savvy than average. Another reason was that at the time these examples were collected in 2007, Nerve’s profile format allowed a degree of expressive freedom that was uncommon. The amount of free-form text that users were prompted to supply provided enough material for a substantive analysis.

Nerve’s dating section, at this point, was connected to and housed profiles for a number of different websites, including The Onion and Gawker. Nerve was “[selling] technology to publishers that let them offer online dating services to their readers” (Bort, 2012). This means there definitely was not a one-to-one correspondence between Nerve’s readers and those who used its dating site, though users had the choice of searching profiles within Nerve alone or across all connected sites.

After 2007, Nerve’s format became highly commercialized; it was taken over by FastCupid and more restrictions were placed on users’ interactions. This was meant as an incentive for users to purchase an upgraded account that provided access to more services and areas of the site. While registration and searching on the site remained free, search results for non-paying users were limited to a single page, as were views of full-size user photos. Another interesting aspect of Nerve.com was moderation of content. Users’ profile text was screened by moderators, and so were emails between recipients, wherein they were not permitted to exchange their own regular email

addresses. Eventually even messages to other users could not be sent without purchasing "credits" on the site. After the site's relaunch in late 2011, this format changed radically, eliminating the fill-out profile altogether (Tiku, 2011).

To use the site, each user had to create a profile with some minimal requirements, including the name and "headline," as well as fill in two free-form text boxes titled "About me" and "What I'm looking for in a person." Users also checked boxes describing "who" they wanted to meet (man or woman were the options provided) and for what kind of relationship ("short-term," "long-term," "friendship," etc.). Users had to identify themselves as either male or female (the form does not allow for identification as transgender or genderqueer). Other boxes included such information as body weight and height, hair length and colour, education level and occupation, as well as religion and smoking and drinking habits. I accessed the site by creating a profile and filling in only the minimum required information.

The bulk of the profile form was under the heading "My additional details" and consisted of a series of 36 different text boxes designed to allow free-form responses. Each box provided a prompt in the form of a question or phrase, such as "The best or worst lie I've ever told," "Five items I can't live without," or "How planned do you prefer a date to be?" The guiding phrases seemed designed to delimit possible responses and to "frame" the information the users provided, while providing space for an individualized answer.

Until at least 2011, Nerve allowed users to search for appropriate matches using delimiting criteria such as location, age, sex, and sex of desired partner. I restricted the search criteria so that all the profiles I chose were from individuals living in a single Canadian province, all were either men seeking women or women seeking men, and all were aged 25 to 35 years. Profiles were selected according to 1) whether they showed up in this search, 2) whether users were seeking "opposite-sex" matches only, and 3) how much text users provided (500 words minimum). The purpose of this was to delimit the scope of the data, to target the groups most likely to try to tap in to normative gender presentations, and also to make sure the profiles had enough text for an analysis.

Profiles were chosen from the first and second pages of search results, rather than through any kind of in-site "recommendations" or by deliberate selection of exemplary profiles. Throughout my analysis and discussion, profiles are referred to not by their actual user names but by codes reflecting male/female identification, sample number, and age (e.g., F10-36).

Using text from the free-form "boxes," I analyzed whether and how the profiles reflected heteronormative constructions of gender, paying close attention to lexis (word choice) and directness/indexicality. My analysis was guided by the categories suggested by Paap and Raybeck (2005) and Jagger (1998), including "representations of self and other," social and physical categories, resources (occupational, cultural, educational, economic, and various commodity resources such as valuable objects), and "masculine" or "feminine" personality attributes. I also looked for differences and similarities between users' responses by comparing how different people answered the same prompt.

The results of this study are subject to limitations, most notably the small sample size, with profiles chosen from only one website, age group, and geographic area, at one specific time. The study also focuses only on those seeking heterosexual or "opposite-sex" relationships, excluding those seeking same-sex partners (usually identifying as bisexual or homosexual). This approach does not provide generalizable conclusions.

Analysis, examples, and discussion

The results of this analysis suggest that a large amount of space for free-form text allowed indirectness of language, which was evident throughout all the profiles. Nerve's form makes references to lifestyle choices in a way that encourages users to engage in a kind of cultural inferencing. What has emerged from this analysis is the kind of schema of indirectness suggested by Ochs, in which something mentioned "translates" into (indexes) something else, which in turn generates meaning. Below I use the example of choosing "my bike" as an important item:

- Objects implicate activities: Mentioning "my bike" as important signifies "biking" as a valued activity in which the author participates.
- Activities implicate attributes: "Biking" as an interest implies physical "fitness," "activity," and "mobility/movement." So one thinks of a fit (capable) body, belonging to someone who is not constrained by physical space.
- Attributes have associations: What kinds of references signify "physical fitness" and "mobility"? Who is "fit" and "mobile," and who should be? What in turn does fitness signify (in combination with other specific references)?

Within the text presented by profile authors, stereotypically gendered traits were referenced in this indirect way, with profile authors relying heavily on the assumed cultural knowledge and interpretive competence of an imagined audience.

It is not surprising to find that Internet discourse (particularly on dating sites) is "gendered," because people have been found to re-produce gender norms even in "disembodied," online behaviour (e.g., Whitty, 2007b, p. 5). But in this sample of dating profiles, there were also signs of blurring distinctions between what is acceptably masculine or feminine, and these were anchored heavily in the lifestyle and cultural references that mediated gender signification. This could reflect evolving norms of acceptable femininity and masculinity, evidence that norms are always in flux—for example, new types of masculinity that have appeared, including the oft-cited stereotype of the "metrosexual" that has become a touchstone for commentary on contemporary gender norms, or the "herbivores" in Japan (Harlan, 2010).

As Judith Butler (1990) argues, "gender is not always constituted coherently and consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (p. 4), there is an array of gendered subjectivities articulated through the interplay of references made in texts like online dating profiles. These references can provide interesting clues to the "changing meanings constructed around the categories ... 'masculinity/femininity' in this specific historical and social context" (Jagger, 1998, p. 798).

Descriptions of self and other

On the Nerve dating site, users were first identified through a profile name that appeared next to a small picture within a list of search results. Choices about one's photograph and user name were important, since they helped to determine whether or not a profile received any "views." Clicking through to a profile revealed (small) photos on the upper left and basic information (see Appendix, numbers 1 through 26). If the viewer was interested, she could scroll down and view the responses to long-form prompts.

It seemed reasonable to expect that site users would self-describe, or identify, with traits imagined to be desirable to members of the "opposite sex" (Jagger, 1998, p. 797). Such qualities were indeed both indexed and directly referenced in the first text box, "More about me," where users often included a kind of summary of themselves by naming a set of attributes that they felt they possessed, frequently combined/contrasted with a list of attributes sought in a romantic partner. One woman described herself as

outgoing, energetic, funny, intelligent, intense, compulsively honest, a little mischievous is how friends would describe me. ... kind, bright, interesting, can cook and do and know all the neat things one is supposed to, but also, say what I mean—mean what I say, honour my word, ... am affectionate, playful, ... am more happy than not, and apparently am sexy to some people, and ... a little bashful, a little old school. (F1-33)

The qualities she desires in an "other" are somewhat different, though with some overlap; while describing herself as "affectionate, playful" and even "bashful," she seeks a partner who is "intelligent, funny, decent, passionate, lively, knows himself well, ... spiritual, noble, strong, driven, independent, tall, sextastic (to me)." A number of these attributes seem to fit especially well with those described by Jagger (1998, p. 808). "Feminine" traits represented include empathy, intuition (this profile also lists the user as being a "therapist"), and communication; "masculine" traits desired include intelligence (though this is listed in descriptions of both herself and her desired other), strength of character and principles ("noble," "decent"), and ambition ("driven").

An interesting example for comparison is this quote from a male site user who seems to be seeking a relatively modest personality, but shows no concern for projecting that trait himself:

I am looking for a [sic] energetic, funny, intelligent woman. ... If you consider yourself in possession of some or all of the aforementioned qualities, have a job and your life together (though not too much, I don't need a bitch or anything) then please feel free to consider me. Also, being considered a knockout would be a bonus, but not required. And if you think you may be a knockout but aren't sure then that's even better. I don't like people who are too full of themselves!!! (M8-27)

The tone is simultaneously demanding and self-congratulatory, such that one almost wonders if the writer is being ironic. He implies that while he desires a certain level of independence and intelligence, "too much" makes a woman "a bitch," though very

good looks (“being considered a knockout”) are acceptable—particularly if she doesn’t have too high an opinion of herself.

The qualities referenced by profile authors are not always listed in a straightforward sequence of single words. In her profile, F6-36 implies an ability to transcend traditional stereotypes about women as helpless and dependent, with the comment that “I like to pick [up] my cordless drill, and put up a shelf or two once in a while.” An example of women’s desire for alternative versions of masculinity is written by F5-35, who selects what are generally considered to be “feminine” traits in her outline of what she desires in the “other”: she is looking for “inner beauty,” for someone who is not “afraid of communication,” and for someone who will share (his) feelings. Other users stuck to a more normative “script,” including M7-36, who states: “I love slow dancing with a lady, I love romance and surprise, and I love to spoil my partner and make her feel comfortable.” He expresses his ideas about his ideal partnership by elaborating with references to normative versions of male-female romance, such as those where the man “takes care of” the woman, and he references chivalry (note use of the word “lady”).

A number of attributes were regularly referenced or implicated (as desirable) by both men and women; many users sought to associate both themselves and their ideal matches with these qualities, which included creativity, intelligence, “passion” (roughly defined as an enthusiasm for something), maturity, confidence, selflessness, honesty, morality, and a good sense of humour. User M7-36 writes that he is looking for “honesty dammit! Someone I can trust, someone I can love.... She has to have good morals and someone who is not selfish,” while F3-32 likes “spending time with people who think about the world beyond themselves.... You are a grown-up.”

Lifestyle and consumption: Food, culture, work, place

Throughout the profiles, many references are made to specific places and to travelling, restaurants, leisure time, work, and so on; these generate associations. To allude to one’s lifestyle, including habits of consumption and “pace” of life, is to reference other kinds of choices and desires and ways of seeing oneself in the social world. Occupations and work are seen to signify something important about a person’s ambitions and goals.

In the profiles sampled, users did not list their incomes or financial status, but quite a few made comments about work and almost all indicated something in the “occupation” category. Education, a category filled in almost all the profiles, could indicate income level and occupation indirectly. Job titles did not noticeably reflect gender norms, though women seemed to have chosen more communication-oriented jobs (such as “therapist,” “translator,” “comms advisor”) compared with men’s (“finance,” “entrepreneur,” “working for the man,” “robotics mfg”).

Nerve’s profile form encouraged its users to refer to objects, through prompts such as “In my bedroom you will find,” “In my refrigerator you will find,” and “The last great book I read.” A good example was that of M2-34, who listed as “Five items I can’t live without”: “My Mac / The next bottle of wine / Business cards / My passport / A dinner companion (hate eating alone!).” Within a single line, he makes references that indicate an affiliation with and reliance on particular forms of technology (a trendy laptop—others referred to their iPods); an appreciation for wine (as opposed to beer,

which may be viewed as less “classy” and also more “male”); the importance of work and international travel; and a “place” for a partner within a particular vision of urban living. Compare this with the items listed by F10-36, who in the same category included “Crockpot / Guitar / Microphone / A Man (unfortunate but true ...) / Spices.” This demonstrates a concurrence with traditional gender norms for women—not only is “a man” listed as an object among others; he is also indispensable (Paasonen, 2007).

Some of the prompts on Nerve’s form required profile authors to project an image of their “self” through imagining something ideal, such as what they would buy with a large amount of money, where they would be right now if they could choose any place/situation, or how they envision the future; users’ fantasies become signifiers of their hopes, dreams, interests, and ambitions. For example, user M5-34 references place and politics as aspects of lifestyle: “[If I was given a million dollars] I would buy land and live off the grid.” This could imply a concern for the environment, an interest in sustainability, and a preference for a rural rather than an urban lifestyle as well as a rejection of the “mainstream” values of consumerism. On the other hand, when F5-35 imagines her life “25 years from now” she sees herself “in [her] 50s. With [her] soul mate (whether be married or common law) maybe a child. Still working—hopefully still in recruiting and do[ing] an awesome job at it.” She references what is generally an acceptable life-script for contemporary Western women, envisioning a long-term partner, a child, and a fruitful career.

Body/physical aspect as signifier: In addition to the photo...

What happens to the form and features of dating discourse when the signifiers of the body that are employed in the “short ads”—like “slim,” “blonde,” and so on, are already “covered” by the use of a photograph and a series of checked boxes that refer to height, weight, and hair colour? Paap and Raybeck (2005, p. 23) argue that “while looks certainly play a role (and are also embedded in other qualities, such as ‘fitness’ or ‘healthy lifestyle’), they play a different role because they are described as a demographic aside and don’t need to be included in one’s own personal narrative.” Possibly because of this, there were few explicit references to bodies (or to sex) in the profiles I used in this analysis. This seems interesting in a context where photos may be used as an initial means of eliminating candidates from a larger pool of possible dates, but text often does the rest of the rhetorical work.

It was still clear that some users had more invested than others in describing their physical attributes; for example, M2-34 is keen to point out in the first available text box that “between dancing every weekend and hitting the gym a couple of times a week, I manage to stay in shape.” He also identifies his body type as “athletic.” But in most cases, rather than direct descriptions, site users tended to indicate the state of their bodies in other ways, using the free-form boxes and prompts as starting points. One of the primary ways in which such significations work is through users’ referencing of their bodies in different ways that did not point explicitly to a version of maleness or femaleness, but which played on associations.

A relevant text box was “Favourite item of clothing.” Many of the men in my sample did not complete this at all, and women were not particularly descriptive: “at the moment, my skinny jeans” (note the reference to body size); “bather”; “thigh-high

boots"; and—more explicitly—"my really amazing black lace bra." In spite of their brevity, these answers still seem to signify that site users are presenting their bodies in specific, gendered ways: the revelation that one wears women's underwear is a choice that would no doubt seem out of place (to many heterosexual women) on a man's profile. Pragmatics, rather than choice of object, could also reflect gendered differences—such as one interesting example in which two users (one male, one female) chose the same "favourite" item, shoes. While M8-27 picked "A good pair of shoes. Gotta have good shoes," F9-30 showed more enthusiasm with "Shoes, shoes, shoes!" The "male" version of desire for shoes sounds like a practical choice, whereas the "female" version reflects enthusiasm for clothes and/or shopping.

While one norm of femininity is that women tend to be more concerned than men with advertising their bodies (and that men are receptive to this), "idealizations of youth, beauty, slenderness and fitness are now promoted as universal consumer images of desirability" (Jagger, 1998, p. 799). Not just a slim body but a "healthy" one (fit, active, bolstered by good diet) is the ideal for everyone, men included (Featherstone, 1982). The concern for body image has been universalized such that "now we both [men and women] have magazines dedicated to what's wrong with our bodies" (Vitzthum, 2007, p. 105). There could be a connection here to the number of references to activities such as hiking, camping, bike riding, and so on, which are not necessarily considered sports but which do signal characteristics of an active body and lifestyle.

Discussing "which sports I play and watch" makes a distinction about lifestyle, fitness, health, and gender. Competitive sport is normatively gendered as masculine, and men are generally assumed to both watch and engage in more sporting activities (especially team sports) than females. For women, playing sports is more likely to be acceptable primarily as a form of exercise. In some of the profiles I analyzed, the position of references to sport and exercise in the first text box seemed to indicate its assumed importance to the profile's author: "Sports is a bit of a blank spot, though I'm working on it, unless you count following English Premier League football"; "I love playing sports and hittin the gym."

Contrary to the stereotype, some of the women indicated that they enjoyed sports as well—F2-31 states: "I'll play pretty much any sport you can throw at me I don't really watch sports unless it's live; I prefer playing them." While a number of site users did not fill out the "sports" text box, they were able to generate inferences about the body in terms of general physical healthiness (suggested by references to food and drink, smoking, alcohol, and so on).

Considering that online dating profiles are designed to attract romantic partners, there were very few explicit or direct references to sex/sexuality. When such references showed up, it was usually in categories such as the "Fill in the blank: ____ is sexy; ____ is sexier" box, as in this example from M8-27: "Walking on a beach with a lady [is sexy]; walking naked on a beach with said lady [is sexier]."

One place where sexuality was more often referenced in detail was the "Favourite on-screen sex scene" box, which invited profile authors to make a cultural reference (to a movie or TV show) that indicates something about their own sexual preferences, desires, or fantasies. However, not all those who responded did so with a specific ex-

ample. F1-33 states that she has “way too many” favourites in this category, but that in general she prefers “more of a vulnerable charge and emotional risk”; while F2-31 also avoids picking just one scene but describes an ideal that “would involve sensuality and desire.... Nothing is sexier than wanting to touch but holding back to make the desire last.” Instead of responding directly to the prompt, each of these women chose to articulate a *theoretical* version of “on-screen” sex that reflected their own preferences and desires.

Two of the women made references to same-sex desires or fantasies, one of whom (F10-36) seemed to qualify her interest even as she took the trouble to mention it: “I can’t recall because it was too late and I was too stunned ... but I’m pretty sure it involved two men. Yes, us women too have this strange fetish!” In the same profile, there were also oblique references to queer sexuality as “other” from the self, in the “best or worst lie I’ve ever told” box: “I might have told a few men I was a Lesbian when trying to avoid harassment at bars where I frequent to do karaoke. Unfortunately that just encouraged them.” This site user has an interesting strategy for constructing attractiveness to the “opposite sex”—by implying that she is so magnetic that men wouldn’t stop approaching her, even when she described herself as a “Lesbian.” Rather than acting as an appropriate repellent, the illusive/elusive shield of (female) queerness seems to lure men even more, so there is a layered, if possibly subconscious, motivation behind the use of this kind of reference.

Men’s references to sexuality were no more explicit than women’s, showing variation according to the user’s style of self-presentation. However, while women more often described or imagined ideal intimacy, men were more likely to engage in flirtatious implication, showing how “the nonverbal cues individuals typically display when they flirt can be represented online in text” (Whitty, 2007a, p. 58). In the “Favourite on-screen sex scene” box were some examples, including “I prefer to create the content” and “Come over here and I’ll tell you.”

Conclusions and further research

The Internet as a medium has provided a new arena for social interaction and thus inevitably for the development of romantic relationships. As websites have been developed to facilitate this, an apparent philosophy of “more (information) is better” has led to a flexible interface that can support images and also much more text, and thus a much more complex array of rhetorical devices. Site users are “authors” of virtual versions of themselves, assembling each as a bricolage of references to genres and cultural artifacts. A new form of literacy is required on the part of both writers and readers in order to successfully construct and interpret these texts, which are highly considered, well-“worked,” and re-worked and re-imagined over time.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods would help to build up a fuller and more nuanced picture of the ways in which gender presentations change over time, manifesting partially as shifts in discursive practice. The self-promotional, explicitly “romantic” objective of dating profiles provides a unique and useful case study of new forms, discourses, and identifications that should be a rich vein of research in the future. A content analysis of a much larger and more diverse corpus could provide insight into people’s use of personal promotionalism and even the psycholog-

ical attributes of the most successful/enthusiastic self-marketers—a relevant issue across more than one area of social life, considering the ubiquity of “entrepreneurialism.” This kind of project could be combined with existing threads of research about online lying/truth-telling and trustworthiness. Quantitative, content analytic research could also be used to inform further theoretical work on gender and identity in contemporary (romantic) life.

Dating profiles are not trivial texts; in spite of the humour employed by many profile authors, “the search [for a romantic partner] is far from playful, since it involves the very sense of the self, social acceptability, and desirability” (Paasonen, 2007, p. 45). At stake is one’s self-perception and self-worth, signified by success or failure in the romantic arena, with gender “performance” serving a key role. Dating sites in form offer users a peculiar combination of private and public, personal and promotional elements, as do many of the websites in the “social networking” genre—they invite one to present a particular kind of face to the (virtual) world, and they tend to structure the interactions they are designed to facilitate. Profile-writing and other forms of online participation are also part of a reflexive process of identity “creation” and reformation. As more people continue to use these sites as a part of their everyday practices of interacting and identifying, what will be the implications for intimate relationships?

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers who provided constructive feedback on this paper, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for generous support, and Lars Wessman for assistance with French translation.

References

- Bort, Julie. (2012, March 15). From satire to singles: Former president of The Onion is running new dating site. *Business Insider*. URL: <http://www.businessinsider.com/from-satire-to-singles-former-president-of-the-onion-is-running-a-new-dating-site-2012-3> [March 20, 2013].
- Brym, Robert J., & Lenton, Rhonda. (2001). *Love online: A report on digital dating in Canada*. A report on surveys funded by MSN.ca. URL: <http://www.nelson.com/nelson/harcourt/sociology/newsociety3e/loveonline.pdf> [January 28, 2007].
- Butler, Judith. (1990). *Gender trouble*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cameron, Deborah, & Kulick, Don. (2003). *Language and sexuality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Coupland, Justine. (1996). Dating advertisements: Discourses of the commodified self. *Discourse and Society*, 7(2), 187–207.
- Eckert, Penny, & McConnell-Ginet, Sally. (2003). *Language and gender*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellison, Nicole, Heino, Rebecca, & Gibbs, Jennifer. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11, 415–441.
- Empson, Rip. (2012, January 30). Nerve Dating re-launches to put the humanity (and humor) back in online dating. *TechCrunch*. URL: <http://techcrunch.com/2012/01/30/nerve-dating-launches-to-put-the-humanity-and-humor-back-in-online-dating/> [March 20, 2013].
- Featherstone, Mike. (1982). The body in consumer culture. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 1(2), 18–33.
- Gibbs, Jennifer, Ellison, Nicole B., & Heino, Rebecca. (2006). Self-presentation in online personals: The role of anticipated future interaction, self-disclosure, and perceived success in Internet dating. *Communication Research*, 33, 152–177.
- Goffman, Erving. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books.

- Hardey, Michael. (2004). Mediated relationships: Authenticity and the possibility of romance. *Information, Communication & Society*, 7(2), 207-222.
- Harlan, Chico. (2010, October 24). Japan's young men seek a new path. *Washington Post* [online]. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/24/AR2010102403342.html> [October 28, 2010].
- Hitsch, Günter J., Hortaçsu, Ali, & Ariely, Dan. (2005, January). *What makes you click: An empirical analysis of online dating*. University of Chicago working paper. URL: http://209.197.108.139/assa/2006/0106_0800_0502.pdf [August 20, 2012].
- Horning, Alice. (2007). Examining personal ads and job ads. In M. T. Whitty, A. J. Baker, & J. A. Inman (Eds.), *Online matchmaking* (pp. 70-80). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jagger, Elizabeth. (1998). Marketing the self, buying an other: Dating in a postmodern, consumer society. *Sociology*, 32, 795-814.
- Kitzinger, Celia. (2006). 'Speaking as a heterosexual': (How) does sexuality matter for talk-in-interaction? In D. Cameron & D. Kulick (Eds.), *The language and sexuality reader* (pp. 169-188). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ochs, Elinor. (1993). Indexing gender. In B. D. Miller (Ed.), *Sex and gender hierarchies* (pp. 146-169). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Oliveira, Michael. (2010, March 25). Canada a hotbed of online dating. *Globe and Mail*. URL: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/canada-a-hotbed-of-online-dating/article4312016/> [March 10, 2013].
- Paap, Kris, & Raybeck, Douglas. (2005). A differently gendered landscape: Gender and agency in the web-based personals. *Electronic Journal of Sociology*.
- Paasonen, Susanna. (2007). Scripting the rules for Mars and Venus: Advice literature and online dating. In M. T. Whitty, A. J. Baker, & J. A. Inman (Eds.), *Online matchmaking* (pp. 57-69). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shalom, Celia. (1997). That great supermarket of desire: Attributes of the desired other in personal advertisements. In K. Harvey & C. Shalom (Eds.), *Language and desire: Encoding sex, romance and intimacy* (pp. 186-203). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Tiku, Nitasha. (2011). Nerve personals, the original hipster dating site, relaunches after years of bad tech with a human proposition. *BetaBeat*. URL: <http://betabeat.com/2011/12/nerve-personals-hipster-dating-site-nerve-dating-relaunch-1222011/> [March 20, 2013].
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Vitzthum, Virginia. (2007). *I love you, let's meet: Adventures in online dating*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- West, Candace, & Zimmerman, Don. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society*, 1, 125-151.
- Whitty, Monica. (2007a). The art of selling one's 'self' on an online dating site: The BAR approach. In M. T. Whitty, A. J. Baker, & J. A. Inman (Eds.), *Online matchmaking* (pp. 57-69). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Whitty, Monica. (2007b). Introduction. In M. T. Whitty, A. J. Baker, & J. A. Inman (Eds.), *Online matchmaking* (pp. 1-14). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Whitty, Monica, & Carr, Adrian. (2006). *Cyberspace romance: The psychology of online relationships*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wu, Pai-Lu, & Chiou, Wen-Bin. (2009). More options lead to more searching and worse choices in finding partners for romantic relationships online: An experimental study. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 12, 315-318.
- Yurchisin, Jennifer, Watchravesringkan, Kittichai, & Brown McCabe, Deborah. (2005). Identity re-creation via Internet dating. *Social Behaviour and Personality*, 33(8), 735-750.

Appendix: Nerve.com profile form questions

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Name: | 14. Relocate: |
| 2. Subtitle: | 15. Occupation: |
| 3. Age: | 16. Education: |
| 4. Looking for: | 17. Ethnicity: |
| 5. Height: | 18. Speaks: |
| 6. Body type: | 19. Religion: |
| 7. Hair color: | 20. [Relationship] Status: |
| 8. Hair length: | 21. Have children: |
| 9. Eye color: | 22. Want children: |
| 10. Eye wear: | 23. Interests: |
| 11. Location: | 24. Cigarettes: |
| 12. Travels to: | 25. Booze: |
| 13. Hometown: | 26. Drugs: |

Free-form text boxes

27. Introduction text [Why you should get to know me]:
 28. [More about] What I'm looking for in a person:

Quirks

29. The word or phrase that best describes my personality:
 30. The best or worst lie I've ever told:
 31. Fill in the blank: _____ is sexy; _____ is sexier.
 32. My most humbling moment:
 33. The last thing that made me laugh out loud:

Ideals

34. If I could be anywhere right now:
 35. If I was given a million dollars:

Philosophies

36. Five items I can't live without:
 37. 25 years from now, I see myself:
 38. The role religion plays in my life:
 39. My personal motto or creed:

Style

40. My personal style:
 41. The celebrity I resemble most:
 42. Body art [i.e., tattoos, piercings]:
 43. Favourite item of clothing:

Space

44. In my bedroom one will find:
45. In my refrigerator one will find:
46. Pets:

Work & Living Environment

47. The pace of my life is best described as:
48. What I like—or dislike—about what I do for a living:
49. The type of family I come from:
50. The amount of fame and fortune I've achieved in my life is:

Interests

51. My favourite way to spend a weekend:
52. If I could take a class in any subject, it would be:
53. What sports do you play, and what sports do you watch?:
54. My most unusual or impressive skill:

Entertainment

55. The last great book I read:
56. In my stereo right now, you'll find:
57. 5 albums I can't live without:
58. The best movie I saw this year:
59. Movies which spend the most time in my DVD player:
60. Shows I Tivo (or would)?:
61. Favourite on-screen sex scene:

Dating

62. What are some activities that you'd enjoy on a date?:
63. How planned do you prefer a date to be?:
64. Tell us what you expect to happen on a first date:

Copyright of Canadian Journal of Communication is the property of Canadian Journal of Communication and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.