

Chapter 10

Writing to Meet Your Match: Rhetoric and Self-Presentation for Four Online Daters

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ABSTRACT

After ten years, Internet dating has become mainstreamed with members producing and consuming a great deal of written text before meeting face-to-face. Through a twenty-one-prompt questionnaire and follow up interviews, four case study participants describe their efforts at self-reflection, self-representation, and interaction with other members. The following chapter analyzes email questionnaire responses and interview excerpts that discuss each participant's perceptions of the rhetorical process of writing profiles, interpreting others' profiles, and exchanging emails to facilitate courtship. In addition, this chapter analyzes the discourse of participants' self-presentations in comparison with their reported self-perceptions and impression management strategies. Findings suggest that more effective members composed their e-texts after a methodical process of understanding the communication genre, the expectations and behaviors of their target audiences, and their own relationship objectives. Further, participants with greater experience with cyber dating have more positive experiences, which led to positive attitudes and greater satisfaction with e-dating.

INTRODUCTION

More than ten years have passed since AOL instant messengers used chat rooms to meet others from remote locations and Internet dating has been added to singles' repertoire of ways to meet new people and make romantic connections. As evidenced by television commercials, Internet

dating has become mainstream, with 15 million profiles on Match.com, 5 million users on eHarmony.com, 3 million on Perfectmatch.com, and with 225,000 members on Plenty-of-Fish.com. In addition, there are services that target narrower markets such as USMilitarysingl.com, Christiansingl.com, PlanetOut.com for gay members, Furries.meetup.com for fantasy fans who enjoy

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role-playing as animals, and JDate.com for Jewish users, to name a few (ConsumerSearch, 2012). Further, Craigslist.com, Twitter.com, Facebook.com, and even LinkedIn's 2012 "Hitch.me" are just a few examples of electronic social networks not designed specifically for dating but have been used by users for meeting people for friendship, family reunion, romance, partnership, and sex. Clearly, there has been a revival and re-imagining of the age old service of match making, mediated by Internet dating service providers (Lawson, 2012, pp. 189-90).

Unlike other forms of match making, Internet dating involves producing and consuming a great deal of written text before meeting face-to-face. In fact, techno-rhetorician Michael Day notes a resurgence of written correspondence as an "electronic epistolary renaissance:"

And just in the last year, some of my students have begun to confide in me that they were finding partners online. Could this reliance on text as a vehicle for feeling be a resurgence of the art of the love letter, through which, in days of yore, suitors had to prove their intelligence and wits in writing? Might it also in some ways echo the letters of those caught by cultural tradition in arranged or mail-order marriages, making a stab in the dark at relaying the essence of self in text? (M. Day, personal communication. February 17, 2007)

Facilitating courtship, online dating services gather members, who are looking for an attractive picture and package while there are others who are not just interested in a good picture. The latter, initiates relationship-building, which depends in part on clear and vigorous writing via the Internet. While less communicative individuals may rely primarily on pictures, phone conversations, and face-to-face meetings early on, more serious members develop relationships through writing

before moving on to more immediate forms of communication. In both cases, members are part of a rhetorical and social process as they navigate through the ever-fluid communications of information exchange, self-representation and impression management, compatibility assessment, and relationship building—however brief or lengthy these processes may be per individual.

This project has been an invaluable opportunity to get "behind the screens" with four independent and adventurous individuals as they pursue love, sex, and/or companionship with the help of dating services. The following represents case study research that combines a questionnaire, discourse analysis of various e-dating documents, and interviews about individuals' perceptions of their rhetorical processes while Internet dating--how they adapt their written identity constructions and interactive messages to their sense of audience and relationship goals.

BACKGROUND: PROJECTING IDENTITY, IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT, AND MEETING OTHERS ONLINE

Internet dating relationships are made possible by the personal profile, are initiated by the first email, and are sustained by the subsequent emails and instant messages between corresponding profile authors. Importantly, relationships evolve toward face-to-face meeting with each act of reading and writing, or they end from incompatibility, or lack of availability. In addition to digital photos, verbal textual features portray a persona through general content and stylistics that signify emotions and attitudes. Effective interlocutors develop strategies for projecting and interpreting expression, emotional content, and subtle nuances of meaning in order to interpret personality and compatibility

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