Goffman Meets Online Dating:

Exploring the ‘Virtually’ Socially Produced Self

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Self-presentation is an exercise we are constantly engaged in every day, whether we are consciously aware of it or not. While each of us are, to a certain extent, autonomous beings, capable of choosing self-presentational strategies to perform for others, our performances are strongly influenced by the presence of others and the context we find ourselves in (Goffman, 1959; Branaman & Lemert, 1997). According to Goffman (1959), it is through these self-presentational performances that our sense of self arises. Goffman is interpreted as asserting that “the self is a social product,” meaning that the self is produced through social interactions with others (Branaman & Lemert, 1997). Presently, most of this body of work encompasses explorations of face-to-face interactions (Goffman, 1959; Malone, 1997). However, as technological innovations increasingly provide us with new modes for communication and interaction it becomes necessary to evaluate the applicability of said theoretical frameworks.

The widespread availability and increasing usage of the Internet has led many researchers to examine online presentations and performances of self (Hardey, 2002; Schau & Gilly 2003; Whitty, 2007). However, a main goal in studying self-presentation has been a focus on how people engage in and enact self-presentational strategies. What has been less extensively explored is what impact others have upon the self-presentational strategies one chooses to employ. Determining how others influence one’s self-presentation can be a difficult phenomenon to study. I assert that investigations and analyses of online spaces make this phenomenon a more feasible inquiry.

I intend to apply a Goffmanian framework regarding self-presentation to a study of online interactions, specifically within the context of an online dating website. I aim to show that, like face-to-face interactions, online interactions with others influence performances of self. Additionally, the context itself and those interacting within it produce and enforce social norms and rules that further constrain individual behaviors. One’s self is produced through the use of self-presentational performances that are either publicly validated or discredited by interested parties based upon the context interaction occurs.
within (Branaman & Lemert, 1997). Feedback from others thus plays a large role in shaping one’s self. Goffman’s explication of the self is dynamic: thus, my research question is two-fold: ‘What impact do other daters have upon the way one chooses to self-present?’ and ‘How do the social norms of a particular site of interaction influence presentations of self?’

Goffman Meets Online Dating

A main goal for online daters is to find and interact with prospective dates with the intention of an eventual face-to-face meeting. Dating online, through the use of dating websites, is a means to an end; it is a means through which singles can easily meet others. Face-to-face, people manipulate “sign vehicles” that allow them to convey information about themselves to others through their conduct and appearance (Goffman, 1959). Online, many of these social cues – namely nonverbal behaviors such as posture, gestures, vocal inflections, etc. – are absent (Walther & Parks, 2002). Given the differences between face-to-face and online interaction, alternate strategies are utilized online to convey information (Walther & Parks, 2002).

While there are undoubtedly differences between face-to-face and online communication, it is not the differences that I would like to capitalize on, but their similarities. The differences in communication between the two are significant, and will be discussed in more detail later, but my aim is to show that the self is performed and constructed according to Goffman’s thesis irrespective of the medium used. That is, while the Internet provides variations in the ways in which we communicate with others, the Internet does not radically alter the conventional constraints on social interaction (Wynn & Katz, 1997). Goffman is famous for using the metaphor “all the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players” to illustrate the process of self-presentation. While this metaphor emphasizes the importance of individual autonomy in putting on a performance, it should also be made evident that the particular stage and audience contribute to and influence said performance.
The self is a social product in two senses. First, the self is a product of the performances that individuals put on in social situations (Goffman, 1959; Branaman & Lemert, 1997). One’s sense of self arises as a result of publicly validated performances; metaphorically speaking, a standing ovation as a result of good acting can be likened to the acceptance of one’s self-presentation. Secondly, even though individuals play an active role in fashioning their performances, they are generally constrained to present themselves in ways that can be socially supported within a specific social context (Goffman, 1959; Branaman & Lemert, 1997). Metaphorically speaking, it would be inappropriate for actors hired to perform Shakespeare’s “As You Like It” to, come show time, perform Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman.” Thus, one’s sense of self depends upon validation awarded and withheld in accordance with the social norms inherent in a specific context (Goffman, 1959).

Past Research on Online Self-Presentation

In recent years, many researchers have shown great interest in and have published studies focusing on how the self is produced and presented online, gathering, analyzing, and reporting on information from a variety of sources. While dating websites may share some commonalities with other online locales, online dating websites are qualitatively different from other online settings because of the anticipated face-to-face interaction inherent in this context (Ellison & Heino & Gibbs, 2006). Interacting online with the anticipation and expectation of meeting someone can be expected to influence self-presentation strategies (Gibbs et al, 2006). As Whitty (2007) notes, cyberspace is not one generic space; it is necessary to consider how different spaces are constructed online, and, subsequently, how they influence behavior.

Given the amount of media attention to and consumer popularity of online dating websites, there is a surprising lack of research to be found on this subject. This is unfortunate because analyses of online dating websites can aid in our “understanding of how people construct and negotiate virtual identities and relationships within a digital space that offers opportunities to meet people on-line and move into
relationships off-line (Hardey, 2002).” Concurring with Ellison et al (2006) that online dating websites are qualitatively different from other online spaces, Hardey (2002) further notes that they serve as an “appropriate environment in which to examine how users negotiate the tensions between the development of virtual relationships and the norms and conventions associated with the ‘interaction order’ of physical copresence (571).” Hardey (2002) uses online dating websites to illustrate how “virtual spaces may be shaped by and grounded in the social, bodily and cultural experiences of users (571).” By invoking Goffman, Hardey aims to show that our online interactions with others are structured and influenced by offline considerations. The Internet is not a space free of social norms; rather, they are adapted to suit the medium.

For many researchers, technological innovations are largely responsible for cultural shifts in perceptions regarding the self and identity. Traditional notions of the self perceived an individual as possessing a singular identity, one that remained relatively stable throughout one’s lifetime. Goffman (1959) belied this notion of the self as a unitary entity, claiming that the self is built out of multiple, loosely-integrated social roles. For Goffman, the self is what “social participants put forth as viable means of negotiating normal social life (Wynn & Katz, 1997).” The self is organized into multiple parts (identities), one for each of the social roles a person holds (Goffman, 1959; Stryker, 1980). Our identities are based upon reflexive evaluation (Mead, 1967; Solomon, 1983 as cited in Yurchisin & Watchravesringkan & McCabe, 2005); that is, our identities are shaped by the way others perceive us. As such, the self is processual, in that it is constantly and continuously shaped by others and situational norms (Goffman, 1959). Depending upon the stage we find ourselves on and the audience that is watching, different identities emerge. Presently, the conception of identity as multiple and as socially constructed is widely accepted (see symbolic interactionism); this notion is increasingly discussed and analyzed in terms of technological innovations.

Sherry Turkle has written extensively about how technology has impacted our perceptions of self and identity. In discussing the self as multiple, she draws largely upon the computer and its windows as a
metaphor for the self. Turkle (1995) notes that, when working on a computer, it is not uncommon for us to have several windows open at once. Each of these windows represents a different context that we are simultaneously “present” within (Turkle, 1995). Thus, identity can be thought of as “the sum of your distributed presence (Turkle, 1997).” “According to this metaphor, the self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings, something that people experience when, for example, a woman wakes up as a lover, makes breakfast as a mother, and drives to work as a lawyer (Turkle, 1997).” For Turkle (1997), online the self is multiple and distributed and “exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time (1096).”

Turkle’s conception of the self, while not completely inconsistent with Goffman’s, is too technologically deterministic. Turkle (1995) points to the computer, and subsequently the Internet, as being responsible for current conceptualizations of the self as multiplicitous. In doing so, Turkle fails to recognize those who came before her. Even though Goffman’s writings predate the advent of technological innovation, he conceives of the self as multiple. Because of Turkle’s over-reliance on the computer as a metaphor for the self, she juxtaposes definitions of self between Goffman’s embodied, socially produced self and a postmodern, diffused, and disembodied self (Wynn & Katz, 1997). Perhaps anticipating the concerns that the likes of researchers like Turkle would raise, Goffman (1983) referred to mediated interactions as “reduced versions of the primordial real thing (2).” Had Goffman lived to see our current “virtual culture (Jones, 1997),” he would likely disagree with Turkle by saying that even though the computer allows us to "cycle through" our different identities at the click of a mouse, we still play different roles within each window. That is, depending upon what we are doing/who we are interacting with/what site we are on, these things are going to affect our presentations of self. Playing a fictional MUD character in one window would not be acceptable in another, say, on an online dating site. We are still playing different roles in different settings; the computer allows us to play out our different identities more easily.
Turkle largely discusses identity within the virtual fantasy worlds of her ethnographic study, a place where one is not expected to construct and enact performances that are true reflections of self. In these spaces one is not expected to be oneself; cynical performances are anticipated, nay required. While Turkle’s discourse focuses on identity play within fantasy worlds, I believe her thoughts and insights on identity in the midst of technological innovation to be instructive. While the very nature of the Internet may allow for more explorations and expressions of identity, our performances are still undeniably influenced by others and the context through which we interact.

Theoretical Framework

Many researchers critique online communication because the Internet filters out certain behaviors that aid in discourse and convey meaning, such as nonverbal behaviors (Kiesler, 1986; Culnan & Markus, 1987). This claim portrays people as incapable of successful communication through technological mediums. Even so, the Internet is an inherently social space (Hardey, 2002; Walther & Parks, 2002); as such, claims that it is less social than face-to-face communication are not appropriate here. People are social creatures and have interpersonal needs that include transferring and interpreting social information, such as status affiliation and liking (Joinson, 2003). These needs remain as people shift from communicating face-to-face to communicating through the use of technology; what changes is the way information is conveyed.

While my aim is to focus on the applicability of Goffman’s theories to online interaction, it is nevertheless important to highlight significant differences in modes of communication. Integral to Goffman’s discussion of the self as a social product are those aspects of performance, called sign-vehicles, which can be manipulated in order to produce a desired self-presentation. Since many sign-vehicles available in face-to-face interaction are absent online, alternate means must be employed for self-presentational purposes. Actors use emoticons, manipulate text, choose screen names, and post pictures in attempts to self-present to others and construct the self online (Walther & Parks, 2002).
While performances are carried out by manipulating sign-vehicles both online and off, the lack of available sign-vehicles online provides a context more conducive to cynical or untruthful performances. Take photographs for example. The ways in which actors physically present themselves can be captured through a photograph, which can be thought of as a still frame of a performance that was captured and preserved. An actor exercises control over self-presentation in deciding which photos to show to potential dates. While a picture can serve as a fairly accurate visual representation of oneself, one could post old photos to purposely misrepresent one’s age.

Online presentations of self are also affected by the asynchronous nature of communication. Face-to-face, communication occurs synchronously, which means that talk is occurring at a contemporaneous and recurring rate; online communication is largely asynchronous in that there is a lack of sequential concurrence (Gibbs & Ellison & Heino, 2006; Walther & Parks, 2002). While there are spaces on the Internet where communication can occur relatively synchronously (i.e. chat rooms), communication on most dating sites occurs asynchronously. The asynchronous nature of online communication allots actors the time to carefully construct their performances (Gibbs et al, 2006; Henderson & Gilding, 2004).

Why Minglingsingles? Other researchers have primarily studied popular pay-for-membership dating websites like Match.com or eHarmony.com (Arvidsson, 2006; Gibbs et al, 2006; Yurchisin et al, 2005). I chose to study a smaller-scale dating site that does not require its members to pay fees for use of the site and access to other members. It has been observed that members of pay-for-membership dating sites are more likely to conform to the site’s standards, which greatly influenced my decision to study a free site. For example, Arvidsson (2006) found that members of Match.com, a site that boasts possessing “Quality Singles,” tended to conform to the site’s motto and construct their identities accordingly. Match.com

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1 Minglingsingles.com is a pseudonym used to protect the identities of the research subjects.
claims that its members “tend to be college educated professionals, and residents of a large city and its suburbs (www.match.com as cited in Arvidsson, 2006).” Thus, the “Quality Single” ideal provides “a value for users, an embodiment, a ‘materiality’ that presumably facilitates self-presentation and interaction on the site (Arvidsson, 2006).”

Minglingsingles.com operates on the principle that singles shouldn’t have to pay membership fees in order to find dates, and offers a variety of unique features for members to use. Minglingsingles.com boasts “Any pay sites you know of that have forums, friends, fully customizable profiles, etc? Nope!” While Minglingsingles.com provides many options for daters to engage in self-presentation, the site itself does not adhere to a slogan that brands or identifies members as sharing one universal characteristic, as Match.com does. Rather, members have a strong influence over other members’ self-presentation strategies, as can be seen in the forum posts. The forum that largely served as the site for analysis, titled “Profile Reviews,” is geared towards giving advice about how to self-present. This creates an interesting dynamic for analysis, in that members not only aid by indirectly constructing social norms, they also maintain and enforce them through their direct interactions with others.

“Lurking” as a Research Method: My Forays as a Netnographer

The role I played in the data collection process is that of “lurker,” which is a euphemism for a person who participates in an online community by not participating; that is, someone who visits or is a member of a site, but never posts (Weinberger, 2002). While the term “lurker” encompasses a range of observational behaviors, the academic orientation of my observations more specifically labels me as a netnographer. Even though I became a registered member of Minglingsingles.com, I never had any interactions with other members; membership was strictly for observational purposes.

I employed an inductive approach to data collection and analysis, based largely upon grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Like many researchers who embrace this approach, sensitizing concepts were used to guide the analysis (Bowen, 2006). Major sensitizing
concepts included sign-vehicles, social norms, and self-presentation. As the data was collected and analyzed, guided by these sensitizing concepts, it became apparent that there was a variety of recurrent themes present. Observing and analyzing the overarching themes that emerged provided a more concrete way to determine social norms and to explore the ways others influenced presentations of self.

Coding categories where then created to fit with these emerging themes (i.e. social norms and types of advice). As Glaser and Strauss (1967) note, “… in discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence; then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept (23).” The excerpts that appear in this paper were chosen from the data to illustrate the themes that were, in turn, fitted into conceptual categories that emerged during analysis. All excerpts represent original statements made by members so as to preserve the language used by each in interactions with others. Following Markham (2004), I believe that member writings should be conveyed to the reader exactly as they were written, without correcting spelling, grammatical or punctuation errors.

We literally reconfigure these people when we edit their sentences, because for many of them, these messages are a deliberate presentation of self. Even when they are not deliberate, texts construct the essence and meaning of the participant, as perceived and responded to by others (Markham, 2004).

Data for analysis was collected at two different time intervals or waves, which will hereafter be referred to as time 1 and time 2. At each wave, threads from the Profile Review forum (screen shot 1) and their subsequent thread-starters profiles (screen shot 3) were selected for analysis. Clicking upon a thread title reveals the discussion that occurred within it (screen shot 2). At time 1, 125 individual profiles and corresponding threads were collected for analysis. Dater profiles were selected over a twelve day period from February 2nd to February 14th, 2009. Each day, the first 15 threads were selected for inclusion in the sample. Naturally, this frequently led to the collection of threads gathered on previous occasions; as such, replicate threads were discarded. Recently created threads or threads with the most recent activity appear at the top of the forum. At time 1, my goal was to attempt to collect threads initiated by members asking for advice on their profiles before they received any response posts from
other members. Due to the unpredictability of member participation, it often proved difficult to collect threads in their infancy. Much of my sample consists of threads that have at least a few posts in response to a member’s inquiry.

Two additional threads were also collected at time 1. At the very top of the Profile Review forum, there are two moderator-initiated threads. The first thread, titled “If you want your profile reviewed read this!” outlines the rules of forum participation for members. The second thread, titled “How To Write A Great Dating Profile,” was previously open to member posting, but is now locked. This thread was created for the discussion of what members think makes a dating profile great (as the title suggests!). As such, this thread contains members’ expectations of others and constructs social norms of site participation. Both of these threads will be analyzed and discussed in terms of how they influence members’ self-presentation.

At time 2, individual profiles and corresponding threads from the Profile Review forum were collected again. Time 2 occurred on March 1st, 2009. Minglingsingles.com has a search feature that allowed me to locate members by using an individual’s screen name as a search term. Upon searching for each member from the initial sample at time 1, only 105 of the original 125 could be located. These 20 members were subsequently eliminated from analysis because of the lack of or otherwise insufficient data to compare across waves.

**Screen Shot 1: Profile Review Forum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thread</th>
<th>Starter</th>
<th>Replies</th>
<th>Last Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="Page" alt="How To Write A Great Dating Profile" /></td>
<td>dustin</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>11/5/2008 4:01:48 PM by cutuno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="Page" alt="If you want your profile reviewed read this!" /></td>
<td>dustin</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5/5/2006 2:52:51 PM by dustin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sooo yeahh...</td>
<td>sjs08</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Today at 09:24 AM by usakindatheart</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2/2/2009 11:33:30 PM  sooo yeahh...  

what do all of ya'll think about me... ladies opinions welcome also 

sj508  
Denton, TX  
age: 18  
view: posts | threads  
joined: Jan. 2009

2/2/2009 11:50:09 PM  sooo yeahh...  

Nice profile, cute pics (If you finished that drink by yourself I'm certain you half-way pickled your liver lol)...👍
Best of luck to you. 

slowhand31  
South Pittsburg, TN  
age: 31  
view: posts | threads  
joined: Dec. 2008

2/3/2009 12:50:48 AM  sooo yeahh...  

Nice lady, good luck.😊 

milktogo  
Vernal, UT  
age: 53  
view: posts | threads  
joined: Oct. 2008

Personality

hey whats up.. i'm savannah. i live in aubrey.. i jst got out of a 2 yr relationship and is looking for someone fun and outgoing to chill with.. cuddle with ..i'm not into playing games or highschool bull shit so i go for older men..i'm looking for a athletic fluffly fun loving guy cowboys are my weakness.. but i've dated all sorts of men.... i'm a hairstylist at jcpenney and i love my job...i wanna get married and live in the country i don't have any kids but i love them and i want some someday... .. i love two steppin when i can and you can usually catch me at the r-bar everyother weekend.. i love to drink have fun and thats about it.. so send me a message if you want more or i'm me on yahoo... savisue08 ❤
While Minglingsingles.com holds a membership base of singles from around the globe, my sample solely consists of members who cite residence within the United States. Upon sign-up, I selected the United States as my country of origin, which subsequently filtered out those not residing in the U.S. While singles from other countries can be searched for, I chose to stick with U.S. singles primarily because it is my country of origin.

In addition to being U.S. residents, my sample is also exclusively heterosexual. There are slightly more males (n=59) than females (n=46). Members who fall between the ages of 20 and 49 (n=76) make up the majority of my sample, at 72.5 percent. A majority of members cited their race/ethnicity as Caucasian (n=90) at 85.7 percent, with African Americans (n=7) ranking the next highest at 6.7 percent. The most frequently indicated level of educational attainment was “some college” (n=42) at 40 percent. While the “some college” category is vague, as it does not allow members to indicate what type of degree program, if any, they are currently enrolled in (if any), the overall findings show that most of my sample has achieved a level of education beyond a high school diploma. While Match.com boasts a membership base consisting primarily of “college educated professionals,” an initial sampling from Minglingsingles.com shows that many members are perhaps not as academically accomplished. Rather, it appears that many members are in a transitional period in regards to education.
The “Rules” of Profile Review

This is dustin; dustin is the forum moderator. Upon entering the Profile Review forum, the following thread is the first encountered.

| 5/5/2006 2:52:51 PM | If you want your profile reviewed read this! | flag post: (wrong forum | inappropriate) |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| dustin              | If you want people to review your profile you must create a new thread for it. Don't reply to someone else's thread asking for a review. One thread per person so we keep things nice and organized. Also, if you post a thread and no one replies, don't fret. You can learn a lot just by reading other profile reviews, so make sure you do that too 😊 |
| Roseville, CA       | Thanks!                                     |
| age: 28             |                                             |
| view: posts | threads | joined: Jul. 2002 |
| [Edited 11/10/2008 9:36:58 AM PST] |

This thread functions as the “rules” for participating in the Profile Review forum. As such, it not only outlines the purpose of the forum and behavioral expectations of those who decide to participate, it sets up the framework that governs members’ interactions. Organizational rules, like the ones listed above, are typical to most forums: requiring a person to create their own thread for profile review and to keep posts on-topic serves to organize interaction. Failure to follow these rules results in social sanctioning not only by dustin, but by other members as well.

Additionally, advice is proffered; it is this advice that I would like to draw further attention to. dustin suggests that “you can learn a lot just by reading other profile reviews, so make sure you do that too.” This statement, in and of itself, speaks to the sensitizing concepts and theoretical stance with which I have approached analysis. Instructing members to read fellow daters profile reviews facilitates a type of interaction that can have an influence upon one’s self and subsequent self-presentation.

I observed that many members, even when not explicitly advised to do so by others, changed their profiles from time 1 to time 2. This perhaps indicates that members did, in fact, read others profiles and
forum posts which, in turn, influenced each to modify his or her profile. As Goffman further notes, individuals are constrained to present images that are validated by others in accordance with the rules, or social norms of a particular situation (Goffman, 1959; Branaman & Lemert, 1997). By looking to (established) others, members can indirectly learn the rules and how to self-present in ways that will be approved of by others. Analyses of the rules and expectations of site participation aid in answering the question: ‘How do the social norms of a particular site of interaction influence presentations of self?’

Dater Expectations

In addition to the above thread which outlines the “rules” of forum participation, dustin also created a thread titled “How To Write A Great Dating Profile.” This is a thread in which dustin first gives his recommendations, and then opens discussion up to members by inviting them to answer the question “What do you think makes a good profile?” Members were invited to voice their opinions regarding their expectations of others, namely what they expect to find upon closer inspection of individual profiles. How to go about writing a great dating profile is clearly an important issue for many members as this thread received 111 response posts.

I would here like to point out that dater expectations are communally negotiated and collaboratively constructed. Unlike in the first thread I discussed, in which dustin single-handedly laid out the “rules” for proper forum conduct, this thread features members collaboratively engaged in constructing expectations or norms of member behavior, specifically regarding what one’s profile should look like. And perhaps most importantly, the expectations are supporting and re-creating the pre-established rules.

I determined that there were five overarching themes that primarily concerned daters, which were determined based upon the frequency with which each were discussed. Due to space limitations, only the theme regarding the use of pictures will be here expanded upon.

“A great dating profile has to have a picture (copterdriver).”
Much of participant discourse within this particular thread focused on profile pictures. There was an overwhelming consensus amongst thread participants that a great dating profile must include a picture. Due to the absence of nonverbal cues inherent in the online medium, photos are a significant indicator of self. Pictures serve as a physical representation of the self in the absence of the physical body. Even though pictures are representations, much can be learned about a person from a photograph. As jon432 notes,

I like to see a persons face and I like to see a persons full body. We take clues from the way a person holds themselves, the way they smile, the light in their eyes and the way they take care of themselves. (jon432)

For jon432 and others, pictures hold clues about potential mates that can be deciphered. Pictures are used to evaluate mates; things such as age, socioeconomic status, and lifestyle are deciphered through photos by others (Lawson & Leck, 2006). As jon432 alludes, pictures provide a snapshot of who a person is because they capture his or her nonverbal language in the instant it was taken.

Because pictures serve as an indicator of self, the more pictures one posts, the better. Several members noted that they like to see a variety of different kinds of pictures posted on a potential mate’s profile.

I like to see a variety of pictures… A head shot, a body shot, and a couple in different clothing and environments (tempehotodave).

…don’t just post head shots of yourself, people like to see you in different styles and different poses (silkpanties53).

Including pictures that show a person in different poses or clothing or environments can give further clues as to what kind of person he or she is.

Additionally, many pointed out that pictures were important because they wanted a visual representation to associate to the textual descriptions found within the profile. As these daters note:

People just want to be able to put a face to the profile (dustin).

I agree with you about pictures being the main source that most people expect to see when they are trying to fit the profile with the person (dsjr2003).
A combination of visual and textual representations creates for a more effective presentation of self. A profile with a picture allows its viewers to get a better sense of self of the person behind the profile. Because pictures are so highly valued among members, profiles without pictures renders a person virtually invisible.

No picture? I will not even notice you (krazz).

As one dater poignantly points out, “Would you go out on a date having seen nothing more than a silhouette?” In posing this question, this dater is drawing a distinction between blind dating and online dating. While blind dates are typically arranged by a third party for two people who have never met, online dates are typically facilitated between two interested parties who are interested in getting to know one another before they meet. And, as mantra08 notes, “a picture is key to connecting with someone online.”

Most members supported this sentiment in that they recognized the importance of physical attraction in making a connection.

Love connections based on sillhouettes are chancy at best. If I felt I had a connection with someone and then found out later that they looked like a homeless bag lady then I would have issues with that. It’s not shallow it is human nature. If I can’t be comfortable with that dime sized mole on your nose with a big black hair stubble poking out, I’m not getting over it. Lol (copterdriver).

i think a photo is as important as the profile because i think we all are attracted to a certain type of person and certain look… (patty01).

I think ninety percent of people are attracted to someone based on their look, not that it is a particularly handsome or pretty face, but something in the features of a persons face connects us through chemistry (snooookie).

Whitty’s (2007) survey of online daters revealed that physical attractiveness was the number one aspect looked for in a potential date as it was mentioned by 90 percent of her sample. Interestingly, while physical attraction is clearly important for many, it in and of itself is not satisfactory for making a connection. As many of these poster’s suggest, even though it may be possible to make a connection with
another person based upon textual exchanges, a picture is otherwise necessary for completing a connection.

While many members made it clear that pictures were important for a variety of reasons, not just any picture would suffice. Many made comments that stated their desire to view quality pictures of potential mates.

I think that a very low quality, or a very small picture is almost as bad as no picture... A high quality picture is very helpful (temphotodave).

What do I pass by? Pictures with multiple people and no caption to point you out (ndiace).

An updated picture is a must also… (copterdriver).

While pictures clearly serve as an indicator of self, poor quality pictures make it difficult if not impossible to get a real sense of who someone is. As such, poor quality pictures can be misleading. Furthermore, there is an expectation that others will post current pictures. The posting of an older photograph can be likened to a cynical performance in that it is purposely misrepresented as a reflection of self. This form of deception is not uncommon, and has been documented by several researchers (Levine, 2000; Toma & Ellison, 2008).

Discussion surrounding photographs not only centered upon their presence on individual profiles, but also by their absence. Many members speculated about why some did not post pictures:

…in the back of my mind, I always wonder: “What’s he (or she) got to hide?” Its smacks of game playing… (kailie).

I also feel that most view don’t believe that your profile is real, if you don’t have a picture with the profile (dsjr2003).

Members speculations regarding an absence of profile pictures, as illustrated above, is largely negative. Not only does a picture serve as a physical representation of a person, as a sign-vehicle that can be used to convey a sense of self to others, it serves a baser function, namely, legitimation. The presence of a picture indicates to others that not only is a person “real,” it further legitimates their performance. Within
this specific situation, one is expected to be single and actively looking to date others, and one’s willingness to post a photo serves as an indicator to others that one is serious about dating.

**Dater Interactions**

While daters indirectly influence behaviors by collaboratively constructing and enforcing the social norms that frame the context of forum participation, they can also have a more direct effect by answering others inquiries for advice. As previously mentioned, the purpose of the Profile Review forum is to allot a space for members to create threads so that they may request opinions and advice regarding their profiles. What is essentially being asked is, “What do you think of my presentation of self?” The Profile Review thread is also a space for members to answer other’s inquiries, and give their opinions and advice accordingly. In doing so, these members are answering the aforementioned question posed by a particular individual. Within each thread, this dynamic and direct member-to-member interaction is present; an individual inquiry is made, and opinions and advice are offered in response. Analyses of these threads aids in answering the second half of my research question, ‘What impact do other daters have upon the way one chooses to self-present?’

“...a picture is worth a thousand words… (ipoeti).”

Similar to the previously analyzed thread regarding dater expectations, discourse regarding pictures emerged as a significant theme among individual threads within the Profile Review forum. In instances where those requesting a profile review did not have a picture of themselves on their profile, it was advised that they post one:

add a pic…most women want to see who they are talking to… (caligirl1).

once you get a picture…you will noticed more…we are a very visual society… (caligirl1).
The above comments reveal some of the same reasons for the necessity of posting pictures as evidenced within the “How To Write A Great Dating Profile” thread. As califgirl1 notes in her comments, pictures aid in getting a person noticed; it makes them more visible to others. Furthermore, people want to be able to “put a face with a profile.” Communicating with a person who has a picture posted is more reassuring than communicating with someone who does not; the presence of a photo constructs a person as “real,” in that others feel like they are talking to an actual person.

Since the majority of my sample consisted of members whose profiles contained at least one picture of themselves, most discourse regarding pictures focused either on suggestions for more pictures or opinions regarding currently posted ones. Suggestions such as the one made by lakc, “You may want to post more photos….” were common, but they were often accompanied by reasons why members should do so:

About the only thing I would say is another pic or two showing you actively engaging in life…..mug shots are a bit static & don’t really show the ‘real’ person (nightwings).

You take nice pics and very attractive but posed looking and the shot is somewhat repetitive wearing different clothes. I you want to boost your photo charisma get a few that are caught in a moment of spontaneity doing the things you really do in real everyday life to portray the true you (foxyfifty).

your pics are boring.. put up pics of you being active.. its more appealing (matty1329).

The above poster’s comments can best be summarized by a comment made by califgirl1: “Spice up your pictures…” Clearly, variety is indeed the spice of life, and these members want to see more of it evidenced in others pictures. Most of the above suggestions advise the posting of more “dynamic” pictures, ones that show a person “actively engaging in life.” While “mug shots” show a person’s physical appearance, they don’t reveal much else because of their “static” nature. Photos that capture the physical body engaged in an activity allow an observer to better gain a sense of self of that person.

Further, dynamic photos can be used to support claims about the self made in the profile narrative (Ellison et al, 2006). As foxyfifty indicates, pictures should be selected that serve as accurate representations of what one does in everyday life; doing so gets one closer to presenting the true self.
While the inclusion of pictures on one’s profile that more dynamically represent a person was adamantly encouraged, they were more often than not considered inappropriate as the main profile picture, as the following comments indicate:

Showing yourself with two girls is not gonna make girls on this site take you seriously. I say get a pic all by your lonesome, up close so they have a good idea of what you look like (notez).

Too much of the car and not enough of you face shot always a winner… (hbutif).

a pic with a smile with no cigarette butt hanging from your mouth might attract more… (spider_man5).

My first thought was to get a pic… with a shirt on… at least for the mail pic… (califgirl1).

When members search the site for potential dates, a photograph coupled with a limited amount of demographic and site-specific information (age, location, etc.) appear. Because a member’s photo appears amid a dozen or so others, the main picture appears at a reduced size. Thus, it is important to select a close-up face shot so that not only does it appear visible, but attracts the attention of others. Having other people or objects (i.e. pets, cars, etc.) in the picture reduces the focus on the individual. Furthermore, the presence of certain objects (i.e. cigarettes, other people) and lack of others (i.e. clothing) can be perceived as undesirable in main pictures because of the likelihood of producing a negative first impression. On the other hand, including particular objects in photos demonstrates their significance to that person and is a purposeful way to convey one’s hobbies or passions to others (Ellison et al, 2006).

Since the main picture is the first thing people notice prior to viewing one’s profile, it is important that it be an eye-catching picture. Much advice focused specifically on what members thought about a person’s main picture, and why they felt it should be replaced or swapped with another photo:

use the other pic as your smile seems more genuine (funfireguy).

Change your main picture because it makes you look a whole lot older than you really are! (notez).

These comments largely reveal a concern for presenting the best possible self, at least when it comes to the main profile picture. People may get passed by or discovered based solely upon the picture they select to represent their profile; clearly, the consensus is to choose wisely. While pictures can serve as
accurate representations of the physical body, they can also distort the body. As notez states in response to an inquirer, a main picture change is in order because the picture makes him look older than his posted age. Even though this particular photo may be an accurate depiction of him, it is not flattering.

“...if your really serious about getting any responses... (notez).”

Of the 105 individual profiles in my sample, a majority show changes made as a direct result of being advised to do so. The fact that a majority of members’ profiles evidence changes based largely upon this advice indicates a concern to present in ways that align with the expectations and social norms of the site. A quantitative categorization of changes made by each individual is not feasible here due to the complex nature of interactions. While many individual changes were explicit across waves, others were more ambiguous. Further, there were often instances where none or not all of the recommended advice was implemented.

Results

“...a picture is worth a thousand words... (ipoeti).”

As can be evidenced in the analysis of discourse about pictures, people clearly have a lot to say about them. Not only were they heavily focused upon in the “How To Write A Great Dating Profile” thread, much advice about photos were given to others upon individual profile reviews. Since profile templates are the same for each member, picture changes or additions were easily observed when comparing profiles across times.

Advice about photos was generally made explicit, usually accompanied by specific reasons for the suggested change. For example, upon reviewing bryan0608’s profile, two reviewers suggested he change his main profile picture:

I’d say get a new clear picture (if your really serious about getting any responses that is)and post it (notez).
Need a pic that isn’t fading to black (califgirl1).

As a result, bryan0608’s profile pictured was changed across waves:

At time 1, bryan0608’s main photo is quite dark and it is difficult to make out his appearance, as the advice given by califgirl1 and notez indicate. At time 2, it is evident that bryan0608 considered their advice and took the time to post a new, clearer picture of himself.

In another instance, a member by the screen name zarmalar, who had a total of five photos on her profile, created an inquiry for advice. In response she was advised by two members to swap her current main picture for one of her secondary photos:

…you should change you main picture to the one of just you.. That way, when people are browsing profiles, it will catch their eye faster than the one with you and your horse… Besides the one of just you is a better picture of you anyway! (heidikristine17).

…get another main picture where they can see you better in the pic… (notez).

It is obvious that zarmalar took the advice by switching out the photo that depicts her with her horse for the photo of just her that heidikristine17 specifically refers to:
These are just two instances in which advice from others resulted in profile changes. As such, it is illustrative of how feedback from others influences presentations of self. Interestingly, there were several instances in which members, upon receiving advice, noted that they intended to make the recommended changes. In one instance, notez suggests to mruzi that he get a new main picture:

> When I looked at your main picture you looked like a little boy in it, what I’m saying is try and get a more up close picture of yourself to put as your main pic, with only you in it too. It’ll help.

In response, mruzi posts this within his thread:

> Thanks, I’m actually limited on my pictures, I don’t have a camera at the moment, but if I get one… then I’ll definitely post more. Thanks for the advice.

Lack of technological resources, like mruzi’s dilemma of not owning a camera, proved problematic for many daters. While several inquirers indicated such technological dilemmas, replies like mruzi’s indicate an intention to implement the advice given when the necessary technology becomes available. Demonstrating consideration for what others say about certain aspects of one’s self presentation show that others can and do have an impact upon performances.

Concluding Thoughts

“…we are all here for the same reason…to find some one to care about… (calfigirl1).”

As my findings illustrate, online presentations of self are shaped not only by interactions with others, but through the social norms of the context in which they occur. While I separate the modes through which the self is socially produced into two distinct parts for discussion purposes, I do not wish to suggest that they can be considered independently of one another. The two modes work in conjunction with one another and simultaneously influence presentations of self in complex ways that are difficult to capture and comprehend through text. My analysis oversimplifies the process.

My analysis demonstrates that, overwhelmingly, advice given as a result of an individual inquiry is often taken into consideration and implemented. Implementations of advice can be seen upon careful
examinations of individual profiles across time. While changes often occurred as a direct result of others' suggestions to do so, there were many other instances where this was not the case. I documented many occasions upon which unadvised changes appeared across waves. There could be a variety of reasons for this discrepancy, but I suggest that these changes were made as a result of the influence of social norms and dater expectations. Just as I “lurked” in order to discover the social norms that govern site participation, so too do site members in order to learn the rules of participation (Weinberger, 2002).

Analysis of the “How To Write A Great Dating Profile” thread not only revealed many social norms, it provided a space in which expectations of member behavior were collaboratively constructed. These expectations also function to support and enforce pre-existing rules, as outlined in the “If you want your profile reviewed read this!” thread. These norms and expectations are evidenced in members’ interactions with others, as advice was given and received among threads in the Profile Review forum. Further, it was suggested by the forum moderator that members could learn a lot by reading others profile reviews. Advice received directly from other members and/or garnered by observing spaces such as Profile Review threads and member profiles, all play an important role in shaping presentations of self online. Changes documented among individual profiles across waves illustrate how the self is socially produced through this dynamic interplay between social structure and interaction. The self, even when constructed online, is not static: it is processual and susceptible to change by external influences.

While my data and subsequent analysis are wholly derived from observation, the addition of other research methods, such as in-depth interviewing, would prove complementary. As is, my research suggests how the self is socially produced online; my observations focus on explications of social norms and member interactions and how they produce changes in presentations of self over a short period of time. Presently, I cannot conclude that selves were being socially produced online, because I do not know whether or not members were substantively changed by their online dating experience(s). Had I included the use of in-depth interviewing, I could have queried members’ about their own presentations of self, and to what extent they felt others had an impact upon them. Further, questions could have been posed about
“lurking” behaviors to get an idea of members’ awareness of social norms and expectations of site behavior, and how members felt they shaped or constrained behaviors.

Study of online spaces affords researchers a unique opportunity to more concretely observe, record, and analyze human behaviors. Through careful analyses of particular online spaces, it becomes evident that the Internet as a whole is neither a utopian space, free of inequality, nor a space of anarchy, devoid of social norms. Applications of Goffman’s theoretical framework to an online dating website reveals that this particular space possesses social norms that guide and constrain behavior; further, member behavior largely conforms to these social norms. As a result, presentations of self are influenced and produced through a dynamic interaction between the social norms of Minglingsingles.com and member interactions within it. While online interactions are fundamentally different than those that transpire face-to-face, due largely to the ways in which information is conveyed, careful assessments reveal important similarities. Tentative explorations of online spaces have increasingly revealed evidence that online interactions are structured by offline considerations (Hardey, 2002): the application of Goffman’s theoretical framework to online spaces illustrates this.

It should be noted that my beliefs regarding the nature of online interactions served as a base upon which my thesis was founded. I believe individual spaces on the Internet are largely structured according to social norms derived from face-to-face interactions. While this belief underlies much of my discussion and analysis, I do not wish to suggest that the Internet itself does not have influences upon the ways in which we interact with others. As Hardey (2002) notes, many researchers encounter difficulties “in constructing linkages between real and virtual identities (as) there is a tension between the conceptualisation of an empty free-for-all virtual social space and an approach that pays attention to the way embodied sociability anchors and shapes interactions within the virtual landscape (571).” While my present emphasis strains this tension in favor of embodied sociability, I would briefly like to entertain a discussion of online considerations.
The Internet is a space that has its own “virtual culture” that makes it distinct from face-to-face interactions (Jones, 1997). Further, individual spaces on the Internet possess their own unique culture. While some social norms characterize most sites of interactions (i.e. rules against “flaming”), some are unique to the respective site. Because of this, I do not intend for my findings to be wholly generalizable to other online dating websites. While “virtual spaces may be shaped by and grounded in the social, bodily and cultural experiences of their users (Hardey, 2002: 571),” a mass gathering of people from different backgrounds coming together online is bound to create a unique social culture. Because people from all across the United States are interacting with one another on Minglingsingles.com, each member contributes to and influences the culture of the site based upon their differing backgrounds and assumptions about offline dating. While it can be inferred that offline assumptions about dating largely structure dater expectations and interactions online, the ways in which the self is presented to others are differentially negotiated due to the differences in communication between the two mediums. These differences are significant, as much member discourse focuses on issues of self-presentation through the online medium, as my analysis illustrates.

Furthermore, the tensions inherent in “constructing linkages between real and virtual identities (Hardey, 2002: 571)” are not lost on members. There were several instances in which members indicated frustration and/or difficulties in their attempts to convey their selves online. This concern is most eloquently summarized by unspoken4, who wrote a poem capturing the sentiment:

Believability is my issue. 
I can say I'm the greatest guy in the world--strong, sensitive, good looking, hard working, knows how to treat a lady, etc.-- but this shows better in real life not in an online profile. There's something lost in the context of online profiles. Words & one dimensional photos don't do me justice. What's the catch?
Attempts at self-presentation online often fail to capture the true self; the lack of social cues online makes self-presentation a challenging task. This recognition underlies member discourse within the Profile Review forum and related spaces; as such, it underlies members’ preoccupation with self-presentation.

Works Cited

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