

Goffman Meets Online Dating: Exploring the „Virtually“ Socially Produced Self

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Abstract

Self-presentation is an exercise we are constantly engaged in every day, whether we are 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 and censored by the presence of others and the context we find ourselves in (Goffman 1959). While Goffman's body of work encompasses explorations of face-to-face interactions, technological innovations provide us with new modes for communication and interaction. The present study evaluates the applicability of Goffman's self-presentation theoretical framework in an online dating environment (Minglingsingles.com). Our findings indicate that social norms expressed through validation or discreditation social feedback does influence an individuals own self-presentation and self-identification. Specifically, individuals exposed to validation strategies changed their online profiles in a way that suggests a desire to align one's self-presentation to community norms.

Keywords: self-presentation, online dating, self-identification, online community

The self and the circumstances through which it changes have long been a much discussed and debated research topic. It took decades of theorizing before cohesive and widely accepted definitions of the self were created. For our purposes, the self is defined as consisting of multiple social roles, which are constantly and continuously shaped by others and situational norms (Goffman, 1959). However, the introduction and incorporation of technology into our everyday lives has caused many researchers to reconsider established definitions of the self and their applicability to interactions that occur through these mediums (Turkle, 1995; Thomas, 2007).

In particular, the manner in which Internet communication shapes our perception of others and how we, in turn, react to others' perception of us has been the source of significant debate about the possibility that computer-mediated communication might change some fundamental parameters of self-identification. Researchers have consequently focused on understanding the tribulations of the self online, and how it changes under the influence of online interaction (Turkle, 1995; Thomas, 2007).

Consequently, many studies are situated in spaces where participants are expected to experiment with their fictionalized identities, i.e. role playing in a MUD (Turkle, 1995; Thomas, 2007). Yet, it is difficult to determine how the self is changed in these spaces due, on the one hand, to the fantastical and fictional nature of participant interactions, and on the other, to normative imperatives associated with role-playing. We propose that in order to illustrate how one's identity changes under the influence of online interaction with other people, research needs to focus on spaces where presentations of self are expected to be authentic and where social interaction is meaningful and detectable. We aim to show how this process unfolds through our examinations of social interactions on an online dating website, Minglingsingles.com¹.

Our broader theoretical perspective is that the Internet does not re-invent the social norms that guide us in everyday life; rather, they are adapted for use (Baym, 1993; Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2002; Walther and Parks, 2002). In this we follow Goffman, who stated that our selves, and thus our presentations of self, are shaped by interactions with others and the social norms of the context in which we are presently engaged (Goffman, 1959). Through our research, we aim to show that this process of change in regards to self-identification occurs via online interactions, albeit the absence of physical co-presence.

Past Research on Online Self-Presentation

In recent years, many researchers have shown great interest in how the self is produced and presented online, gathering, analyzing, and reporting on information from a variety of sources (Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 2006; Nilsson and Svensson, 2007; Wynn and Katz, 1997; Hardey, 2002; Turkle, 1995). However, online dating websites are qualitatively different from many other online settings because of the anticipated face-to-face interaction (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006; Hardey, 2002). 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 consumer success of online dating websites, there is a surprising paucity of research conducted in these spaces. 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).” Hardey (2002) further notes that dating websites 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).” 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 (Baym, 1993; Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2002; Walther and Parks, 2002).

¹Pseudonym

For many researchers, technological innovations raise questions about established definitions of identity. Symbolic interactionists believe the self to be organized into multiple parts (identities), one for each of the social roles a person holds (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1967). Our identities are based upon reflexive evaluation (Mead, 1967); 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 (Goffman, 1959). While this symbolic interactionist conception of identity is widely accepted, its applicability in the face of technological advancement is in a rather incipient phase.

A notable exception is Sherry Turkle, who has written extensively about technology and its influence on perceptions of identity. In discussing the self as multiple, she draws 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 multiple windows open, each representing a different context that we are simultaneously „present” within (Turkle, 1995). For Turkle (1997), online the self is multiple and distributed and “exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time (1096).”

Yet, Turkle’s conception of the self, while not completely inconsistent with Goffman’s, can be perceived at times as rather 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 does not fully explore the subtler points made by Goffman. Even though Goffman’s writings predate the advent of technological innovation, he conceives of the self as a multifaceted entity. Turkle’s over-reliance on the computer as a metaphor for the self does not take into account the possibility that the fracturing of the self might have preceded rather than succeeded technological innovations. It should be added, however, that Turkle’s point might still be valid, in that the introduction of computer-mediated communication radicalized this process of fragmentation announced by Goffman.

Had Goffman lived to see our current virtual culture, he would likely join the conversation restarted by Turkle by saying that even though the computer allows us to "cycle through" our different identities at the click of a mouse, we play within each window roles that emerge in the interaction with the individuals at the other end of the „line,” not with identities that are created by the window itself. That is, identity play emerges during human-to-human interaction and is dependent on the feedback/input we get from our interlocutors. Playing a fictional MUD character in one window would not be acceptable in another. We are still playing different roles in different settings; the computer allows us to play out our different identities more easily, but these identities are valid to specific audiences.

Turkle largely discusses identity within role playing virtual fantasy worlds where actors are not expected to reveal or enact their “real” offline selves. It is difficult to determine if interactions that occur within these spaces demonstrate changes in one’s self-identity. While much of Turkle’s research focuses on identity play within these fantasy worlds, we 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, and can and do influence changes to our selves.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

We are primarily operating under the theoretical framework of the self and self-presentation as outlined by Erving Goffman. Key to Goffman’s theorizing on self-presentation is the idea that the self is a social product (Goffman, 1959). Specifically, the self is produced through the use of self-presentational strategies that are either validated or discredited by others (Goffman, 1959). Feedback received from others is assessed and incorporated into one’s self-presentational strategy, resulting in changes to one’s self. Within Minglingsingles.com, members are performing for potential mates; thus, their performances are heavily influenced by the approval/disapproval of others. Performances are further restricted according to the social norms present on Minglingsingles.com.

In this context, we take the position that social interaction online has detectable effects on one’s sense of self-identification and on how the self is performed in public. This perspective might be questioned, of

course, if one is to take the view that Internet communication “filters out” certain non-verbal behaviors that aid in discourse and convey meaning (Kiesler, 1986; Culnan and Markus, 1987) and that online communication can only be simulacrum of „real” human interaction. Conclusive research has shown, however, that the Internet is an inherently social space (Hardey, 2002; Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2002; Walther and Parks, 2002) and given enough time even the cues that are lost due to low bandwidth are substituted or recovered. Rather than arbitrarily dividing spaces where research studies occur into „real” and „virtual,” we hold the position that there is one social world (Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2002), one that contains „both traditional and technologically advanced modes of communication and sites of social activity (Garcia, Standlee and Bechkoff, 2009).” Our identities are not fundamentally changed as a result of technological innovation; our identities are subject to change via interactions with others and the social norms that guide those interactions, regardless of whether or not they occur in „real” or „virtual” spaces.

To summarize, our study investigates the possibility that online identities change under the impact of social interaction. More specifically, informed by Goffman’s socio-psychological perspective, we propose that exposure to communicative social validation / discreditation in an online context can lead to detectable changes in self-presentation online. Furthermore, we propose that such changes are indicative of changes in self-identification, validating Goffman’s proposition that self-presentation is a constitutive component of the process of identification.

The specific formal research questions we derive from this perspective are:

- RQ1: Is self-identity subject to changes as a result of online interactions?
- RQ2: Do validation / discreditation norms that regulate performances of self result in changes in how subjects self-identify?

Method

Why MingleSingles.com?

Our study focuses on an online interaction space that relies in great measure on communication validation and discreditation strategies; specifically, a dating website. MingleSingles.com was selected for study because it offers users via dedicated discussion forums the opportunity to offer each other advice on how to present themselves online. This particular feature makes MingleSingles.com unique from the majority of other dating sites that do not provide this feature for members.

MingleSingles.com was also chosen because it is free and has low barriers to entry. We chose to study a smaller-scale dating site that does not require its members to pay fees for use. Members of pay-for-membership dating sites are more likely to conform to the site’s standards (Arvidsson, 2006). Researchers have found that on large websites, which use explicit normative models for user profiles, such as Match.com’s „Quality Singles”, members tend to conform to the site’s motto and construct their identities accordingly (Arvidsson, 2006). Thus, the „Quality Single” ideal provides „a value for users... a ‘materiality’ that presumably facilitates self-presentation and interaction on the site (Arvidsson, 2006)”. At the same time, this constrains or even imposes on the users a pre-processed identity, which might or might not fit their personal characteristics.

MingleSingles.com does not adhere to a slogan that brands members as sharing one universal characteristic, as Match.com does. Rather, members have a strong influence over others’ self-presentation strategies, which emerges through the interactions that occur within the site forums. The forum that primarily served as our source for data collection and analysis, titled „Profile Reviews,” is geared towards giving advice, dater-to-dater, about how to present themselves within their respective profiles. Advice is honest, direct and can be both critical and approving. This creates an interesting dynamic. Members not only aid by indirectly constructing social norms, they also maintain and enforce them through their direct interactions with others.

Of the several interaction opportunities offered by the site, we focus on the Profile Review forum not only because it is popular, ranking 6th out of the 23 available forums based on the number of individual

threads contained within (14, 129 threads containing 85, 536 posts at the time of our study, February 2009), but also because within it daters can submit their profiles for review by other members. In essence, members are asking others to evaluate their presentation of self as portrayed within their individual profiles. As a result of asking for a profile review, responses are given by others that serve to validate or discredit performances of self. Responses given are typically in the form of advice that one can use to improve their presentations of self so that they are more likely to find a date that matches their needs and interests. An individual's profile serves as a representation of self, and as we will demonstrate, there are reasons to believe that feedback-induced changes in profiles might be indicative of changes in self-identity.

Netnography and „Lurking” as a Research Method

We use a grounded theory approach adopted for online environments (Kozinets, 1998; Langer and Beckman, 2005) to investigate how communicative validation or discreditation strategies produce changes in self-presentation and self-identification. Texts from the Profile Review forum were identified via participant observation („lurking”) for three months before data collection (February 2009). „Lurking” or passive participant observation has been long recognized as a form of „netnography” (Kozinets, 1998; Langer and Beckman, 2005). In this context the term „lurking” encompasses a range of observational behaviors similar to those implied by the „participant observation” of classical ethnographic research (Kozinets, 1998; Langer and Beckman, 2005). Ethnographic research emphasizes immersion in a particular social context in order to more fully understand the social processes that underlie interactions. Long-term „lurking” allowed us to observe the spaces that would eventually serve as sites for data collection. Even though the member of the team responsible with ethnographic observation became a registered member of *Minglingsingles.com*, she never had any interactions with other members; membership was strictly for observational purposes. While much ethnographic research emphasizes engaging and maintaining an ongoing dialogue with its research subjects to gain a „rich” understanding via participation (Garcia *et al.*, 2009), the researcher refrained from revealing her intentions to the subjects because she did not want to disturb naturally occurring behavior and create distress among participants by compromising their identities². Further, lurking behaviors were made undetectable by making our profile invisible; also, there is no mechanism for members to detect who has been viewing their profiles.

Data for analysis was collected at two different time intervals, which will be referred to as Time 1 and Time 2 (February 2009 and March 2009). At each collection period, threads from the Profile Review forum and their subsequent thread-starters' profiles were selected for analysis according to the methodology described below. All data was downloaded and saved to a flash drive and printed out in hard copy. Data from these two primary spaces were selected for analysis because they capture the influences that led many members to change their profile pages, and thus evidence changes in their selves over time.

At Time 1 our goal was to collect threads in their infancy (i.e. absent or nearly absent of comments from others; three or fewer comments was considered ideal), which served as a baseline for observing subsequent changes. Each day over a twelve day period (February 2-14, 2009) the first 15 threads were selected for inclusion in the sample. We found that thread creation by members was sporadic, and did not adhere to any predictable time frame. As a result, we selected threads at different times each day in attempts to collect infant threads. Our attempts at collecting infant threads proved largely successful, as a majority of the Profile Review threads collected at Time 1 contain three or fewer comments (n=61, 62.9%). Threads that contain more than 3 comments were still included in the analysis as it was reasoned that even if a participant had already made profile changes as a result of advisement, it stood to reason that additional feedback would also likely result in change. The fact that a majority of members' profiles evidence change across time supports this conclusion.

As a result of this data collection procedure 125 unique individual profiles and corresponding threads were collected for analysis at Time 1. Naturally, this frequently led to the collection of threads collected

²All screen names have been replaced with pseudonyms

on previous occasions; as such, replicate threads were discarded. The reason for exclusively selecting threads that appear at the top of the forum is that they are the most recently created or contain recent activity (which aids in explaining why some threads that were collected contain comments, because the activity bumped the thread to the top).

At Time 2, individual profiles and corresponding threads were again collected. Time 2 occurred on March 1st, 2009, two weeks from the last day (February 14th) of Time 1. Upon searching for each member from the initial sample at Time 1, only 105 of the original 125 could be located; fifteen could not be found, presumably because they deleted their accounts, and five had set their profiles to invisible. These 20 members were subsequently eliminated from analysis because of insufficient data to compare across waves. Further, eight additional profiles were removed from the sample because their postings were „off-topic,” meaning that discussion that occurred within them did not focus on profile reviews, resulting in a final sample size of 97.

Two additional threads were also collected, as they were determined to aid in explications of how the self is changed via online interactions. At the very top of the Profile Review forum, there are two moderator-initiated threads. One thread, titled „If you want your profile reviewed read this!” outlines the rules of forum participation for members. The other thread, titled „How To Write A Great Dating Profile,” was created for discussion of what members think makes a profile great. 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 how members present their identities in public.

An inductive approach to data analysis was employed, based largely upon grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Kozinets, 1998; Langer and Beckman, 2005; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). Sensitizing concepts were used to guide the analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1997). Blumer (1954) explains sensitizing concepts as „giving the user a general sense of ... guidance in approaching empirical circumstances... sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look (7)”. Since our primary theoretical framework draws from Goffman, sensitizing concepts included: self-identification, social norms of participation, social norms of self-presentation, and validation / discreditation of performances by others. For example, statements such as „I am a caring, genuine person... looking for someone special” were classified under the self-identification concept. A detailed list of sensitization concepts and examples can be found in Appendix A. As the data was collected and analyzed, guided by these sensitizing concepts, themes regarding the social norms of participation and patterns of interaction began to reveal themselves. A focus and analysis on each of these aspects illustrates how the self is socially produced according to Goffman, namely through member interactions and the contextual framework that structures interactions that occur on Minglingsingles.com.

As Glaser and Strauss (1967) note, „... in discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories from evidence; then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept (23).” Following Glaser and Strauss’ methods, coding categories were then created to fit with themes that emerged from the data. Social norms revealed themselves in the form of explicitly outlined rules for participation and as evidenced in members’ expectations of others’ behaviors. Patterns of interaction within the Profile Review forum evidenced themselves in the form of advice, from which several different sub-categories were created. The types of advice given by members primarily falls into four categorizations: advice regarding the use of pictures, requests for more information, invitations to participate, and affirmative responses. The sub-categories of advice are used to demonstrate more specifically how changes can be determined in our analysis, and were selected because of the frequency in which they occurred among Profile Review threads (see Table 1). Other sub-categories of advice were noted, but were not selected for analysis due to the infrequency with which they were discussed, and because they do not sufficiently align with our sensitizing concepts.

As we will show, rules/norms regarding participation were usually made explicit or could be evidenced based on frequency of discussion among members. Further, in response to requests for a Profile Review, members either validate or discredit presentations of self in the guise of advice. Different types of advice were given, such as requests for a particular member to provide more information about themselves. In

instances where this type of advice is given, it can be inferred that one's presentation of self is „lacking”, and is thus discredited on that basis. The inclusion of more information about oneself serves as a means to remedy this, and gains approval from others. For those who chose to take advice given, changes can be seen by examining profiles over time. Therefore, the decision to divide validation / discreditation strategies into sub-categories of advice provides for a clearer way to effectively observe nuanced changes in self-identity.

For discussion and analysis purposes, we will be using excerpts from members to demonstrate how they serve to influence changes in self-identity. All excerpts represent original statements made by members to preserve the language used in interactions with others. Following Markham (2004), we believe that member writings should be conveyed 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, 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 (153).

Analytic strategies

We started our analysis by determining whether specific spaces and the interactions that occurred within them warranted further examination, and thus inclusion in our research study based upon their compatibility with our sensitizing concepts. While lurking on Minglingsingles.com, we familiarized ourselves with rules that members are expected to follow, as they serve as the social norms that guide participation within the Profile Review forum. These rules are outlined in a thread at the top of the forum, titled „If you want your profile reviewed read this!” It was determined that the text contained within (see Appendix) fits our sensitizing concept regarding social norms of participation.

As such, this thread 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 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. For example, jhanson11 posted a request for a profile review in another members' thread by asking „can somebody temm what i,m doing wrong on my profile?” In response, dusking posts „start your own post & we'll fill you in.” This illustrates how failure to conform to the pre-established norms of participation result in discreditation of what is perceived to be a case of „misbehavior.”

Additionally, advice is offered; it is suggested that „you can learn a lot by reading other profile reviews, so make sure you do that too.” This statement speaks to the nature of Goffman's theoretical premise that the self is socially produced (1959). „Lurking” behaviors are encouraged; instructing members to read fellow daters profile reviews facilitates a type of (passive) interaction that can have an influence upon one's self and subsequent self-presentation. By viewing other members behaviors, one can determine what constitutes a validated performance.

Dater Expectations

In our analysis one important concern was to understand and be mindful of dater expectations, since they reflect the pre-existing norms that might influence behavior on the site. In the Profile Review forum, directly beneath the aforementioned thread, there is a thread titled „How To Write A Great Dating Profile.” This thread contains a conversation in which members divulge their expectations regarding how others present themselves, and was summarily categorized under the concept of social norms related to self-presentation.

This thread was created by the forum moderator, then opened to member discourse. How to go about writing a great dating profile is clearly an important issue for many, receiving 111 response posts before

the thread was locked. Three of our sub-categories of types of advice (excluding affirmative responses) were also widely discussed within this thread, providing further support for their use in our analysis. For example, 1lovelylady makes the point that “If they don’t fill out the profile... then there is nothing to write to them about.” By not making an attempt to present the self on one’s profile by providing enough information, it is difficult for interested parties to get a sense of who they are and how to approach them.

Unlike in the first thread discussed where the forum moderator lays out the rules for proper forum conduct, this thread features members collaboratively engaged in constructing expectations of member behavior, specifically regarding what types of content one’s profile should contain. Thus, norms and expectations regarding behaviors that will be validated and those that will be discredited are constantly and continually negotiated among members.

Analyzing Dater Interactions: Main findings

This section summarizes our main findings, specifically, how likely it is that online interaction can lead to self-identification in online environments. Before getting to specifics, we need to contextualize the discussion of our findings. While daters 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 inquiries for advice. The purpose of the Profile Review forum is to allow members to create threads so that they may request opinions about their profiles. In turn, it also functions as a space for members to answer other’s inquiries by critiquing presentations of self via advice-giving. Within each thread, this dynamic and direct member-to-member interaction is present.

Types of advice given in response to a member’s inquiry for a profile review were utilized to determine whether or not performances of self were validated / discredited. Examples are provided to illustrate changes that occurred across time as they evidence changes in self-concept. The following table shows the frequency with which each type of advice is given within Profile Review threads, and the subsequent number of members who changed aspects of their profiles per advice given.

Table 1

Frequency of Types of Advice	Number of Mentions (per individual thread)	Percentage of Occurrence (overall sample n=97)	Number of Profiles that Evidence Change (per Advisement)	Percentage of Profiles that Evidence Change (per Advisement)
Advice Regarding the Use of Pictures	47	48.5%	24	51.1%
Requests for more Information	41	42.3%	22	53.7%
Invitations to Participate	36	37.1%	25	69.4%
Affirmative Responses	72	74.2%	-	-

As the information found within the table suggests, the number of participants making changes per specific advisement is significant. Many members received multiple forms of advice, which accounts for overlap. Sometimes members incorporated changes according to all advice received, sometimes not. Regardless, we observed that a majority (n=80, 82.5%) changed their profiles in some way from Time 1 to Time 2, regardless of whether or not specifically advised to do so. More significantly, a direct confirmation of our initial assumption, namely that online interactions may lead to self-identification, is provided by the finding that of the 82.5% who changed their profiles, 68.8% (n=55) changed after receiving advice of any kind. In brief, the answer to the first Research Question, „Is self-identity subject to changes as a result of online interactions?,” is a very clear „yes.”

At the same time, it is interesting to make a note that 15.5% (n=15) of the observed subjects changed aspects of their profile even though all responses signaled approval. This perhaps indicates that members did read others profiles and forum posts which, in turn, influenced each to modify his or her profile. By looking to others, members can learn the rules and how to self-present in ways that will gain approval. Due to the fact that many threads collected at Time 1 already included comments from others, it is entirely possible that profile changes went undetected by us because changes were made immediately upon receiving advice. It could also be the case that we did not let enough time elapse for some to make desired changes.

Norms and validation / discreditation strategies

In what follows we will explore the four interaction types we uncovered (advice regarding pictures, requests for information, invitation to participate, affirmative responses) in more detail aiming to provide richer texture to the findings and to prepare the ground for answering our second Research Question, namely if „validation / discreditation norms that regulate performances of self result in changes in how subjects self-identify.” The running red thread through this discussion, and major substantive finding of our study, is that norms and validation / discreditation strategies do indeed have a very important role in shaping the process of self presentation and directly influence self-image as depicted in profiles. We structure the discussion by type of advice, focusing in particular on those examples that illustrate how norms and validation / discreditation strategies interact with self-presentation.

Advice regarding the use of pictures

Whether or not members had pictures present on their profiles, and how they were used to present the self was an issue many had a preoccupation with. For example, many members felt that a profile without a picture discredited an individual, because there was a lack of „proof” that there was a person behind the profile. Comments such as „add a pic” were easily categorized under the sub-category for pictures, belonging to the sensitizing concept of validation / discreditation strategies. Noting whether members utilized advice regarding pictures was thus a significant means of determining whether or not the self was changed across time as a result of validation / discreditation by others. In other words, adding a picture was considered a central behavior for actively „re-presenting the self” and for shifting one type (fully pseudonymous) to another and highly selective strategy of self-identification.

Member advisement on profile pictures occurred in nearly half of our sample (n=47). Since profile templates are the same for each member, picture changes or additions were easily noted upon comparing profiles across waves. Each profile contains a photo space near the top center, and space is provided to the right where additional pictures may be vertically aligned. Of the 47 individuals who were given advice regarding use of pictures, half of those (n=24, 51.1%) implemented changes.

Advice about photos was typically made explicit, usually accompanied by reasons for the suggested change. For example, upon reviewing brin23’s profile, 1caligal suggests that he „need(s) a pic that isn’t fading to black.” At Time 1, brin23’s main photo³ is quite dark, making it difficult to make out his appearance. At Time 2, brin23 clearly considered her advice by removing the dark picture from his profile, and replacing it with a clearer one.

This is just one instance in which advice resulted in a profile change. As such, it is illustrative of how feedback from others influences presentations of self, and subsequently, how the self is perceived and changed as a result. Interestingly, there were several instances in which members noted that they intended to make the recommended changes. In making such a declaration, these members are stating intentions which will result in validation by others at a future date. In one instance, notepasser suggests to mreasy that he get a new main picture:

³To protect subjects’ identities, photos are not used

... get a more up close picture of yourself ...

In response, mreeasy posts

I don't have a camera at the moment, but if I get one... I'll post more.

While several inquirers indicated similar technological dilemmas, replies like mreeasy's indicate a desire to gain the approval of others, even if said approval must wait until a later date. 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 of self, providing one support to our affirmative answer to Research Question 2.

Requests for more information

The manner in which the data supports Research Question 2 can be further nuanced by analyzing advice that aims to shape a core strategy of self-presentation, namely, the overt invitation extended to newcomers to disclose more about themselves.

Discourse focusing on the need to provide an informative profile narrative was a major theme (n=41). This sub-category of advice was a very popular advising point among members for obvious reasons. In the absence of the physical body, text becomes an impertinent means of self-presentation. Failure to adequately describe the self by providing enough information results in discreditation by others. Comments such as "more info" were categorized under the sub-category for requests for more information of the sensitizing concept for validation / discreditation strategies.

Whether or not an advised member made textual changes was easily evidenced across time by examining profile narratives. It is within the profile narrative that declarations of self-identification are made; these explications fit under our sensitizing concept of self-identification. In particular, we were looking for evidence of change within personal narratives based upon whether or not others validated or discredited their attempts at self-presentation.

The types of information that was most often requested pertained to what interests and personality one has and what qualities one is looking for in a partner, which are all characteristics that are closely aligned with one's self-identity. Taking the time to carefully fill out this information allows interested parties to get a better idea not only of what a person is like, but if they meet his/her criteria as a potential mate. dusking summarizes it best in his advice to a fellow member: „you could also flesh out your profile a bit w/ adventures you'd like to have, etc. Something to give a real sense of self.” It is obvious that members' demonstrate an acute awareness of and concern with their selves and whether or not their textual depictions align with how they perceive themselves.

In response to requests for more information, a majority of those receiving this advice complied by re-working their narrative. Out of the 41 individuals who were advised per this sub-category, 22 (53.7%) complied. In one example, member jp45 received the following suggestions in response to his profile review inquiry:

tell more what u like to do... (spidey4).

... what type of woman your looking for ... (cook76).

Prior to incorporating advised changes, jp45's profile (excerpt) reads as follows at Time 1:

I'm a „chicken fried, cold beer on a Friday night, pair of jeans that fit just right, and the radio up” type of guy ... just an ordinary blue collar, work my fingers to the bone ... I'm an outgoing ... guy and can strike up a conversation with any total stranger.

At time 2, jp45's profile evidences significant change, as the following excerpt shows. While his introductory paragraph remains largely unchanged, he makes additions:

I will be going to school this spring to become a massage therapist ... I'm a sucker for a girl with a southern accent ... a girl who is real ... A girl that loves to laugh, and is not one who points out other peoples faults ... Ya gotta' have self respect, and ... confidence in yourself.

Upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that both spidey4's and cook76's advice was incorporated. Whereas jp45 previously did not include much information regarding what he was looking for in a potential mate, he does so at Time 2. Additionally, jp45 also added information about his future employment aspirations. Based on the feedback he received from others, jp45 was able to determine that his original attempts at presenting his self were not satisfactory. Further, statements such as „I will be going to school ... to become a massage therapist ...” are categorized as self-identification statements, and demonstrate members' attempts at presenting themselves.

Because the nature of communication and self-presentation differs from face-to-face, feedback from others aids in understanding how the self is perceived online. This example does an excellent job of illustrating how one's self-identity is shaped and influenced based upon the social norms of the context one is a part of, and through interactions with others. It also demonstrates that the self is subject to changes via the same modes, regardless of where that interaction occurs. Examinations of changes that occur across time per advisement to provide more information about the self provides further support for an affirmative response to Research Question 2, as this type of advice aids in revealing disparities in one's presentation of self online.

Invitations to participate

Suggestions that a member should actively engage with others differs from the sub-categories of advice we have heretofore examined in that participation is a dynamic rather than a self-reflexive activity. Despite its differing orientation, noting whether or not those advised to participate choose to do so provides a means for us to aid in answering Research Question 2. Attempts made at interacting with others are approved of, as they demonstrate a member's interest in actively trying to meet people. In most cases, those asking for profile reviews are new members, and posting in the Profile Review thread is their first attempt at interaction. By advising these „newbies” to participate, advisers are simultaneously recommending changes to the self and revealing social norms regarding active participation on Minglesingles.com.

Much of the advice given by respondents (n=36) suggested that individual inquirers get more involved by participating in forum discussions. Of the 36 individuals who were specifically advised to do so, 25 (69.4%) evidence increased levels of participation, which was determined by examining the number of discussions (threads) a member had created and the number of posts they contributed to various forums from Time 1 to Time 2. As aforementioned, a majority of our sample showed some form of participation across time, whether it was as minuscule as creating one discussion or the posting of dozens of comments.

Forum participation can also supplement and validate the information found on one's profile. Individual profiles contain links to all of the discussions/posts one has ever initiated/made. Examinations of these discussions/posts can reveal more information about a person, as it allows viewers to see how they interact with others.

For instance, in response to butterfly's request for a profile review, members suggest that she participate in the forums, as exemplified in the following comment:

the chat rooms are fun and you meet a lot of people. join in the fun ... (six09).

A quick glance at butterfly's activity across waves shows increased participation.

Time 1:

My Discussions:	view my: discussions (1) posts (16)
------------------------	--

Time 2:

My Discussions:	view my: discussions (4) posts (69)
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At Time 2, butterfly initiated 3 more discussions, and posted 53 more times. We discern who people are via our interactions with them, as they give off clues about who they are. Participation not only presents a more dimensional self to others, but impacts butterfly's own identity as she learns more about who she is through discourse with others. Because interactions with others influence our presentations of self, and as a result, how we self-identify, advisement for members to participate aids in supporting an affirmative response to Research Question 2.

Affirmative Responses

While profile reviewers offered plenty of constructive criticism, they also gave out compliments, which serve as affirmative responses (n=72, 74.2%). As it pertains to our Research Question 2, evidence of no change over time as a result of receiving affirmative responses suggests a validation of self. A majority of the members in our sample received at least one affirmative reply in response to a profile review; affirmations were given both as initial requests for a profile review, and also as approval of changes made. It was not uncommon for advisers to have no additional advice to proffer members at Time 1; instead they felt a profile was satisfactory as is, which serves to validate one's presentation of self.

Comments, such as „your profile is good!“ were easily categorized under the sub-category for affirmative responses under the validation / discreditation concept. Affirmative statements were often accompanied by reasons why a particular reviewer liked a profile. In addition to being complimentary, the reasons given for liking a particular profile illustrate the importance of dater expectations. Members expect to get a sense of self in reading another's profile. For many members, dating online is a relatively new phenomenon; the receipt of affirmative responses further serves to validate that members' attempts at conveying the self online are successful.

Profile viewers draw upon available resources to get a sense of who a person is. In addition to being a validation of one's performance of self, complimentary comments go beyond simple validation and reveal first impressions as interpreted by others. Goffman (1959) spoke at length about the importance of first impressions in face-to-face encounters; they are likewise important in online interactions. Further, this type of feedback allows an inquirer to determine whether or not their performances of self are being interpreted as intended. If not, adjustments can be made.

Much of the time members replied affirmatively by complimenting the inquirer and letting them know that they felt his/her profile didn't require any changes. Members reviewing mesas' profile all gave him affirmative responses, such as „I think the profile and picture are both very good!“

Perhaps due to these complimentary responses, mesas profile did not change from Time 1 to Time 2. mesas is a rare case, as only four other members' profiles show no changes across time; usually even when those being reviewed got all or mostly complimentary responses, some change can be evidenced across waves, usually in the form of participation. Like vistas, workinmama received all complimentary responses. Despite this, she makes several changes from Time 1 to Time 2 by tweaking her narrative, and posting 1,528 more times. The fact that many members increased their levels of participation or changed other aspects of their profile without being specifically advised to do so suggests that they are learning its significance by further site explorations. While the receipt of affirmative responses signals validation, it is also apparent that changes suggest that the social norms of Minglingsingles.com and expectations of

behavior also influence how members choose to self-identify. Advice focusing on validation supports an affirmative response to our Research Question 2, regardless of whether or not members chose to leave their profile „as is,” or were inspired to initiate change due to the influence of social norms.

Conclusions

As these 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 we separate the modes through which the self is socially produced into two distinct parts (validation / discreditation of performances and social norms) for discussion purposes, we 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. This analysis oversimplifies the process.

Our analysis also demonstrates that advice given upon individual inquiry is often implemented by members, which is evidenced upon examinations of individual profiles across time. Types of advice were used show how validation / discreditation influenced changes in self-identity. 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. There could be a variety of reasons for this, but we suggest that these changes were made as a result of the influence of social norms. Just as we “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. In turn, these norms influenced changes in members’ self-identity.

„How To Write A Great Dating Profile” provided a space in which expectations regarding self-presentation 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. Further, discussions of social norms related to self-presentational strategies also suggests the types of behaviors that will be considered acceptable.

These observations document a complex series of interactions in which the social norms of the context and members interactions within it not only influence presentations of self but produce changes in one’s self-identity. Changes documented among individual profiles over time illustrate how the self is socially produced through this dynamic interplay between social structure and interaction. The self, even when presented online, is not static: it is processual and susceptible to change by external influences.

While our data and subsequent analysis are wholly derived from observation, the addition of in-depth interviewing would undoubtedly prove complementary. In-depth interviews would allow access to information that cannot be garnered through observation alone. Had it been included, we 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 be posed about „lurking” behaviors to get an idea of members’ awareness of social norms and expectations of site behavior, and how members feel they impact how they self-identify.

Our study shows that studying online dating websites can provide very promising avenues for understanding some core sociological concepts. At the same time, the expectation of eventual face-to-face interactions with individuals initially known online make online dating websites qualitatively different than many other websites. Thus, they warrant closer inspection. The mixing of online and offline behaviors needs to be more carefully scrutinized. Even though our present study focuses on changes in self-identity that occur on an online dating website, we do not suggest that our findings are necessarily generalizable across all dating sites, much less across all online spaces where interaction occurs.

Study of online spaces affords researchers a unique opportunity to more concretely observe, record, and analyze human behaviors. Through careful analyses of 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 in our present study reveals that this particular space possesses social norms that guide and constrain behavior; further, members’ presentations of self are adjusted and adapted to conform to these social norms. As a result, self-identity is influenced and

produced through a dynamic interaction between the social norms of Minglingsingles.com and member interactions within it, namely through the process of having one's performances validated or discredited by others. While online interactions are fundamentally different than those that transpire face-to-face, careful assessments reveal important similarities. Tentative explorations of online spaces have increasingly revealed evidence that online interactions are not fundamentally different from those that occur offline: the application of Goffman's theoretical framework to online spaces illustrates this phenomena.

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Appendix A

Sensitizing Concepts and Examples

Self-identification	
Excerpts from profile narratives	„I am fun loving.” „I’m very passionate about my work ...”

Social norms of participation	
Excerpt from “If you want your profile reviewed, read this!”	„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.”
Excerpt from Profile Review (member sanctioning)	brendan09 creates an off-topic post. In response, 1caligal posts „wrong forum ... this is for profile review ...”

Social norms related to self-presentation	
Excerpts from „How to Write a Great Dating Profile”	„Empty profiles are an automatic ignore.” „No pictures = no success.”

Validation / discreditation of performances	
Sub-categories: Types of Advice	
Excerpts from Profile Review forum	
Pictures	„Add a pic.”
Requests for more information	„...write more about what you are looking for ...”
Invitations to participate	„...venture out into the forums ...”
Affirmative Responses	„I think your profile is good. It rocks!”

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