**Performative Acts of Gender in Online Dating: An Auto-ethnography Comparing Sites**

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**Introduction**

Last year, one in ten Americans reported using online dating; I am one of these many users.[[1]](#footnote-1) Dating websites are intended to mediate a space for meeting new people and provide access to a dating market.[[2]](#footnote-2) The site’s culture and design offer suggestions about how to find a partner through optimal dating presentation. In turn the site subtly suggest ways to construct a personal identity, including gender presentation. When I participated in online dating, I struggled with how to present my identity authentically to another person through online interactions. Specifically, how could I shape my dating profile to represent a virtual extension of myself? I hypothesize, describe, and reflect on how a woman can present herself as a feminist in a manner that avoids the stigma associated with the term, through autoethnographic methods. In fact, many women do not associate with the term “feminist,” and I ultimately conclude that creating an authentic personality using online dating websites is difficult and dehumanizing for men and women based on restrictive traditional gender performances. When asking Internet users what they think of online dating the approval steadily continues to improve.1 In the future, we can expect the number of online daters to continue to increase.

Dating courtships have been complicated both by the changing roles of women and men and by the new approaches afforded by technology.[[3]](#footnote-3),[[4]](#footnote-4),[[5]](#footnote-5) It should be the responsibility of both men and women to negotiate the new possibilities (specifically new norms and expectations around courtship) afforded in dating relationships, “but the media would certainly have us think that . . . women must figure it out before we end up desperate and alone”.5 To add to the complication, online dating sites, despite their potentially alternative media form, further perpetuate a traditional view of love and romance. The websites present narrow examples of user narratives that fit what finding love should be and how people should act, rhetoric being used would have daters believe they should present as well-behaved characters in a romantic comedy. This paper is intended to be an informative recounting of my experience trying to present an authentic identity while using online dating for the first time. This paper theorizes about the role of corporate dating site owners and the existing platform constraints/affordances that are shaping identity for heterosexual dating experiences. In applying the work of Judith Butler[[6]](#footnote-6), the performative acts of gender will be considered both in my personal process and choices and in the way that online dating sites encouraged me to behave. What began as a study of “objective” observations of the pedagogical aspects of dating websites, particularly Match.com and Okcupid.com, evolved into a weaving of my own personal story about the informal learning that happens in these spaces. While autoethnography is a less traditional method, using my own experiences and observations from participating in several online dating sites was selected as an ethical approach for respecting others’ online dating experiences and provided a great deal of information.[[7]](#footnote-7),[[8]](#footnote-8),[[9]](#footnote-9) I will use reflexive practices to examine how popular commercial dating sites play a pivotal role in shaping and re-shaping my online identity choices.

Previously research has shown that heteronormative culture and traditional gender roles are pervasive in the online dating experience. A content analysis of a Canadian dating site showed men and women have overlapping interests regarding a potential partners character qualities, such as morality and passion, were frequently mentioned by both men and women.[[10]](#footnote-10) Some male profiles emphasized certain masculine qualities that were less traditional; presenting a new more polished modern man who was in touch with certain aspects of his own femininity.10 Yet, the men’s profiles did not abandon all tradition and certain qualities, especially work and the ability to provide, were highlighted in the virtual self. Women’s profiles that were analyzed also performed gender scripts to a degree; certain profiles mentioned sexuality but in an illusive way, in contrast the male profiles more explicitly talked about sex. Women online who were older than 40, and looking for a partner, emphasized romance and waiting for the right person to be physically intimate with.[[11]](#footnote-11) Several studies demonstrate that while individuals may show nuance, more often than not, familiar gender performances are used for constructing virtual selves. 3,4,10,11

Contemporary dating relationships provide individuals’ an opportunity to personally define relationship needs and seek partners according to these needs.[[12]](#footnote-12) Previous research documents that the combination of casual and loosely defined relationships, with the onset of online dating and personal advertisements in print newspapers, lead to a dating industry. [[13]](#footnote-13) The dating industry helps people become objects or products within the dating space, “Science and commerce are entwined in the relationship-scientific endeavors of these [online dating] organizations.”13 Before online dating began men and women would use print advertisements to market themselves in order to entice other singles.[[14]](#footnote-14) In Jagger’s content analysis of dating newspaper advertisements she concludes this is consumerism at work, and to be marketable as a dater one many daters relied on mentioning their physical attractiveness and likability.14 In the conclusion Jagger describes how gender performances remain present, but are being redefined based on new masculinities and femininities.14 Daters must present themselves as attractive products, and identify a target market.14 In an experiment by Yang and Chiou, adolescents’ were asked to select dating preferences off a checklist; then the participants were given an opportunity to scroll through potential dates online. The results demonstrated that the more options available, the more young people would become distracted and abandon their original preferences.[[15]](#footnote-15) The medium of online advertisements could potentially influence daters’ rational dating process, making it increasingly difficult to stand out among other daters. Based on previous online dating literature many individuals’ perform heterosexual gendered scripts, potentially to attract a target audience. Using autoethnography to describe the online dating experience from the perspective of the dater I will discuss at length how I navigated these spaces.3,4,9,10,11

**Methodology**

The analyses and information offered in this auto-ethnography are based on my experiences as an online dater as interpreted using Foucault’s discourse analysis theory. [[16]](#footnote-16) Foucault describes how large institutions create predefined roles, and members of the institution select a role they associate with while a member of the institution. Thus, the “institution” defines the roles in order to maintain a position of power over individuals, yet those individuals believe they are creating a unique and individual representation of themselves.[[17]](#footnote-17) Applying Foucault’s theory, I will attempt to determine if users can create an individual and complex identity within the sponsoring site’s structure. I will focus particularly on whether a site’s pedagogy inhibits individuals’ from establishing a nuanced gender identity by limiting their responses to an abstract assortment of predetermined roles.

During the first phase of the discourse analysis, I will analyze the content of the websites based on the “site of the image” as well as the “textual materials, both visual and written.” 16 Although it may seem that using one technique or methodology may offer a clearer understanding, the complexity of the sites requires using both methods. When setting up a dating profile, there are specific templates provided for users to create a unique dating profile. I will examine these templates to determine what the site defines as necessary dating information. This examination will be useful in identifying how the website shapes a user’s dating experience and how gender roles are integrated into the site’s structure. The visual context and culture of the Internet is different than traditional media; “users of the Internet collaboratively produce digital images of the body – very particular things for very particular uses – in the context of racial and gender identity formation”.[[18]](#footnote-18) This analysis will demonstrate how my individual experience was a constant interplay between the institution of commercial dating sites and user-created material.4 It will detail how web designers create the choices that its users may select to individualize their online personality. This process of interactivity between user and creator sets Internet studies apart from traditional media studies.18

The second portion of the discourse analysis will seek to explain how “the institution[s] put[s] images to work,” and the dating site users hold up the websites expectations. 16 Images are a powerful way to promote a message. An institution can promote certain types of images to present an idea to its members. In this way, the site is used to promote an idea. A site, however, may also reinforce to its users ways to conform to an idea (e.g., attractive bodies). This can be seen where dating sites allow user to select only predetermined body types. Fuchs calls this a socio-technological space where institutions recreate the societal norms where its online members exist.[[19]](#footnote-19) I will analyze the choices commercial dating sites offer users to find whether the site has greater power when creating the experience, or, conversely, whether users create their own experience within the site. I will use reflexivity to discuss my experiences dating online and demonstrate how gender matters and corporate institutions now facilitating dating markets shape identity possibilities. Further, the shaping of this process can influence the ways individuals interact during first encounters with potential partners.

Lastly, throughout this paper I plan to use reflexivity. In discussion of the relevance of previous research findings, I will analyze my experiences participating in online dating. Previous research describes what reflexivity is and why we may use it: “The ability of humans to reflect (on the past and the future) has a long intellectual history and heritage growing out of Enlightenment belief in the ability of (wo)man to reason in a reasonable manner about his(her) fate, impact the future, and transcend the present”[[20]](#footnote-20) In order to demonstrate how the sites interact with the users, I will discuss my dating experience using both Okcupid, and Match.com. The use of ethnographic methods in virtual worlds is useful because it can “explore beliefs and practices within and between cultures, linking together materials…. “9

I did receive approval from my institution’s IRB before creating a faux profile to make observations about how Match.com and Okcupid operates and communicates with members. My “research profile” informed users I was observing the site and encouraged users to contact me if they had questions or concerns. No users contacted my research profile. I then decided to research the site as a consumer of its product instead of making inferences about other individuals’ experiences. The examples given are based on my experiences. Ethnography methods commonly present “key critical cases, incidents, stories, or events to illustrate patterns”9 The description is intended to resonate the cultural experience of online dating rather than give a factual accounting of individual behaviors.7,8 “We must take into consideration possible harm or embarrassment that can be brought about through romantic, sexual, and intimate activities.” 9 While I considered doing interviews and providing information from others’ profiles as part of the data within the paper, this practice seemed deceptive since I knew during the early phases of my research that I was on both sites as a researcher and as a dater. For this reason, specific examples are fictionalized to protect the privacy of other daters with whom I had interactions. This protection is two fold; first, I intend to reshape certain phrases and words so that in an era of search engines no other daters’ information could be directly linked back to them. Secondly, I believe most interactions unfolded as a sincere and honest attempt to reach out to me as a dater and not as a researcher. To unveil these potentially intimate moments word-for-word felt like a breach of ethics as a researcher.

**Attracting an Audience**

Standard features found on dating sites include an original profile where individuals can display content including pictures, and a short text description about themselves. On both Match.com and Okcupid, daters have multiple ways for interacting through the site. These include less direct methods meant to seem more like gestures, such as the wink on Match, or adding someone to a list of favorite users on Okcupid. Additionally, users can email and direct message one another when logged onto the site. After a short period of using Match.com, I quickly noticed several fields on my profile providing a numbers report. Emphasis on these statistics showed the site had a vested interest in attracting users and site traffic over helping individuals finding a life partner. The website consistently encouraged my participation, by reminding me to check, update, and attend to my profile. The faux research profile I had created received several notifications; between March 27th and May 9th, the site generated 68 emails, an average of two per day, encouraging my participation even though I rarely logged in and no other daters had contacted me. The emails suggested “potential matches” and encouraged me to contact them. Love, it seemed, was available only for the most active users. But the constant suggestion to look more, click more, and send more messages is dangerous. Men may feel justified in unwanted pursuit, and women, who are traditionally encouraged to be submissive, may have a difficult time stopping unwanted communications.6 Further, the activity of flipping through profiles became exciting and fun, but I was unsure if it was helping me narrow down my dating pool. If anything the longer I was spending collecting potential profiles, the broader the range on my spectrum of dates.15

To the websites credit, knowing I was female, I was encouraged to reach out and contact potential dates. I hesitated to do this, believing that men still have an expectation of making first contact. When engaging in a site specifically designed to (re)create dating opportunities, I felt it necessary to craft an image that was at least moderately compliant with gender norms. Match.com, knowing prevailing cultural dating practices, was “offering available norms for the act of recognition.” [[21]](#footnote-21) Match.com never stated explicitly on the website when a wink should be used, but a mediating flirt option seems to be a convenient way for women to indicate interest without seeming aggressive. People would take this interaction as the first step towards flirtation. Viewing profiles became the catalyst for more user interaction, and even though I did not send a wink first, some men communicated with me simply because I had viewed their profile. After viewing a profile, I would often receive a wink from the user. Then I would wink back, and a conversation would ensue. This reincarnation of traditional dating pursuits affirms that in the online world, many men still felt comfortable in their role as initiators.

Similar to Match.com, OKcupid.com reported the number of viewers I had on my page each day, which told me the number of people interested enough in my picture to click to my page. Every time I logged into these sites, it was difficult not to view these numbers as a report of my success. During my youth, I can recount numerous occasions where young men described how they ranked women. The woman became an object in this rating game, an exercise in who deserves a man’s attention. The higher the number, the more desirable she was considered. In the 11th grade, Shane told me that on a scale of one to ten, I was a “six” because I wore my hair short, and my chest was too small. My anxiety about “low numbers” was fostered from an awareness that my ability to find a partner was hinging on my ability to compete with other women, and again, here was my score right in front of me. According to the site, this is how the world of dating goes for everybody. As stated upfront in one Okcupid.com blog, “we all know that beautiful people are more successful daters”[[22]](#footnote-22) However, different from men, women at a much earlier age internalize the messages that their inherent value to other people comes first from their attractiveness and their ability to secure a partner.[[23]](#footnote-23) Men do have to compete based on looks; yet just based on the use of women’s modeling photo’s or professional pictures as their dating profile icon, my impression was their pressure did not come with the same intensity.

The numbers game elicited different emotional responses. Some days, I had many views, and I felt validated and attractive. Other days, I felt insecure and uncertain about my attractiveness, because I had received no messages. To win at the numbers game, I found myself spending more time on both sites, frequently checking my winks, watching for new messages, and viewing more profiles. I became easily distracted by the prospect of being datable or likeable for an audience rather than a partner. Nowhere on either site does it suggest that less is more or that narrowing down your potential daters will benefit you. Rather than emphasize certain attributes that make me stand out as an individual, generating high volumes of traffic meant presenting a commodified pleasurable package of myself. My online self became a product, not a person.

**Marketing Tools**

Both Match.com and Okcupid.com provided information that instructed daters on different ways to present themselves. Match.com has an “advice center” that gives direction on how to write the perfect first email, pick out the perfect outfit, be sensual on the first date, and win anyone over. To illustrate, according to Match.com, to write the perfect email: 1) keep it simple, 2) be honest, 3) mention something specific from the person’s profile, 4) let your voice come through, 5) have fun with the format, and 6) check your spelling. However, daters should not: 1) focus on your match’s looks, 2) go on and on via email, 3) ask too many questions, 4) use edgy humor, 5) send multiple users the same message, or 6) rely on sexual innuendo. Essentially the site attempts to teach people to be polite and avoid taking risks. According to online dating presenting risks, such as edgy humor, may mean no dates. Based on the sites advice I assumed the objective was not to help other daters rule you out based on differences, or a clear mismatch, but to subdue off-putting characteristics so that potentially more users could relate to you.

Match.com also promotes certain dating behaviors with its online magazine, “Happen.” [[24]](#footnote-24) Just as it is stated in the slogan, “because love doesn’t come with instructions,” is telling, The magazine includes articles such as:

* “8 things that make women crave sex”
* “Dating when you are a parent”
* “6 bad traits that make him a good partner”
* “7 text messages that scare men off”
* “Women’s 5 biggest dating lies”

The magazine reinforced the notion that there were limitless opportunities for a social connection, and if I failed at love, I must have done something wrong. As another example, in the article “Women’s 5 biggest dating lies,” women are berated for having low self-esteem. “Sure, it’s normal to have a few negative thoughts (which Ahlers[life couch] refers to as “Big Fat Lies”) while you’re dating, but what’s not OK is allowing that mindset to prevent you from finding real, true love. According to the online life coach, women should simply stop any negative self-talk because it prevents us from dating.[[25]](#footnote-25) The article never mentions where self-doubt comes from, or how consumerism and gendered scripts being reiterated through the site may contribute to feelings of inadequacy. The article asks women to question their inner critic (e.g., “too fat compared to whom?”). Additionally, the article never addresses the website’s role of mediating the dating space. Instead, all responsibility for success or failure was squarely placed on my shoulders. It seems Match.com perpetuated an overarching message: love is for all people, and if you market your online profile just right, you too can find love.

Okcupid.com matches potential daters according to test results. The site informs users that it will “do the math” as you look for a partner. Additionally, Okcupid.com offers many blog entries where general trends are presented as info-graphics, charts, and quantified information. At the bottom of the homepage, the OkTrends section reports on a number of topics, similar to Match.com’s online magazine.[[26]](#footnote-26)The content is comparable; “Don’t be ugly by accident,” and “Exactly what to say in a first message” instruct users on what tone to use when writing and how to pick the best image for their profile picture. Okcupid.com attempts to use a casual, humorous tone, which suggests their willingness to help a user find whatever they are looking for at the moment. For example, one blog discusses the sexual trends of site users while creating the impression the writer is a friend, and the two of you are having a conversation. 26

Okcupid.com emphasizes being matched based on the quantified and tested attributes of our personality. The site offers several tests, some of which are traditional psychological metrics meant to capture personality while others are more playful. This is not a unique feature of Okcupid.com; other dating sites promote their ability to help you make the right match using algorithms.13 The claimed magic of the site is it can match you based on science, which implies love is based on a formula or algorithm. If the users have a successful relationship, it supports the rhetoric; love is logic. Historically, relying on math, abstract logic, and traditional sciences has been categorized as male in nature and superior to female ways of knowing. [[27]](#footnote-27) Okcupid.com’s discourse has a subtle but powerful implication; don’t rely on your intuition or heart. Use logic, science, and authority for best results during online dating.

An interesting feature found only on Okcupid.com is the use of crowdsourcing. As previously mentioned, site members can upload their own tests to the website, giving other daters an opportunity to measure features not covered by the tests offered on the site. Users can also submit photos to “My Best Face,” a program that allows daters to rate the attractiveness of other users’ photographs. Crowdsourcing acts, such as My Best Face, are a perfect example of how online dating can construct online spaces in conjunction with the designers. 19 Previously, researchers have demonstrated how commercial images are so common place in our day-to-day lives, that often times individuals’ mimic or recreate the images on their one. [[28]](#footnote-28)Despite the opportunity for freedom of expression, users’ ranking patterns matched those images which are typically considered commercially attractive.28 Recently, WIRED magazine was given permission by Okcupid.com and Match.com to use their data and determine, on average, what attracts daters. For heterosexual daters, both men and women prioritized a flat stomach above all else. [[29]](#footnote-29) Eventually I came to understand that if I wanted to attract a dater, my physique was the most important thing.

Online dating culture is influenced by the coproduction of knowledge through the site as well as broader society; each individual profile actively shapes and conforms to the culture.19 Men and women seem to rely on the social context of the site to define gender roles and self-presentation. This includes the visual culture, and that culture still promotes the idea that a woman’s ultimate value is in her looks.28 Match.com and Okcupid.com subtly promote bodies as advertisements. A reoccurring advertisement on my page was for Weight Watchers. The ad featured a petite blonde and, given my recent understanding that my looks mattered most, suggested to me the idea that “thin” is a desirable attribute. The message seemed clear. Consumer culture emphasizes thin, small, docile bodies as a representation of true femininity.28 Many men and women wanted a model like date, and in order to find love, I should look like one, or so I was told.

Commercial dating sites promote the idea that it is not only convenient to meet potential partners online; it is also common. Below are a list of Match.com slogans and marketing, found on the website and through television commercials. The first slogan reiterates that the relationships start online, not during the in-person phase. Love is guaranteed for any user. The promise of love for any user may not be logical, but individuals are sold the idea that their existence, or at least their happiness, it contingent on finding a partner. Form women they may have received even stronger messages about how their self-worth depends on that love, especially the love from a successful hetero-man.6 Lastly, the slogans reinforce that online presentation trump other factors involved in love. Finding a mate is about keeping a fresh marketing approach, and even though the environment has changed, your appearance is still a strong (perhaps the strongest) indicator of your chances for love.

* “1 in 5 relationships start online. And more of them start at Match than any other site.”
* “Find Love. Guaranteed.”
* “Your interests change, so should your profile.”
* “Attract 15x more attention. Add a photo.”

Regarding performativity, the act of gender is not a role, it is a series of acts. 6 Thus, if the site or its users’ minimizes the importance of a woman’s career, other users may begin to minimize their career to remain an acceptable woman based on the standards of the site.6 Since the site, and users who maintain the culture within the site, strongly emphasize physical attractiveness, than the users are best to invest their time in presenting a physically attractive self. The culture and profile space provided limits individual expression and reduces bodies to online advertisements. After spending my time immersed in online dating sites I learned that the responsibility of creating and maintaining a sense of self that is authentic is up to me, the user, and the majority of getting to know other daters would happen in the real world.

**Personal Marketing Strategy**

When first creating my dating profile I looked to other users, and not just the advice and features of the site, to better understand the culture. I was unsure how I wanted to present myself to other daters. Early on people speculated the Internet would allow individuals to create a neutral space removed from the body and void of cultural identities such as gender, race, and class.18 Yet, the internet has evolved into a socio-technological extension of society where individual identities are important. 18,[[30]](#footnote-30) My initial expectations of the sites were changes my observation of other users and the suggestions of the dating sites. At first, it seemed best to present myself as authentically as possible if I wanted to make an authentic connection. I wanted to present a nuanced gender identity but worried that my message would be misinterpreted. It was difficult to know if my choice to mute certain aspects of my identity was a sell out of my personal values. 6 Before I even began to build my profile I already had certain advantages, being young and white are both highly competitive in online dating space.[[31]](#footnote-31) Would taking advantage of certain selling points, attract the type of person I would really want to be with?

I reviewed other females’ profile to decide how I wanted to portray myself. Just like real or offline dating, to some degree I would be competing with other women, or at the very least our online presentations would be compared.[[32]](#footnote-32) Some of the content I saw was worth mimicking; such as offering a practical reason using the site i.e. moving to a new city. Other portrayals seemed so cliché that they failed to provide any sense of the person outside of their ability to perform gender. Usernames like “ms.cherrypie” or “bubbleycutie” made me wonder if these women chose youthful personas intentionally, or were these women just doing what was needed in order to compete for attention in the dating market? Other usernames hyper-sexualized a woman’s persona such as “pullmyhair” or “bombasticblondie” or “vampirehottie”. There was a wide range of usernames, but culture is influenced by these extreme presentations of womanhood. I was having a hard time feelings like an individual when some of the women seemed to be presenting identities that positively reinforced the acting out of gendered scripts.6,11 I chose an androgynous username, mlindsa3, because neutrality felt safer than having every email message start with the line, ‘Hello naughty4you’ or ‘Hi sweety14’.

Another interest I had was related to the way in which women presented careers, ambitions and goals.Match.com has an online dating community where individuals presented traditional gender scripts such as traditional pursuit or heteronormative family roles. Arguments made for the “naturalness” of gendered identities are based in the perceived need for society to create a proper family unit.6 Women in their childbearing years are expected to publicly display and justify their choices for reproduction.6,11 While not scientific, I tallied the education preferences of fifty men and fifty women and noticed a telling pattern. Men and women tended to emphasize traditional gender roles within the structure of the family. For example, men commonly listed their education but had no preference for their partner’s education.10 Yet, women commonly preferred a partner with a higher education.10 I began to wonder if my commitment to higher education was a disposable quality to men, or at least something I should be clear would not prevent me from prioritizing a family. Perhaps because the site forces users to prioritize their preferences, my value was still measured according to traditional roles for women, and I should strive to present myself as a good wife and mother. Even online, it seemed men chose to present themselves as the breadwinner, and women emphasized their qualities as a homemaker. 1,10,11

My opening paragraph needed to be interesting and authentic but somehow stand out among many profiles. “Reciprocity takes the form of self-promotion. Culture is to become precisely nothing but advertising.” [[33]](#footnote-33) I wondered if it was better to be cute or smart. Was there room in the online dating world to be both? I consider my stubbornness, independence, out-spoken nature, logic, and sarcastic sense of humor my more masculine traits, and my more feminine traits are my kindness, passion, and my nurturing nature. I am comfortable with these traits, and I hope my partner has similar qualities. However, I felt certain if I emphasized my masculine qualities too strongly, I would drive people away. Deciding which side of me to present raised interesting questions not just about female stereotypes, but feminist stereotypes. If I wanted a partner was I daring enough to dismiss all men who may not relate to feminist ideas presented in my profile? How important should I consider these feminist values in relation to my future partner? I felt pressured to be vague about some things such as my career plans and my love of politics. Acting cute appeared the best way to get noticed. Here is what I posted:

“I just moved to Phoenix this year. I am doing grad school here and I really love it so far. I am pretty ambitious about career goals and decided in the new year I should be more social. I have some old fashion values about family, but overall I would say I am a pretty modern woman. The most uncomfortable part of this whole profile stuff is picking your body type- I think I have a "great body" but that wasn't an option. Humor is really important for me, and I can't picture spending a lot of time around someone unless they make me laugh and laugh at my jokes too. I can be very sarcastic and argue at times, but I am very much a people person and I enjoy socializing. If you are looking for a girl who will follow, that isn't me- eek sorry. I am very interested in making friends, and don't mind a more casual get together. I only date people who really stand out to me.”

The problem of presenting a feminist self is not a unique problem:

“To count as a girl today appears to require this kind of ritualistic denunciation, which in turn suggests that one strategy in the disempowering of feminism includes it being historicised and generationalised and thus easily rendered out of date.”

McRobbie (2007) (p. 258)

An online persona has the potential for self-expression, at the time I felt it was necessary to qualify my own behavior and minimize certain characteristics. When retrospectively analyzing my own content I felt some shock and embarrassment. In my attempt to follow the “norms”, I found myself apologizing for my strengths. I wanted to present a strong feminist identity but feared the stereotypes that would be unnecessarily placed on me. Personality traits, which may be authentic, can be off-putting if they do not conform to gender performanc.6 So I opted to reduce my complicated essence to something simpler, an advertisement…a potential date.

I had other opportunities to present my persona to potential dates. I could check off interests from the site’s predetermined checklist. I had numerous options, such as reading, hiking, working out, travel, “hot” spots, and other options for first date topics. I quickly learned that the topics were broad enough to match me with almost anyone. Certain leisure activities and consumer behaviors nearly all members were included.14 For example, I can assume nearly all men are interested in weight lifting because that always came up as a common interest. This simplification of people is dangerous because, “…that reduction of life is what gets broadcasted between friends [daters] all the time. What is communicated between people eventually becomes their truth. Relationships take on the trouble of software engineering”. 33 Reducing ones self means that other daters viewing your profile are relying on limited information, largely based on consumer behaviors, and have no way of knowing how important a person’s interest is based on a checkmark.14 The checklist is left open for interpretation, and if a woman selects an activity, her identity is decided for her by that checkmark.

For example, a user might “like” dancing. I chose this category because I was a dance instructor and still enjoy attending classes occasionally. However, this could easily be construed as dancing in nightclubs, which I also enjoy, but does not accurately represent what I meant when I selected “dancing.” Further, dancing and nightclubs and are typically associated with “bad girl behavior.” Thus, reduction to a category brings with it the performativity of other woman’s behaviors and choices, now on the dating site, and throughout history. 6 The selection of “dancing” or any other behavior becomes redefined by the male reader and conformed to his assumptions about women who enjoy dancing. Interestingly, after my experience on Match.com I decided that for Okcupid I would I only post a picture. I did not include a bio or answer questions about my personality, but I received a similar level of interest from potential suitors as I received on Match.com. Although I had struggled with how to present my identity as a modern, feminist woman to daters, apparently my most important attribute was my appearance. All that mattered was the picture. Despite my personal hopes of tweaking, and altering my profile in order to indicate the type of person I am to other daters, I remained an advertisement in the space.

**Consumer Satisfaction**

To conclude the story of my experience in online dating culture I will describe interactions with the other users. After investigating the online spaces of commercial dating sites, I would like to offer the following examples as key incidents that influenced the interactions.9 I believe that many of these incidents were part of a larger set of socio-cultural norms found in all dating situations that allow daters to treat one another as objects. My virtual presentation (advertisement) led to interactions where I was treated as a product, more so than as a person. Often my silence was mistaken for intentional mysteriousness and an invitation for a follow-up. However, Match.com and Okcupid do not offer a mechanism to signal disinterest. With face-to-face interactions, men are more likely to take safe bets and wait for a perceived signal or appropriate body language. At the very least, I can offer a signal of disinterest by walking away or turning my back to continue a conversation with friends. Online, the cues are filtered, and hopeful emotions may prompt a user to be even more courageous.33 Men may have genuine hopes based in a false reality. Yet, when a real person rejects someone, the feelings are real. The intensity of the emotion may not be experienced any differently at all, even thought the interaction took place online. Some men have lashed out, and others tried to change my mind through repeated offers, other men did not pursue beyond the first message. All of these problematic dating rituals began offline, but continue in this space. However, just as in the offline world, women are supposed to be flattered and intrigued by all offers. 6

The first example is a fabricated account based on a real email exchange between myself and a potential suitor: “You know, you look better as a brunette.” At first I could not figure out why would a complete stranger felt compelled to critique me without ever having spoken any other words to me? My initial thought was, “Who does he think he is?!” I replied, “I don’t ask or take advice from complete strangers.” Within minutes I got another reply. “Wow. I was just trying to be helpful. No wonder you are single— you cunt.” The majority of the I met online did not make such bold moves. However, I couldn’t help but wonder if the rejection he felt was enhanced because in an online space people are supposed to treat one another as products. And especially, myself as a female dater should have been grateful and receptive to his feedback as a consumer.

By emphasizing traffic, the site clouds users’ judgments about the purpose of online dating. The site teaches users to value consumption by measuring success as the number of views your profile receives, and in the age of hook-up culture I wonder if people don’t see this endless pool of daters as a means of shuffling different partners in and out with efficiency. The second example I offer is a fabricated version of a very common text conversation I had with many daters.

Suitor: “Hey, whats up?”

Me: “Hi, not much, how are you? This is Mike, right?”

Suitor: “Yeah, it’s Mike. I’m good.”

Me: “Sweet. So what are you up to?”

Suitor: “Nothing really, just watching TV relaxing a little bit.”

Me: “Nice.”

Suitor: “Wanna send me a pic?”

Me: “No thanks, I don’t really do that.”

Suitor: “You don’t have to take your clothes off! Lol.”

Me: “Oh I know, I just don’t really like send pics to people I have never met. Lol. I know it might seem strange, but I just don’t do that.”

Suitor: “Oh common, why not? You must be trying to hide something.”

Me: “Lol, nope. I just feel weird sending an image or picture of myself to a complete stranger. Its always been my policy. Don’t worry!”

Suitor: “So you really won’t send one at all?”

Me: “No, nothing personal.”

Suitor: “K. I’m not sure if I want to meet up then, unless you will send the picture.”

As previously discussed there is great emphasis on attractiveness. The more you are viewed, the better your chances, and the more gender conforming the profile, the more views you will attract.6 My private conversations with men lead me to believe that they were invested and interested in making sure the attraction level translated into real life. That is understandable, the question I was always left with, is how the potential for deception left men feeling they had a right to access my image on command. After giving very rational and what I believed, justified reasons for not sharing cell phone pictures; I was often dismissed. I believe this dismissal was based on two reasons, one the idea that I was a replaceable product in a flooding market. The second, reason was that as a woman setting clear and firm boundaries around the ownership of my body was seen as unattractive and difficult, no matter how politely I state it. 6 Not all users behaved this way, but the site potentially facilitates these experiences. [[34]](#footnote-34)

The last incident, or example I will use presents more questions than answers. However, I think if we are to dismiss the experience of sexual aggression from the online dating experience, it will not offer a holistic picture. To be clear I have had these types of conversations in bars, at schools, at night clubs, over text message, and through online chat after I got to know someone. Yet in real life, when a man would approach me in a public place, for the first time, the conversation rarely evolved so quickly. This is not a condemnation of casual sex, or an attempt to explain or hypothesize about when sex should be introduced into relationships. It is important to note, that in my experience men would often discuss quickly, even before actually meeting me, topics of sexuality and physical intimacy. Here is an example of a fabricated conversation with a man met online, but not in person.

Suitor: “Hi there beautiful. How have you been?”

Me: “Good, how are you doing?”

Suitor: “I’m great, just kinda lonely.”

Me: “Lol, oh yeah? You are lonely?”

Suitor: “Ok, well I’m actually horny. Ha. Wanna hang out?”

Research is still developing theories and hypotheses around intimacy the perceived meaning, influences, and changes brought on through new technologies.[[35]](#footnote-35) Walther believes that mediated spaces enhance the opportunity for hyperpersonal communication. Research about college students communication patterns shows that there is a progression or pattern for mediated exchanges; participants described meeting people in person and then finding one another through social media, followed by private direct message conversations, and lastly giving out cell phone numbers for text messages and phone calls. The spaces where privacy is perceived, especially text messaging and direct messaging through chat, could evoke feelings of intimacy that lead to conversation about sex more quickly. The topic is certainly a part of contemporary dating experiences, and sexual practices within relationships could be influenced by online dating culture. “In online life, the pace of relationships speeds up. One quickly moves from infatuation to disillusionment and back. And the moment one grows even slightly bored, there is easy access to someone new”35 People already use online space to find casual sex, but in the near future I wonder how as users we will keep casual sexual networks separate from dating relationship networks. In my own experience the boundaries between these two spaces is already becoming blurred, and perhaps all dating networks will blend together in the future.

**Conclusion**

Essentially online dating sites transform people into advertisements whose worth is determined by the amount of traffic they can generate. Many commercial dating sites follow a similar format setting a precedent for online dating culture. In this regard, a dating profile is not much different than a personal ad in the local newspaper, yet the pace of online dating is much faster, more resourceful, and growing in popularity. For the sake of keeping profiles in a pleasing and enticing state, the sites promote traditional gender roles that inhibit users from creating a more nuanced identity. To compete, women and men are forced to market themselves like products. This ritual can dehumanize and in turn encourage daters to objectify one another. However, I believe these sites provide a valuable service to their users, so long as the users realize the profiles on the sites are limited and the information portrayed is restricted by the space. It takes time and effort to develop a personal relationship with a potential partner, and dating sites can only provide a forum; the real work is still up to the individual.

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