

Self-Presentation in the Online Dating Environment

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the world of Internet dating. It examined how daters presented themselves and formed impressions of others online with a particular focus on the accuracy of the online presentations. Five men and women who were currently dating online were interviewed and observed. In addition, one participant's observations prior to and after meeting another participant online were obtained.

Participants reported that Internet dating was a great way to meet people but a difficult method of determining compatibility without meeting in person. Relationships that began on the Internet were continued offline only if the daters experienced chemistry in person. Deception was expected due to the nature of the medium (e.g., the lack of non-verbal cues), but the deception that was encountered was small in scale. All the participants claimed honesty in their presentations, but they misrepresented themselves in small, unintentional ways. Overall, the online impressions differed from the reality but not significantly enough to be a concern. Deception appeared to be no more rampant on the Internet than it is in everyday life.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

From its humble beginnings in 1965, when a telephone line was used to wire a computer on the East coast of the United States to a computer on the West coast, the Internet has progressed to a technological source of vast amounts of information and a unique social domain that facilitates interpersonal communication (Montero & Stokols, 2003) and relationship formation and development (e.g., Baker, 2000; Parks & Roberts, 1998). Much of the research on online relationships has focussed on groups that are formed and tend to stay exclusively online in such contexts as newsgroups, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and the fantasy environments of MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons or Dimensions), MOOs (Object-Oriented MUDs), and MUSHES (Multi-User Shared Hallucinations) (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimmons, 2002; Biggs, 2000; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998; Suler, 2000). Internet dating sites, however, provide the unique opportunity to examine relationships that begin online with the express intention of moving off-line. In addition, because the dating process begins with a perusal of profiles or, in essence, self-advertisements, Internet dating sites are a rich source of data for the study of self-presentation (including misrepresentation) processes.

Along with the explosion of Internet dating as a new means of meeting people and forming relationships has come a proliferation of sensationalistic media reports about people being purposely lied to, scammed, and placed in dangerous situations (e.g., Starling, 2000; della Cava, 2004). Online daters are warned to be cautious because the anonymity afforded by the Internet can make it easy to fabricate identities. In the case of MOOs and MUDs, imaginary personas are not only encouraged but also oftentimes required (Suler, 2000). In

fact, a whole new industry has been spawned to help consumers spot scammers. Online businesses such as TrueBeginnings and Verified Person will do background checks on a range of things from age and marital status to criminal records (della Cava, 2004). Some dating sites like eHarmony.com even make use of their own psychology tests to screen would-be liars. Users are asked to answer a battery of questions about themselves, and those who answer in the affirmative to questions like, "I would never tell white lies" and "I read all of the editorials in the newspaper every day" are instantly suspicious and are asked to leave the site (Mulrine & Hsu, 2003). Although it appears that some amount of lying is expected of online dating participants, Hardey (2002) points out, "...while individuals could always embellish or lie about their appearance, self-presentation is underpinned by the knowledge that a[n] off-line meeting would involve a manifesting [of] the virtual self" (p. 579). With expectations of meeting in person, Internet daters can only fabricate so much without jeopardizing their credibility. This leads to the question of how much deception in self-presentation is acceptable and how much is too much?

The idea that a person embodies multiple identities, or personas, is well known in psychology and sociology (Bargh, et al., 2002). Although theorists on identity have used different terms to describe these multiple selves (see Bargh, et al.), it appears that each of us has a *true*, *actual*, and *ideal* self. The true self can be defined as the inner, present version of self not fully expressed to others (Rogers, 1951); whereas, "the ideal self contains those qualities one strives someday to possess...and the actual self those one actually expresses to others at present" (Bargh et al., p. 34). In a series of experiments, Bargh et al. found that people interacting on the Internet were better able to present their true selves than those interacting face-to-face. They also found that there was a greater tendency for people to

project their ideal or hoped-for partner qualities onto those they initially met and liked over the Internet.

The Internet dating realm is unique in that users must create profiles of themselves in such a way as to attract the attention of potential suitors. In effect, they have to sell themselves much as they would when creating a resumé to present to potential employers. Indeed, participants in a study done by Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) stated that they used the profile to "ideate a version of self they desired to experience in the future" (p. 16). In their exploratory, ethnographic study on identity re-creation, Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, and Brown McCabe (2005) found that although most participants sought to be honest and truthful in their profiles, they also admitted to exaggerating the truth a bit.

The need to present the true self to others (McKenna & Bargh, 2000) appears to be at odds with the ideal self that is presented in the profile and the actual self presented in person. The logistics of getting to know and be known are certainly complicated in the Internet dating realm, especially adding the tendency to idealize the other person into the mix. Although studies have been done on how online dating participants manage their online presentations with a view to meeting others in person (Bargh et al., 2000; Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Hardey, 2002, Hardey, 2004; Yurchisin et al., 2005), only one (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008) so far has compared participants' actual characteristics with their reported (true and ideal) characteristics.

The Problem

Both William Glasser (1998) and Carl Rogers (1951) emphasize the importance of meaningful relationships to a healthy, successful life, and Glasser even goes so far as to say that love and belonging are basic human needs. Given the explosion of online dating

services, it appears that people are now turning to the Internet to help them in their quest for love and belonging; they are not simply relying on the traditional dating venues of school, work, clubs, or bars (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Because the Internet dating scene is relatively new but probably here to stay, counsellors need to have as much information at their disposal as possible in order to adequately advise clients who are either thinking of, or currently involved in, online dating.

Researchers have already found that Internet dating can be a positive transformational medium leading to greater self-knowledge and growth (Biggs, 2000; Ellison et al., 2006). Some people may even use the Internet "as an opportunity to exercise their positive characteristics, or to develop new ones in a process of 'self-actualization'" (Suler, 2000, Positive and negative valence section, ¶ 1) while others who are shy or anxious in social situations may use the Internet to try on new roles and practice social skills in a relatively safe environment (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Internet use in general has been found to decrease loneliness and depression (Shaw & Gant, 2002).

Counsellors should also be aware of the negative aspects of Internet dating. Donn and Sherman (2002) conducted two studies to examine undergraduate and graduate students' attitudes on the use of Internet dating sites to formulate intimate relationships. Both groups of students reported significant concerns about the lack of visual cues and lying on matchmaking sites. Interestingly enough, in the second study, participants who had explored matchmaking sites (exposure group) rated them significantly more positively than those who had no exposure to the sites (control group). In a study on the effects of stigmatizing discourse on the quality of online relationships, Wildermuth (2004) found that off-line people felt a strong stigma towards online relationships and readily expressed their negative

opinions, which in turn affected the relationship satisfaction experienced by the online dater. "Thus, others' opinions of online romantic relationships hold relevance for those people engaging in these relationships and for practitioners that may be counseling persons in online relationships" (Anderson, 2005, p. 523).

The general stigma associated with Internet dating may abate as time goes by and people become more familiar with this form of meeting potential mates, but in the meantime, this stigma remains and is something counsellors need to be aware of in themselves, in those who support online daters, and in society itself.

This study explored the realm of Internet dating from a qualitative perspective in order to gain in-depth knowledge about the ways in which participants negotiated the complexities of self-presentation given the unique features of the online dating environment. This study built on the existing research by looking at whether the strategies that users employed to work with and around the constraints of the Internet dating process were perceived to be deceptive and, if so, what was and was not acceptable. In addition this study investigated the similarities and differences between the presentation of self online to that presented in person.

Research Questions

Therefore, the overarching research question was the following: How do participants negotiate their way through the complexities of self-presentation given the limitations and capabilities of the online dating environment and the inevitability of meeting potential mates in person? Specific questions that were used to investigate this general question were as follows:

1. How long have you been on Lavalife?
2. What prompted you to get involved with Lavalife?

3. Have you tried any other sites?
4. What has been your overall experience on Lavalife?
5. How do you form your impression of others on Lavalife?
6. Have you met anyone on Lavalife in person?
 - i. If yes, how did your impression of the person online compare to the impression you received in person?
 - ii. If no, why not?
7. Do you think that you get a good sense of what a person is like online before meeting in person?
8. What things do you learn about someone in person that you would probably not learn online unless he/she told you?
9. Have you ever thought that you might not be attracted to someone in person but met her/him anyway? If yes, why?
10. What are some of the advantages of the Internet for getting to know another person?
11. What are some of the disadvantages?
12. Have you ever changed your profile to match the profile of a person you're interested in?
 - i. If yes, in what way?
 - ii. If no, why not?
13. When do you think changing a profile crosses the line and becomes deception?
14. What tools or strategies do you think people use to overcome the constraints (technical or otherwise) of Internet dating?
15. Do you think any of these tools/strategies are deceptive?
16. Within this category of deception, what is acceptable to you and what is not acceptable?
17. Do you have any concerns about Internet dating?
18. Have you learned anything about yourself through your experience on Lavalife?

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Computer-Mediated Communication

Early research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) took an impersonal “cues-filtered-out” (Culnan & Markus, 1987) approach to the medium. This perspective asserted that CMC was less personal and lacking in “social presence” (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and “social context cues” (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984) compared with face-to-face (FtF) communication. Social presence theory contends that the fewer channels or codes available within a medium, the less attention will be paid by users to the presence of other social participants. Thus, as social presence (the feeling that others are jointly involved in a communication interaction) declines, messages and online relationships are more impersonal and less intimate than FtF relationships (Walther, 1996; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). With the filtering out of nonverbal cues (such as facial expression, mannerisms, and vocal pitch) and social contextual cues (aspects of physical environment and hierarchical status cues), CMC was deemed more appropriate for task-related rather than interpersonal-related goals (Walther). In addition, CMC was found to be “significantly higher than FtF on certain types of hostile or profane speech acts, leading to characterizations of CMC as uninhibited and depersonalized” (Walther, p. 5).

Later research studies, however, found quite the opposite to be true. The lack of visual and auditory cues was also found to be a great equalizer whereby physical appearance became irrelevant and computer users could go beyond the distracting superficial aspects of a person and connect more directly to the mind and personality (Suler, 2000). In a series of experiments by Walther and colleagues (see Walther, 1996) it was found that when CMC

users were not time-restricted and anticipated a future interaction with their partners, CMC approached, and in some cases, went beyond the interpersonal levels of FtF relationships. Walther's theory of *social information processing* (SIP) encapsulated this alternative proposition to the cues-filtered-out approach, contending that online communicators will develop interpersonal relationships much the same as FtF communicators but simply at a slower rate.

Walther actually went one step further by proposing that CMC was not only interpersonal but also *hyperpersonal* in that CMC sometimes "surpassed the level of affection and emotion of parallel FtF interaction" (p. 17). In fact, Rheingold (1993) argues that people end up revealing themselves more intimately than they normally would do without the anonymity of the Internet. CMC becomes hyperpersonal under the following conditions:

When users experience commonality and are self-aware, physically separated, and communicating via a limited-cues channel that allows them to selectively self-present and edit; to construct and reciprocate representations of their partners and relations without the interference of environmental reality. Perhaps moreso when this communication is asynchronous and/or when the CMC link is the only link there is. (p. 33)

Without the cues that would normally be gleaned in person, CMC users will pay close attention to whatever social context cues or personality cues do emerge in their communications to form impressions (Jacobson, 1999), and this leads to a tendency for CMC partners to engage in an *overattribution* process:

They build stereotypical impressions of their partners without qualifying the strength of such impressions in light of the meager information – misspellings, typographical errors, or excessive punctuation – on which they are built. This overreliance on minimal cues is more pronounced when participants have no physical exposure to one another, as in CMC. (Walther, p. 18)

In addition there is also the inclination “to project one’s ideal or hoped-for partner qualities onto those whom one initially meets and likes over the Internet” (Bargh et al., 2002, p. 45). In one study done by Stafford and Reske (as cited in Walther, 1996) on engaged couples separated by distance, it was found that the more their communication was asynchronous (i.e., through written letters), the more favourable were their perceptions of each other, their adjustment, their communication, their idealization, and finally, their love.

While the receivers of information tend to idealize the senders, the senders can also optimize their self-presentations. Goffman (1959) asserts that whenever an individual presents him/herself before others, he/she will always employ techniques to foster and sustain a particular impression; some aspects of self are accentuated while others are concealed in order to present an idealized version of self. Two common features of CMC may contribute to this “selective self-presentation” (Walther, 1996): reduced communication cues and potentially asynchronous communication. As Walther observed,

Among zero-history CMC participants particularly, one was not bound by the cues to personality others infer from physical appearance or vocalic attributes. They were better able to plan, and had increased opportunity to self-censor. With more time for message construction and less stress of ongoing interaction, users may have taken the opportunity for objective self-awareness, reflection, selection and transmission of preferable cues. (p. 19)

Asynchronous Communication

Synchronous communication is that which occurs simultaneously as in any normal phone or face-to-face conversation; whereas, asynchronous communication is not simultaneous (Riva, 2001). These categories can get a bit muddy, however, particularly in the case of instant messaging (IM), which is when two or more Internet users exchange text messages in real time. Riva refers to IM as Internet Relay Chat and places it under the category of synchronous CMC. Although users are technically communicating

simultaneously, they are still able to take the time to think about a response and to edit what they have written before actually sending the message to the receiver. Therefore, IM is more analogous to, and takes on the properties of, asynchronous communication.

Communicating asynchronously, by email or IM, allows users more time to ponder and reflect upon their choice of words in a conversation with another user. This can be a good or bad thing in that it can lessen the chance of “putting your foot in your mouth,” but it also can inhibit the natural spontaneity characteristic of a FtF conversation. In asynchronous communication, turn-taking is forced, so each partner reads, reflects, and responds to the other, resulting in each person feeling heard and understood. There is no “hogging” of the conversation. As Ochs noted (as cited in Walther, 1996), “asynchronous verbal communication is more intersubjective and less egocentric than is unplanned (spontaneous) discourse” (p. 26).

Reduced Cues

Without the distraction of physical cues, online communicators can concentrate on the content and flow of the textual conversation. As Walther (1996) points out,

In CMC, there is no need physically to backchannel, hold in one’s waist, nod, smile, remember to “look interested,” and so on. We may shift attention from our need to maintain simultaneous expressive and sensory systems and devote it instead to language selection. (p. 22)

This visual anonymity also allows people to express different facets of themselves without worrying about disapproval or repercussions from those in their off-line world, and without the risk of negative social sanctions, online partners are able to self-disclose and present their true selves more so than they would in person (Bargh et al., 2002). This has been said “to create bonds of empathy and understanding between relationship partners” (Bargh et al., p.

35) and contributes to the greater liking that is found between people who initially meet over the Internet versus FtF.

Once initial liking is established, there is a tendency for CMC users to project, sometimes unconsciously, idealized qualities onto the other (Bargh et al., 2002; Champagne, 2008; Suler, 2000). For example, in an experiment done by Chilcoat and Dewine (as cited in Walther) examining the interpersonal perceptions people had of each other while communicating through three types of synchronous systems (FtF, videoconferencing and audioconferencing), it was found that in the only condition where people could not see each other, they thought their partners were more physically and socially attractive. With limited cues, the imagination kicks in, allowing people to shape the way they want to present themselves and to build an image of the other person.

Along with the opportunity for selective self-presentation and idealization, CMC also encourages a reciprocation process whereby senders and receivers influence each other in a way that intensifies their relationship. This *behavioural confirmation* process has been illustrated quite strongly in research done by Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (as cited in Walther, 1996) on telephone interactions. Male subjects were shown photographs of either physically attractive or unattractive females before engaging in a telephone conversation with female subjects who were unaware that the males had been shown photographs (of paid models not involved in the study). The researchers found that not only did the photograph affect the male's impression of the female's interpersonal characteristics prior to and after the conversation, it also affected his communication. Even more interestingly, "the females who were thought to be more attractive showed more confidence, greater animation, greater enjoyment of the conversation, and greater liking for their partners than those women who

interacted with men who perceived them as physically unattractive” (p. 66). This same cycle of behavioural confirmation exists in FtF conversations in that we respond to others based on our expectations, but in CMC, with its limited cues and lack of disconfirming data, the cycle is intensified (Walther): selective self-presentation leads to the receiver of the information creating an idealized image of the sender and projecting back a confirmation of this image to the sender; the sender’s self image is thus enhanced and reciprocated.

CMC in the online dating world differs quite significantly from the CMC environments in which most of the previous research studies were conducted. In online dating, there is the anticipation of future FtF interaction, which may temper the feeling of anonymity and affect self-presentation and self-disclosure strategies. Whitty and Carr (as cited in Champagne, 2008) point out that online daters are in the unique and complicated position of having to present an attractive image to garner the attention of potential dates while at the same time being authentic enough that there will not be a huge gap between their online and offline selves.

Gibbs et al. (2006), found that individuals who had “long-term goals of establishing FtF relationships engage[d] in higher levels of self-disclosure in that they [were] more honest, disclose[d] more personal information, and [made] more conscious and intentional disclosures to others online” (p. 169). Interestingly, their disclosures were not necessarily more positive than those of the participants who did not place as much importance on meeting FtF. This may have been because they were attempting to portray themselves in a realistic way, knowing that both their positive and negative attributes would eventually be revealed in an ongoing FtF relationship (Gibbs et al.). For those who were more concerned about presenting themselves in a favourable light, self-disclosures were more positive.

Indeed, this may be a wise strategy since too much self-disclosure (especially of a negative nature) early in a relationship can have negative effects (Gibbs et al.).

Self-Presentation

Within the complex field of personality theories there is quite a bit of variation in the extent to which human behaviour is believed to be influenced by inner forces, environmental stimuli, or some combination of the two. Despite these discrepancies, all personality theorists recognize the importance of both internal and external influences on behaviour and “recognize that there is both consistency and variability to individual behaviour” (Pervin, 1989, p. 525). The concept of self and the idea that there are multiple aspects of the self presented in various contexts is well accepted in both psychology and sociology (Bargh et al., 2002; Ellison et al., 2006).

Freud not only spoke of the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious aspects of the personality but also of the id, ego, and superego. According to Freud’s structural organization of the mind, the id represents the instinctual sexual and aggressive drives. The id is the primary source of psychic energy and operates according to the pleasure principle – “the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain” (Pervin, 1989, p. 86). It seeks to reduce tension immediately without regard for reality. The superego, on the other hand, is the moral component of the personality, which strives for perfection rather than pleasure. It contains the values and ideals of society and generates psychological rewards (feelings of pride and self-love) and punishments (feelings of guilt and inferiority) (Corey, 1982). The third and final structure, the ego, operates according to the reality principle – “gratification of the instincts is delayed until the optimum time when the most pleasure can be obtained with the least pain or negative consequences” (Pervin, p. 88). Freud once described the ego as being

like Plato's horseman trying to ride two horses at one time: "selfless conscience and selfish instincts" (Vaillant, 1993, p. 7). Over time, Freud's model evolved to include two other horses: people (we cannot live without) and reality:

What is outside of us is as threatening as what is within. Interpersonal relationships and external reality are now considered just as important to unconscious conflict as the id and the superego. Thus the ego must control four horses: desire, conscience, people, and reality. (p. 7)

Like Freud, Carl Jung saw the personality as being multi-dimensional with each component vying for expression and recognition. According to Jung, every individual has a public persona or mask that often is in conflict with the private or personal self:

If people emphasize the persona too much there may be a loss of sense of self and a doubting about who they are. On the other hand, the persona, as expressed in social roles and customs, is a necessary part of living in society. (Pervin, 1989, p. 149)

The other personality structures that Jung viewed as influencing, and often opposing, each other were the ego (the awareness of ourselves and our world), the personal unconscious (deriving from our experience, but now suppressed or ignored), the collective unconscious (a storehouse of the cumulative experiences of past generations), and the animus and anima (the masculine and feminine characteristics). For Jung, an important task of life was to integrate all these aspects of the personality into a unified Self (Pervin).

Carl Rogers also believed that people often wore masks in public. Rogers observed that when people came to therapy, they frequently asked how they could discover their real selves or become who they wished to become (Rogers, 1961). Thus, Rogers' concept of the self included not only an actual self and a real (or true) self but also an ideal self – "the self concept the individual would most like to possess, upon which one places the highest value for self" (Corsini, 1984, p. 158). For Rogers, the self was organized and consistent at the same time as being fluid and changeable as the person moved towards self-actualization or

becoming his/her real self. Rogers viewed the basic estrangement in humans to be the result of humans falsifying their values in order to preserve the positive regard of others (Rogers, 1951).

Quite a few other theorists have emphasized and given name to the different components of the self according to their beliefs and research. For instance, Harry Stack Sullivan split the self into three parts: “the *good-me* associated with pleasurable experiences, the *bad-me* associated with pain and threats to security, and the *not-me* or part of the self that is rejected because it is associated with intolerable anxiety” (Pervin, 1989, p. 154). Markus and Nurius (as cited in Pervin) delineated between four components of the self: good, bad, actual and possible. The possible self was further separated into three parts: “what people think they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming” (Pervin, p. 462).

From a sociological standpoint, Erving Goffman (1959) views each of us as an actor taking on a role that reflects our inner conception of self, the situation we find ourselves in, and the audience for whom we are performing. Our true or real self is most often concealed and can only be ascertained indirectly through expressions *given* (verbal symbols or substitutions) or expressions *given off* (nonverbal behaviour). The individual is divided into two basic parts: the performer, who fabricates impressions and stages performances, and the character who has dreams, wishes and other “qualities that the performance is designed to evoke” (p. 252). This dramaturgical view of self is nicely described by Park (1950):

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role...It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. (p. 249)

In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become personas. (p. 250)

This process of packaging and editing the self is an essential part of any social interaction according to Toma et al. (2008), and it is broadly interpreted as self-presentation. Most often individuals will present an idealized version of self and downplay any disconfirmatory negative aspects, especially when making a first impression (Goffman, 1959; Feldman, Forrest, & Happ, 2002). That we make a presentation of ourselves to others is a given, but how closely that presentation matches the true or real self varies:

Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner...sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. Sometimes the traditions of an individual's role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression. (Goffman, p. 6)

Self-presentation necessarily “takes into account both the target audience and the context of the social interaction, and it involves making choices about what information to include, what to leave out, and whether to engage in deception” (Toma et al., p. 1024).

Deception

Deception can be broadly defined as the conscious or unconscious intention to mislead self, others, or both (Tosone, 2006). Despite being universally condemned in our Western society, deception or lying is a common occurrence (Kashy & DePaulo, 1996). As Saxe (1991) stated, “one would have to be a social isolate never to be either the perpetrator or

recipient of a deception” (p. 410). Unfortunately, people maintain a double standard when it comes to lies:

A person tends to judge another’s lies from the general societal norm that lying is bad, yet one’s own lies are seen as necessary in the specific context in which they are stated. In other words, other people are perceived to lie for unacceptable reasons, whereas one views the self as telling necessary, acceptable lies resulting in contradictory self-experience. (Tosone, p. 338)

In DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, and Epstein’s (1996) taxonomy of lies, there are essentially three types of lies: 1) outright lies – “total falsehoods,” 2) exaggerations – “lies in which liars overstate the facts or convey an impression that exceeds the truth,” and 3) subtle lies – “lying by evading or omitting relevant details and by telling literal truths that are designed to mislead. Also includes behavioural or nonverbal lies” (p. 983). The researchers also distinguished between two rationales for lying: 1) *self-oriented* lies, which are told to protect or enhance the liars or to advantage the liars’ interests and 2) *other-oriented* lies, which are told to protect or enhance other people or advantage other’s interests.

Most online daters report being truthful and are consistent in their overall disapproval of deception, with lies about relationship information being less socially acceptable than lying about any of the other categories (physical appearance, age, social status, habits and interests, and beliefs) (Brym & Lenton, 2001; Toma et al., 2008). In the online dating world, the majority of the daters believe that online deception is widespread and the biggest disadvantage (Caspi & Gorsky, 2006; Toma et al.). Although this perception was backed up by the study done by Toma et al. in that 81% of the participants lied about at least one of their observed characteristics, “the magnitude of the deception was usually small” (p. 1032) and difficult to detect in person. There were, however, a few instances of extreme lies, which the researchers thought might have been a contributing factor to the belief that deception was

pervasive online since “these rare but extreme lies would be highly salient and memorable when encountered” and “especially because these extreme lies are more likely to be circulated and discussed among the online dating community” (p. 1032). Interestingly, those who deviated further from the mean (i.e., heavier or shorter) lied more. Caspi and Gorsky’s study found that there were no gender differences in the frequency of lying, but they did find that younger users tended to deceive more.

Although deception may be occurring online, it does not appear to be any more prevalent than that which occurs in everyday life. In fact, it was found that lies appeared in about 20-30% of everyday social interactions (DePaulo et al., 1996; Kashy & DePaulo, 1996), and, similarly, about 30% of the respondents in Caspi and Gorsky’s (2006) survey reported that they deceived online. Lying by omission is a common occurrence in everyday life, and in the dating arena, it is well known that people often withhold negative information in the beginning stages of a relationship (Gibbs et al., 2006; Goffman, 1959). As Lewis and Saarni (1993) point out:

Part of the self is self-presentation and self-disclosure, but an aspect of equal importance is the need to hide, not to disclose, those facets of the self that are less than flattering, humiliating, or simply irrelevant to the social context or interpersonal project at hand. (p. 42)

In the online dating world where first impressions are crucial, it makes sense to highlight, and in some cases embellish, one’s positive qualities and hide the less flattering aspects of one’s self in order to attract potential mates. In some cases, however, this promotion of oneself may simply be a result of having an overly positive self-view, which is what most people possess, rather than an accurate self-view (Brown & Dutton, 1995). This mild self-deception may actually promote one’s mental health according to Kirsch (2005) and increase happiness. “Moreover, this elevated degree of happiness enables these people to make

friends easily and to establish caring interpersonal relations with others” (p. 408), which is the ultimate goal of online dating.

Summary

Many personality theorists, including Carl Rogers and Erving Goffman, have distinguished between the individual’s mask, or persona, worn in public and his/her inner self. In daily social interactions, the self presented to others is generally a carefully edited one. In the online dating realm where the initial impression is based on information provided in a limited-cues, relatively anonymous, text-based environment and where the goal is to attract a potential mate amongst thousands of other profiles, selective self-presentation and deception may be enhanced. Therefore, it makes sense to investigate how daters are portraying themselves online and whether their portrayals are accurate. And if deception is occurring, what is and is not acceptable.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Approach

This study utilized an inductive, ethnographic approach to examine the online dating environment. I was a participant in online dating for 18 months prior to conducting this research study and became well-versed in the practices, rules, beliefs, and procedures used by the members of the dating site Lavalife.com. As far as was possible, I shared “firsthand the environment, problems, background, language, rituals, and social relations of a more-or-less bounded and specified group of people” and through this sharing, “a rich, concrete, complex, and hence truthful account of the social world being studied is possible” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 3). Having been a full participant in the phenomenon of interest, I was able to relate to the participants in this study while still remaining open to new perspectives and viewpoints. Although there is a risk in participant observation of losing a neutral perspective when collecting, describing, and analyzing the data, this is balanced by the gain of the “ethnographic context necessary to understand the answers” (Paccagnella, 1997, p. 4). My knowledge of online dating provided the inspiration for many of the questions and probes in the interviews. However, my choice of questions was also informed by the literature and was an attempt to fill in the perceived gaps in the research.

Participants

Because I wanted to obtain detailed, in-depth information from reliable people, the first participant recruited was a friend who was an active member of Lavalife and willing to document her impressions of her dates before and after meeting them. I then sent out letters to random men and women on Lava who were in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s. During my

search in each of these age categories, I found another acquaintance who agreed to participate. The sample grew as these initial participants suggested other people they knew who dated online, which resulted in a snowball sample. Two people who responded through this snowball process were not included in the study because they were members of other dating sites that used different profile and system structures. Serendipitously, the initial participant, Delia, had given me her observations of another participant, Larry, before I interviewed him. Thus, I had a triangulation of sorts: my initial perception of him online, Delia's pre and post meeting impressions, and finally my own impression upon meeting and interviewing him.

Initially, I wanted to have a sample that included people from age 20 up to age 60 or 70, but because the response rate was very low, I went with the convenience of the snowball sample and ended up with one participant in her early 30s, three in their 50s and one in his early 60s. The participants were single, Caucasian, heterosexual men and women who were active on Lava and seeking relationships with members of the opposite sex. They were all middle class professionals with predominantly university level educational backgrounds living within 500 km of Prince George, British Columbia.

Data Collection

Since I was already a member of Lavalife, albeit an inactive one, I had a hidden profile on the site. I made my profile visible once again and approached Lavalife participants by emailing a letter introducing me and explaining the nature of the study (see Appendix A). I was prepared to provide my picture as a condition of faith to ease people's fears and encourage them to participate, but this was not necessary. I also provided a link to my

UNBC supervisor as verification of my authenticity as a researcher and made it clear that I was approaching participants as a researcher and not as a potential romantic partner.

If the participants were nearby and willing to meet in person, I obtained their informed consents before conducting the interview. If participants were not willing or able to meet in person, I e-mailed them the consent form and asked that they indicate their consent in reply e-mail. Three participants were interviewed in person, and two provided their responses by email. The two email participants were people I knew very well and had met in person, and I talked to both on the phone during data analysis for clarification or elaboration on particular responses. For the in-person interviews, I set up a time that was convenient for the participants and allowed at least one hour for the interview. The interviews were conducted at the participants' homes or in an office at the university. In one case, I watched as one participant went on the computer and corresponded with other daters. I was also privy to the photographs that they shared with her.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure that each participant answered the same questions but also had the ability to give additional information. Questions were open-ended, and the participants were encouraged to elaborate on and explain their answers. I was very aware of my knowledge of and experience in online dating, so to the best of my ability, I took on a *naïve* stance – I tried to set aside my assumptions that I knew what my respondents meant when they told me something and probed frequently for explanations (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Due to the interactive nature of the interview, I was also careful about *reactive bias*, whereby “interviewees become very attentive to cues that the interviewer emits, since they want to know whether they are ‘doing well’ as participants” (Palys, 1992, p. 166). I endeavoured to keep my responses as neutral as possible while still

being encouraging. In some cases, the participants veered off into areas that were very personal in nature and not specifically related to the questions. This was allowed in order to maintain a relaxed atmosphere and to engender the feeling of participating in a guided conversation rather than a formal interview. After having their say, the participants were gently guided back to the topic at hand, and their personal revelations were not included in the final analysis.

After the initial interviews or email responses, each participant was contacted by phone to clarify, elucidate, or provide additional information as required. Follow-up data were also collected in person and by email. All the interviews and correspondence with the participants, with the exception of the email responses, were tape-recorded and transcribed at a later time. To ensure validity, I wrote descriptive and reflective field notes after each interview, while the material was still fresh in my mind.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing and iterative process that began during the interview process. The field notes that I wrote after each interview were a form of data analysis. According to Glesne and Peshkin, “analytic noting is a type of data analysis conducted throughout the research process; its contribution ranges from problem identification, to question development, to understanding the patterns and themes in your work” (p. 49). Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed verbatim and formatted into four-column tables as described by La Pelle (2004). Each separate response of the participant was entered into a new row of the table with the interviewer’s questions and comments interspersed in separate rows. My utterances were in bold typeface to make them more easily visible. Each row was given a chronological sequence number. Although theme codes for

each row were entered later in the analysis, I began to think about possible themes as I transcribed.

Once the transcriptions were complete, I read through the data to get a general sense of the information. During the second read through, I started to jot down possible themes, a process sometimes referred to as “open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I also wrote reflective notes in the margins of the tables and on separate pieces of paper about what I was learning and whenever I had an idea or insight. The third read through was done line by line, and each line was divided into meaningful analytic units. These units were compared and contrasted across all the interviews in an effort to create categories that represented important themes in the responses (Yurchisin et al., 2005). The words (or codes) that were used to describe the units were as follows: length of time on the site, reason for choosing the Internet, advantages, disadvantages, perception of the market, traditional dating, filtering, frustration, red flag, deal breaker, pet peeve, impression formation, attractive, unattractive, physical attraction, chemistry, rejection, communication, self-presentation, self-image, self-discovery, concern, limitation, deception, honesty, strategy, online versus in person, and imagination/fantasy. These initial 28 themes were merged into the following 8 categories: 1) Internet dating vs. Traditional dating, 2) Advantages and Disadvantages of the Internet, 3) Deception/Misrepresentation, 4) Self Presentation, 5) Impression Formation, 6) Communication, 7) Rejection/Ending a relationship, and 8) Imagination/Fantasy.

Since there seemed to be a lot of overlap between the categories, I found that I had to refine these categories further. For example, deception seemed to be a part of quite a few categories, including disadvantages and self-presentation. Therefore, deception was collapsed as a separate category and, instead, integrated into other appropriate categories. In

order to describe the data in a coherent manner, I decided that it was best presented in the same way that Internet dating developed through time. In other words, I would start with the reasons for choosing Internet dating and progress through the steps that the participants normally took in their Internet dating journey. In this way, my report would closely approximate the reality it represented (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the end, the data were organized into five general categories: 1) Choosing Internet Dating: Advantages and Disadvantages, 2) Self-Presentation, 3) Impression Formation Online, 4) Communicating Online, and 5) Meeting in Person. The participants' responses were sorted (by cutting and pasting) into five tables representing each category. In reporting the results of the study, I made extensive use of quotations in order to convey to the reader that the views put forward were not my own but were instead authentic and representative remarks transcribed straight from the mouths of the participants (Van Maanen, 1988).

Ethical Considerations

Participants were asked to sign a consent form that outlined the nature of the study and their role in it. The consent form also indicated that participation in the study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. In addition, before being interviewed, participants were verbally reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation and their ability to withdraw.

Participants' identities were protected throughout the study. Participants were identified only by pseudonyms, and for the sake of anonymity, specific names of cities and regions were removed and a generic descriptor inserted in square brackets. Data were stored in a locked cabinet within a locked room of my residence. Identifying information was kept separate from the rest of the research materials. At the end of the study and after all

reasonable attempts at publication have been exhausted or successful, all paper materials will be shredded and all computer files will be erased. A space was provided on the consent form for participants to indicate whether they would like a copy of the results of the study. Once the results have been sent to the participants, their home or email addresses will be shredded.

Trustworthiness

In order to judge the quality of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four corresponding terms to the conventional terms used to judge quantitative research. Instead of *internal validity*, which refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality, the qualitative researcher seeks *credibility*. While the conventional quantitative researcher assumes that there is only one reality, the naturalistic researcher “assumes the presence of multiple realities and attempts to represent these multiple realities adequately” (Hoepfl, 1997). Credibility, therefore, is achieved through the richness of the data gathered and is enhanced by triangulation (Hoepfl). In my study, I used several sources of data: my observations, interviews, documents (emails and posted profiles), and pictures. I spent an extensive period of time in the field before beginning my study and strove to obtain detailed, thick descriptions from the participants. As noted previously, the results were supplemented with an abundance of direct quotes ensuring the credibility of my findings.

External validity is the second term used extensively in quantitative research and refers to the ability to generalize the findings of one study to other populations and settings. In qualitative language, this is referred to as *transferability*, and it is generally agreed that qualitative researchers cannot claim transferability of their findings; they can “only provide sufficient information that can then be used by the reader to determine whether the findings

are applicable to the new situation” (Hoepfl, 1997, p. 13). Though my sample size is small, the rich, detailed descriptions of the participants should contribute to the applicability of the findings.

In place of the term *reliability* used by quantitative researchers to refer to the stability or consistency of measurements over time, the qualitative researcher uses the term *dependability*. Since the qualitative/interpretive stance is that the social world is always subject to change and instability, replication of the study is nearly impossible. However, the systematic process of recording my observations, thoughts, research decisions, perceptions, and emotions throughout the study, along with the tape recordings and transcripts, provides an audit trail readily available for those who wish to replicate or examine my study.

The fourth and final term used in quantitative research is *objectivity*, which refers to the study being value-free. Qualitative research is by nature value-laden since it is based on interpretations and, therefore, subjective. *Confirmability* is the term that qualitative researchers would use to establish the credibility of a study and refers to “the degree to which the researcher can demonstrate the neutrality of the research interpretations” (Hoepfl, 1997, p. 14). Much the same as establishing dependability, confirmability is established through the provision of an audit trail. As noted previously, I kept detailed field notes of a reflective and analytic nature and wrote copious memos during the analysis and writing stages of the study. Raw data as well as reconstruction and synthesis products are available for review. In addition, my advisor examined my raw data (tape recordings and transcriptions) to ensure accuracy. I also consulted with him on the meanings I gave to the data and the formatting of the findings.

CHAPTER 4

Research Site

There are many different online dating services ranging from the smaller niche-oriented sites that cater to specific groups of people based on such things as ethnicity, religion, political interests and lifestyle to the larger sites, such as Match.com and Yahoo! Personals, that cater to predominantly white, middle-class heterosexuals. I have chosen to study participants who are members of the Toronto-based Lavalife.com. dating site that falls into the latter category in terms of size and target population.

Background

Lavalife began in 1987 as a phone-based classified service that included personals. In 1988, Lavalife eliminated the classifieds and focussed exclusively on the personals aspect. With the advent of the World Wide Web, Lavalife expanded its services to the Internet, launching www.lavalife.com in 1997. Over the years, many more products and services have been added, but the main ones are lavalifeWEB (www.lavalife.com), a personals and social networking website where users can search for and connect with other singles; lavalifeVOICE, an interactive telephone response service that allows users to record information about themselves that other users can access 24 hours a day and to send and receive messages or to talk live if they wish; and lavalifeMOBILE, a mobile phone service, exclusive to the USA and Canada, that allows users not only to search profiles and chat but also to exchange text messages, receive text alerts, and view pictures on their cell phones. Lavalife has now become "a web, voice and mobile-based service providing anytime, anywhere, anyhow access to other singles" (see www.corp.lavalife.com).

This study focuses on lavalifeWEB (hereafter referred to as Lava), which boasts having 1.8 million active members who exchange 1.3 million messages per day. Although it is a global product, the main target areas are the United States, Canada, and Australia. In terms of demographics, Lava's members are primarily between the ages of 18 and 34 with 39% being female and 61% male. The mean income is \$58,800 and 81% are college or university educated. Lava is visited by 50% of the members at least once a day while 38% visit the site 1-3 times a week. Lava describes its members as being "hip, urban, socially active individuals [with] considerable disposable income [who are] active, media-savvy, [and] fun seeking" (see www.lavalife.com/003/guest/advertising.act).

Lava offers users three distinct communities in which to post their profiles: Dating, Relationships, and Intimate Encounters. Lava describes the Dating Section as a place for singles who want to "flirt, have fun and find dates," while the Relationships Section is for those who want to "find romance – and maybe more." Lastly, the Intimate Encounters Section is purported to be for those who want to "explore [their] wild side," which seems to be a euphemism for "have sex with no strings attached!" This study will focus on participants who have posted their profiles in the Relationships section (though it is understood that they may also have profiles posted in either or both of the other sections).

Sign-up Process

To sign up for Lava, users must fill out a form indicating their email address (which is kept private by the site), gender, date of birth, country, province, city, and postal code (which is only used for displaying local members to the user). Applicants create a password and then must agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policies along with the fact that they are 18 years of age or older. Once this information is submitted, the applicants become

members. The site then asks users to choose a community – the Dating and Relationship (D/L) communities are lumped together while, not surprisingly, the Intimate community is separate. Users are required to choose a *nickname* and an *opening line* for the D/L communities and they can either keep the same ones for the Intimate community or choose something different. The nickname is described as the user's "handle" or pseudonym that other members will know him/her by on the site. Lava helpfully offers samples of nicknames, such as Blue_eyes76, Funtimes 86, SportyGal, and LuckyTraveler and suggests that users just choose whatever first comes to mind since the nickname can be edited later. The opening line is compared to a billboard, and Lava again offers examples of good ("Life is always an adventure;" "Instant friend...just add water...results may vary;" and "Great texture, no after TASTE.") and bad ("SWM seeks sf;" "Looking to settle down;" and "Um...I don't know what to write.") opening lines.

The next step is to create a profile. In their profiles, members must include a written (open-ended) description of themselves and what they are looking for in a desired mate, titled *In My Own Words*. Lava posts a sample description and also lists profile guidelines in a separate window. Users are advised that profiles containing the following will not be posted: "less than 100 characters; more than 2000 characters; graphic or explicit language; personal information (full name, email, telephone, ICQ#, URL); comments directed at specific members or at Lavalife itself; written in any language other than English or French; mention of illegal activities, violence or non-consensual acts; solicitation or any commercial activity; discriminatory (racist, sexist, homophobic, ageist) text; and seeking a relationship inappropriate to the area" (see www.lavalife.com).

After users write their profile description, they are asked, but not required, to post a photo. Lava indicates that users with photos get eight times the attention. Users can choose to post photographs of themselves publicly alongside their profiles and/or in a *gallery* (a separate area for up to 30 photos). They can also choose to use a private *backstage* format, whereby other users have to ask and receive permission to view photos (up to 10 can be stored here). Some members choose not to post any pictures at all, so Lava places a generic drawing of a male or a female next to the profile with the caption, "No Picture Available." Other members choose not to have a picture beside their profile but will instead provide pictures in a gallery. They will have the same Lava-simulated picture as those who do not post any pictures, but the words, "View Gallery" are posted below the simulated photo that other members can click. If the member only has pictures posted in the backstage, then the caption on Lava's photo has a red star (symbol for backstage) and says, "Private Backstage Available." If members choose to add a video, they can store up to 6 videos in either the public gallery or private backstage. Members who want extra exposure can choose to have Lava promote them on the site in an ongoing slideshow that is posted at the bottom of each community's home page. Lava also offers to promote members through their advertising partners, and members are informed that their pictures could appear in print or television spots.

After the profile description is written and photos (if any) are posted, users are asked to answer closed-ended questions that have preset categorical answers on the following:

- Personal details - gender, age, height, body type, ethnic background, religion, education, annual income, smoking and drinking habits, whether they want or have children, languages spoken, and location.

- Commonalities - idea of romance, activities enjoyed in spare time, and values
- Interests - outdoor activities/fitness, sports, entertainment, and hobbies and other interests

Users can select "prefer not to say" in any of the categories above except for gender, age, and location (See Appendix B for categorical choices). Lava warns users that if they choose this option, other members who are searching for someone with those criteria may not find them. Once all the selections have been made in this section, the dating experience begins!

Features

Instant Messaging

On the homepage of the chosen community, there is a window for instant messaging (IM), which can be either text-based or video supported. When another member wants to chat, one of the coloured boxes above the window will start to flash (green for the Dating community, blue for Relationships, and gold for Intimate). The person who has initiated the chat will have his/her nickname displayed in the window as well as at the side, and the side nickname can be clicked to display his/her profile. If the member sending the message has posted photos only in his/her backstage, he/she can send a *backstage pass* along with the message, which allows the receiver of the text message access to the private photos. Members can chat with more than one user at a time in more than one community. A window next to the coloured boxes displays the list of people who are currently being spoken to and their nicknames are coloured the same as the community (see above). If for some reason, an IM is missed, members can look in *IM History* for a list of people who have sent IMs within 24 hours, 2 days, or 7 days. The content of the IM is also available. At the bottom of the IM History page, Lava users are given a link to report any soliciting, harassing,

or system abuse behaviors. Lava also offers a blocking system so that users can block correspondence from specified members.

Emails and Smiles

The first mail message that members receive on the site is a welcome letter from Lava inviting them to subscribe for a one, three or six month period. When this study was initiated in 2006, Lava did not require subscriptions for services. Instead, members bought credits in order to send an email or IM. Six credits were needed for a 20-minute IM session and 12 credits for a 60-minute session. Two credits were needed to extend an IM session for 5 minutes. Sending the first email to another member required 6 credits, but all subsequent messages to that member were free. This credit system is still in place for those members who joined Lava before the subscription system was implemented. At the present time, all members can view profiles and videos, send and receive smiles, and respond to instant messages or emails initiated by other members who have subscribed to Lava. Only subscribers, however, can send unlimited emails and instant messages. In the message, Lava also offers to send email alerts (to the member's private email address provided in the registration process) to notify members when they have received an email from someone. If this option is not chosen, members are alerted of new mail on their homepage as well as on the homepage of the community. Messages are kept in each member's mailbox for only 30 days.

In order to email another person on the site, members who have subscriptions simply click on the letter icon that has the words "Email me" next to it at the top of the profile. Free members cannot send emails, but they can reply to an email. Using Lava's email system allows users to keep their identities anonymous. Users are identified only by their nicknames

and their emails are accessible only on the site. The email itself is set up much the same as a Web-based email client, with fields for the subject and the message. Members generally use emails as the first step in getting to know one another and to perhaps proceed to talking on the phone or meeting in person. Some users will give each other their personal email addresses and continue the process of getting to know each other online but off the Lava site.

Since free members cannot send email, their only option for initiating contact is to send a *smile*, which lets the receiver know that they're interested. Members can choose to attach a note to the *smile* as well, letting the receiver know why they're interested. Lava provides drop down menus with a list of items to choose from in two categories: (1) "I couldn't resist:" and (2) "A little teaser, ask me about:" (See Appendix C for the list of choices).

Profiles

If users go to *my profiles* listed on the left side of the homepage, they can edit their original profile at any time. If the written portion of the profile is changed, Lava will not post the new profile until the new description has been approved. Once it has been changed, the date of the change will appear at the bottom of the *personal details* section of the profile. If users go to *my account*, listed in the same area as *my profiles*, they can set their preference for whether they want to show their profiles to others at all times, only when they are online, or not at all. If they show their profile, the words *Online now!* appear in red beside their nickname when they are online. One feature that is not commonly known is that if users place another member on their *hotlist*, that member's profile will always be visible to them, regardless of whether the member chooses to hide his or her profile. Once on a list, you can't hide! The *hotlist* is just what it appears to be – a list of members who are considered hot or

interesting enough that you want to keep track of them. Whenever someone on the hotlist is online, the members who placed him/her on the hotlist are alerted in the *Online* section at the top right-hand side of the page. In this section there are also alerts on the number of other users currently online who are local; have a picture or video; and have sent a smile to, or received a smile from, the member. Users can click on any of the above to see the profiles of people fitting these categories. Another option that Lava provides to paid members is the ability to see a list of who has viewed their profiles.

Searches

Users can specify exactly what characteristics they are looking for in a partner and search for that person using the *custom search* option. This option allows members to search others based on the demographic information or interests given in their profiles. In the custom search option, users can also search for new profiles that have been accepted in a specified time period or based on their online activity. Once a search has been initiated, users are presented with brief versions of profiles, which are hyperlinked to the longer profile descriptions. These searches can be saved for easy access later. Members can also be found by their nicknames or whether they have a gallery, video, or picture.

Extras

Members can sign up to receive a bi-weekly newsletter that features 9 possible dates in that member's geographic area, called *Guy Alert* or *Gal Alert*. They also can navigate from the dating site to an online magazine called *Click*, which features articles specific to each community plus horoscopes, dating and sex advice, film and wine pairings, and finally a section called *Profile Doctor*. This last section is where users can submit their profiles for analysis and receive helpful suggestions for improvement. Just recently Lava has added a

forum section to the site, which is basically an area to post comments, ask questions or just share experiences. In order to join a forum (there is one for each community), members must have a profile with a public photo.

CHAPTER 5

Results

In this section, the results will be presented under the general themes discovered in the analysis. The themes are in the chronological order that is generally followed when involved in online dating: 1) Choosing Internet Dating: Advantages and Disadvantages, 2) Self Presentation, 3) Impression Formation Online, 4) Communicating Online, and 5) Meeting in Person.

Choosing Internet Dating

Because of our changing times, whereby people are more mobile than they ever were, waiting longer to get married, and getting divorces more easily and quickly, there are more single people working full time who don't have the time or energy to be out looking for partners (Mulrine & Hsu, 2003). And as they have gotten older, the singles in this study found that more and more of their social circle was comprised of married couples. Rather than relying on the random chance that they might meet someone with whom they would be compatible on the rare occasions they ventured out, the participants in this study turned to the Internet – a place where they could decide who they would like to meet and get to know from the comfort of their homes.

The general consensus among the participants in this study was that Internet dating was just another, more efficient, way to meet people. As Delia indicated, "It's difficult to meet someone, and it seems to be the modern way to try to meet people of similar interests and age" (line 4). Mark concurred:

I had been separated for a couple of years. At first it was fine being on my own pursuing some long neglected interests, but then I realized that I was lonely, and Internet dating seemed to be the best option for meeting someone who would be a good match. My family responsibilities were, and still are, such that time was

limited, so using the Internet seemed to be the most efficient way to meet a large range of eligible women. (line 4)

Even when they did have the time to go out, the participants were in agreement that they just did not meet many potential mates:

The demographics of my age group were such that meeting someone appropriate casually would have been unlikely even if I had more time. (Mark, line 4)

There just didn't seem to be any other way to meet men. I mean I have friends that I hang out with, but most of them are couples. (Lydia, line 8)

As you get older, you're not out socializing in a scene where you meet people...I hear young people say it's difficult to meet people also. However, I think that young people are out interacting with young, single people; whereas, I'm out interacting with married people because that's who my friends are. (Delia, line 6)

I just find that [on Lava] there's way more people to choose from... (Larry, line 58)

Oftentimes the participants felt that they had simply "been there, done that" and did not want to deal with the loud music, late nights, or unwelcome advances that they did when they were younger:

I remember when I was single 30 years ago after my first marriage ended. I was going out to nightclubs with my sisters and friends, and I remember going into one that...we joked and called it a meat market...We'd go in with a group of girls, and we all worked together...and these guys would stand around the perimeter, and some of them were great and they would come and ask you to dance and that was it. But others, it was just sizing you up when you'd go to the washroom and they're watching you go in and out. And it was just creepy...We called it a meat market. (Delia, line 314)

I don't really go to bars anymore where I'm drinking a lot and flirting or picking up guys...I don't really drink as much as I did when I was in my early twenties (Lydia, lines 8 and 10).

And that was the place where I used to meet ladies at one time, but at my age, I don't like the bar scenes anymore...I don't go out to the clubs and stuff. I'm just not interested because now it's changed a lot over the years, and I've changed. I've gotten older, and a lot of times, I'd just rather be home. (Larry, lines 10 and 134)

Advantages

Lava is like a bar filled with single people who are all there for a common purpose: finding a mate or date. As Larry and Mark put it:

These dating services are a lot easier...the biggest advantage is people are there to meet people as well. That's the biggest advantage. They're looking for a partner...that's why they're on there... And there's a lot of interesting ladies on those dating sites. There's not a shortage of educated woman (sic) out there, or any other type that you might be interested in or looking for. (Larry, lines 122, 124, 128 and 216)

I feel that the major advantage is the range of women that it is possible to meet with relatively little effort and cost, in a setting designed for the purpose of dating. (Mark, line 20)

Not only is everyone at this Lava bar available, but also they are equipped with what amounts to a resumé ready for perusal. Finding someone who meets the criteria that you are looking for in a mate becomes so much simpler. You can "filter through and find people of like interests and like personality" (Delia, line 10), and "if you see an "attractive lady, [you can] click on her and [Lava will] give you her profile. You can do a search...very, very easy... [for] just anything you want" (Larry, lines 218, 220 and 230).

Another advantage of Lava is that it is a place that has no geographic boundaries and offers a wider range of romantic possibilities than what participants were encountering in their everyday lives:

You are in a wider playing field to meet people outside of your existing social circle. (Jen, line 20)

My potential to meet people in my day-to-day life is almost zero because my job does not put me in a place where I meet people. I deal with children all day. (Delia, lines 144 and 146)

You know, I don't meet men through work because I work mostly with women...There's just no opportunity [to meet men] anymore...I mean there are some guys, but they're all dating or married. (Lydia, lines 8 and 10)

The anonymity of the Internet plus the knowledge that everyone is there looking for a relationship of some sort makes approaching and getting to know a stranger much easier and safer, especially as one gets older. Both Larry and Mark commented on this:

At one time I was braver than I am now, when it comes to that [approaching someone in public]. I won't approach too many people in the bars saying, "Can I buy you a drink?" I don't do that anymore, but I have done that in the past. (Larry, lines 126 and 128)

If one is uncertain about someone, it is possible to communicate by exchanging messages and gain some insight without the effort or vulnerability of meeting [in person]. (Mark, line 20)

But along with an easy approach, there is also an easy escape. Lydia's comment highlights these two aspects:

It's a little easier to break the ice. You can just ask little questions and have like a mini conversation, and then it's easier to end it off. Like, "Oh, I've got to go, or the phone's ringing," or something like that. It's almost safe, in a way, to start that way, you know? (lines 148 and 150)

There are no worries about what to say in order to end a relationship on the Internet; all you have to do is simply not respond. As Delia said, "Those that have their picture showing right away, you just don't respond to if you're not interested" (line 62).

Disadvantages

Rejection.

The advantage of being able to easily reject someone is also a source of frustration and one of the several disadvantages of Internet dating as Larry pointed out: "Many people are slow to respond, or if they decide that they're not interested in you, they don't let you know...to me that's a little inconsiderate" (lines 54 and 56). Because no one on Lava has anyone else's personal contact information (unless they choose to give it out), it is difficult to

find out the reason for a non-response, which leaves daters confused and not a little disgruntled. Lydia's example is a case in point:

Like, I saw a guy on there. I think he sent me a smile, so I responded to that, but he never sent anything back. I don't know what happened...People can ignore you very easily. (lines 80 and 166)

When the communication is sporadic, daters are left wondering whether someone is legitimately too busy to respond frequently or whether, in fact, he/she is, as they say, just not that into you. Larry's experiences with infrequent communications and delays were attributed to the women's busy lives and their fear of meeting in person before really getting to know the other person:

The thing that I find a little frustrating is that people take sometimes...I find that they take a little too long to respond to a message...Sometimes it takes two weeks before someone gets back to me...or you ask them a question and they neglect to answer the questions. (line 50)

I'm finding that it's pretty difficult to meet women – they'll communicate but don't really want to meet. (line 46)

I met this one girl that I was communicating with for about six weeks, and she had been on Lavalife for quite a long time. I think eight years, and she was really difficult. Like, I asked her a number of times to go for coffee or something, and she kind of kept delaying it. But she wasn't communicating frequently either. She told me she's been communicating with this guy for eight months. She figured it was good that way because you get to know the person better. (line 88)

She was just too insecure, too afraid. I mean you can only get to know a person for so long. (92)

Right now there's one that I've been waiting to meet, but it sounds like I won't get to meet her. I've been communicating with her for five to six weeks, and it sounds like she's a busy lady and so on, which is fine. But at least she'll correspond. Sometimes it takes a little too long, I find, but I've learned you've got to be patient with that kind of stuff. (line 96)

Delaying was, in fact, one of the methods that Delia employed to ease her way out of having to meet or carry on communicating with someone whom she was not interested in but didn't want to hurt:

The odd time I've kept communicating a little bit and postponed the coffee, then said, "I don't think we have much in common." (line 82)

It was interesting when I sort of indicated that I didn't want to see him again, I got an email from him saying that he realized there was something wrong when it took so much work for me to fit in a time to have coffee. (line 401)

Well, you know, when you're not interested, you just keep postponing things and let four or five days go by before responding to an email. I usually respond - it just takes me a lot longer to respond! (line 409)

Despite the anonymity of the Internet, Delia still found that rejecting someone was difficult, especially when she had communicated with a potential date before receiving access to his photos. In some cases she found that her non-responses generated harsh words from the men:

But with Lavalife, a lot of them keep their picture hidden, so you've got a bit of communication. Then you ask to see the backstage. And what I find really uncomfortable is when they display that backstage and you've had, even if it's just a few sentences back and forth, and you see this picture of someone that you just can't imagine going to a movie with or spending time with... And I find it really difficult... Even though they don't know me and I don't know them, they've got my picture as well. And it's like you're slapping them in the face, and you're being shallow.... I've had the odd one accuse me of being shallow. And I find that makes me really angry because as a man, they don't respond at all. (Delia, lines 62, 64, 66 and 82)

I got a very nasty note from a fellow a couple of years ago. And he called himself tall, fit, and attractive. And when I got the picture, the only thing that matched was the "tall." He wasn't attractive, and he was so far from fit. He was quite obese. And that was one of the times that I didn't respond. And then I got a nasty thing back. (Delia, line 274)

Perception of the market.

Several of the participants also expressed their frustrations with online dating in terms of their perception of the availability and quality of the potential dates in their area:

I think that the clientele that we're picking from here is worse though...I've done a bit of looking both in [region name] and [region name] and, of course, I can't judge because I haven't met them, but just based on pictures, education, and profile information, I think there's more to pick from. Not just more in volume but more quality...more successful, better-looking, more fit, more active...Part of my frustration is that the most common thing with the [local region name] men is that they fish, hunt and camp. And I would like someone who does something other than that. So I feel like I'm a little soured on the Internet, but maybe it's mainly because I'm here [and just soured on the local market]. (Delia, lines 100, 104, 108, 150 and 152)

I was getting a little frustrated with Lavalife because there just wasn't too many people that I, well, I figure I met whoever I wanted to meet. (Larry, line 14)

I haven't got that much out of [Lava]...I sent out smiles to guys that I thought were attractive or whatever and got no response from anybody...I've gotten a couple of hellos from people that I just don't find appealing, like some guy in his fifties and somebody in [region name]. (Lydia, lines 66 and 68)

Inefficient means of getting to know someone.

Although all the participants agreed that Internet dating was a great way to meet people of similar interests, they did not feel that it was the most efficient way to get to know someone:

I don't see it any longer as a way to get to know someone...I'm just using it at this point...to me it's filtering, like would I feel comfortable going to dinner with you? Then maybe I'll consider having coffee. But if you're not someone that I would be proud of, to have on my arm to go for dinner somewhere, I'm not going past that. (Delia, line 136)

I'm just using this as a way to meet people. I'm not using it to sit on the Internet for six hours, talking to people online. Like, that's sort of not my purpose. (Lydia, line 160)

Ultimately, meeting someone in person is the only way to get to know them, so if after an initial assessment, it is mutually agreed that there is some attraction, then the

best next step is to meet in a neutral setting and get to know each other better that way. (Mark, line 20)

It's possible [to get a sense of what a person is like online], better to meet in person. (Jen, line 14)

You need to see a person live, right? (Larry, line 84)

Another aspect that was disconcerting was that relationships that were formed online seemed to accelerate at an uncomfortable speed when meeting in person because of the belief that they knew each other:

When you exchange information with another person online, it seems like things move very quickly when you meet. It's like they want to kiss you right away, and to me that's an intimate thing that comes later. It takes me awhile to get to know someone and feel comfortable with them, so I don't really like that aspect of Internet dating. (Jen, line 46)

Due to the fact that the Internet was a completely different social setting, daters found it difficult to find corroborating information about potential dates (although both Delia and Jen did indicate that they had used Google's search function to verify that other daters were who they said they were). In Mark's words, some of the "more traditional ways of meeting people include meeting people at work, casual exchanges during some other activity (including initiating conversations with appealing strangers), or being set up by someone" (line 20). In each of these instances, the meeting is occurring within a social circle where there is some common connection, whether it is a common friend, activity, or interest. This allows daters to, as Delia said,

...do that age-old check with friends. Do you know anything about so-and-so? And because probably some of your friends know them because you've met at a place that you and your friends go to...you can get a feel, like yeah, yeah, he's a family man or he's this or that. (line 164)

As Jen indicated, this is usually not the case with Internet dating, and it is one of the definite disadvantages:

Due to the wider playing field, there is no connection, i.e., friend of a friend, or you met them at a party, so the person is indirectly connected to someone who knows someone, of one of your friends. It takes longer to get to know someone out of the blue like that. (line 22)

Safety concerns.

Internet daters sometimes have to go by their own "gut feelings," and in some cases, blind faith when choosing whom to converse with or ultimately meet. Based on just a few emails, a telephone conversation, and the fact that her date was an RCMP officer, Delia went against all her normal rules for keeping herself safe:

I did an unorthodox thing that time. Usually, I always have met someone out for a coffee and made a point of parking a little bit a ways away, so that they didn't see what vehicle I came in and stuff and just have always felt that need for safety. But with him, I don't know what it was, maybe because he was an RCMP officer, and I let my guard down. He actually came and picked me up at the house...because the roads were so bad. (lines 178 and 182)

But in another case, all her alarm bells were ringing, so she chose to end her online conversations: "There's one young guy...he's so persistent...so I finally chatted and then I sort of shut it down. I don't know what it is about him. He's so forward and so pushy, and he's kind of creepy" (lines 302 and 304).

Deception.

A common theme that emerged was that deception, whether intentional or not, was a standard part of Internet dating. Although the magnitude of the deception that the participants encountered was generally small, it was an expected part of the online dating experience. What differed for each participant was what was acceptable and what was not.

Lydia was quite adamant that dishonesty in any form was distasteful to her. She was uncompromising in her stance even when she realized that deception may have occurred as a result of technical constraints. For instance, if someone lied about his/her age as a strategy to

show up in more searches, but then told the truth upon meeting, this was still not tolerable in her opinion. In her words, “To be perfectly honest, I don't really think any deception is acceptable” (line 228).

To Mark “dishonesty about appearance, health, marital, or financial status would probably be the most critical, although ultimately any deception is bound to be counterproductive when discovered” (line 26). Although he encountered numerous women who lied about their age, this did not disturb him because age was “not that big an issue” (line 32) with him. Differences in appearance from the photograph to the reality were expected and dealt with humorously, but deception beyond that was disturbing to Mark and contributed negatively to how he assessed whether further contact was warranted (line 32).

Although Larry had not experienced any deception, he indicated that it was unacceptable to him if there was a large discrepancy in age and the woman did not tell him right away; however, if the age difference was small and told immediately, that was okay:

Well, if she would tell me right away fine, I mean, but say I'm looking for a 45 year old and she's actually 59, then I would not be impressed if I found out the truth. [Researcher: Even if she told you right off the bat?] Well, yeah, once we met. No, I would not be impressed at all. I try to be as honest as I can, and I expect honesty in return. And I think most people that are honest, that's how they, they want the same approach. (lines 170 and 172)

Delia had a sliding scale of what she deemed acceptable versus unacceptable. If you were “planning on” doing something but hadn’t done it yet, that was “a bit deceptive” (line 261). “Wanting” to do something was more deceptive and “never intending” to do something was “really deceptive” (lines 261, 264 and 266). At the far end of the scale on the unacceptable side, Delia would not tolerate deceit in three areas: relationship status, smoking and body type (line 272).

In Jen's opinion, lying about relationship status was the worst deceit, but when it came right down to it, any lie that affected her well-being was unacceptable:

If you're married, that's bad because it affects my well-being, but even white lies aren't really acceptable. They might seem harmless, but they're confusing and nebulous. The person may not be actually lying, but they're not giving you information that's important, and that just leads to confusion and angst. I don't want to be in a relationship where I'm always wondering what's going on. You'd go crazy if you got involved with someone like that. (line 46)

Self-Presentation

Based on the amount of advice that Lava offers (in the form of guidelines, helpful hints, articles, and the assessment tool of *Profile Doctor*) on how to write an effective profile, self-presentation would appear to be one of the more difficult aspects of Internet dating.

Profile Description

Much the same as people struggle with bragging about themselves in a resumé, so too do they struggle with presenting themselves in their profile. As Lydia says, "I don't embellish a whole hell of a lot [on a resume]. It's like this is me, this is what I'm good at, this is why I think I'd be good here, and that's kind of it" (line 216). Because she felt that she could not adequately describe herself, she managed to avoid the whole thing by somehow circumventing Lava's requirement of providing a written description of herself. In her own words,

I don't know how to put things on there because I'm not a huge Internet person, like, I don't blog or anything like that, and I'm not sure how to describe myself. I'm the kind of person that you've got to get to know me and just be around me, and that's sort of who I am...I just don't project myself that much, in the sense that this is who I am and this is what I want and I'm all about this, blah, blah. The way people word themselves on the profile, I'm not very comfortable with that...so I don't have a big, massive profile because that's not how I do things. (Lydia, lines 156 and 164)

Others tried to not make a big deal out of it. For instance, when asked how he came up with his description of himself, Larry responded laughingly, "I just used my left hemisphere,"

(line 150) and Delia said, "I just typed, and the description was how I felt about myself" (line 324). Mark and Delia, however, both admitted that they looked at the profiles of other members on Lava to get an idea of how it was done:

At the beginning, I read a few of the other women's profiles to get an idea, but I stopped because some were so good. (Delia, line 324)

I remember looking at some guys just to get a feeling for what they do...so I did read a sampling. (Mark, line 42)

Jen, like Lydia, indicated that she wasn't "too big on long-winded emails or text...so my profile is rather to the point" (line 38), but in actuality, her profile description was about the same length as the other participants' descriptions. It was, however, written more like a poem and, in her words, "creative [and] open ended" (line 38).

In the *Personal Details* section of the profile, Mark was the only participant who chose an answer for each category. The rest of the participants chose the response, "prefer not to say" (PNS) in several categories as shown in Table 1.

Photographs

Every one of the participants had one picture alongside his or her profile. None of them put any pictures in the gallery and only Larry and Delia put more pictures in the backstage. None supplied a video. Both Lydia and Delia balked at even the thought of presenting themselves in a video:

No, I don't, I have no, I don't know how to use it. I don't think I'd be comfortable with that...I mean to sit there and be like, "Oh, hi, I'm Lydia." No, just forget it! I just couldn't do that. I'm a little shy that way, and I just think it's a little weird. I don't know if I could do that, to sit there and talk to a camera. It just seems strange. I'd rather just talk to a person myself and just be having a conversation rather than just talking. (Lydia, lines 218-222)

I've never done a video, and I never would. I photograph poorly. Plus, I've seen myself on video cam, and I see every wrinkle and sag. (Delia, line 332)

Table 1

Information Omitted in Preset Categorical Section of Profile

Categories	Delia	Lydia	Jen	Larry
Have Children	PNS	PNS		
Want Children	PNS	PNS	PNS	PNS
Education	PNS	PNS		PNS
Annual Income	PNS	PNS	PNS	PNS
Religion	PNS			
Drinking Habits	PNS			

All of the participants realized that it was important to have a good photograph, and interestingly enough, Lydia was the one who said that this was the most important aspect of presenting herself: "My biggest thing was just to make sure that I had a flattering picture" (line 216). Delia also made an effort to make sure that she had an up-to-date, pleasing photo, and she commented on the power of having a picture, especially at an older age:

I've got a really nice picture on there...I took my camera over to my friend's place on purpose. I said, "I need a new picture on Lavalife because the ones I have are so old." I just thought it was a fun picture...it shows personality...laughter...If I don't post my picture at 55, I get no response. If I post my picture, I get piles of responses...from all ages, from grossly young. (lines 280, 282, 401, 403 and 405)

Mark admitted that his picture was "somewhat out of date" (line 24), and although Larry acknowledged that his was "from a distance and hard to see" (line 186), he also included pictures in his backstage that were "way closer...so you can tell what I look like pretty easy" (lines 182 and 184).

Honesty vs. Deception

Most of the participants emphasized that they strove for honesty in their profiles as shown in the following excerpts:

I just wanted to represent myself...I tried to be as honest as possible. (Mark, line 40)

My big lesson that I've learned in relationships is that I have to be myself and be honest because I end up, what I've done repeatedly is dated guys and pretended certain things were okay and went along with things and pretended I liked things that I really didn't, so I'm not going to do that [on the profile]...I've done that in person, but I haven't done that on the profile because I won't. (Lydia, lines 178 and 180)

I'm very cautious not to say things about myself that aren't, in my perception, true because I'm just not a liar. (Delia, line 188)

I try to be as honest as I can, and I expect honesty in return. And I think most people that are honest, that's how they, they want the same approach. (Larry, line 172)

Despite the sincere intention of being completely honest, all of the participants except Lydia admitted, either directly or indirectly, to some form of deception. For example, when asked if he had ever changed his profile to match another person's profile, Larry's first response was, "Why should I change myself? I try to put the best profile as I possibly can to describe what I do and my likes, and that's what it is" (line 140), but after more questioning, he conceded that he had "changed it a bit, the wording of [his] profile" (line 144). Delia, who had not only corresponded with Larry online but also met him in person, confirmed that he kept changing it:

There's someone who definitely changed it to match people, and I asked him about that when we met. I said, "I noticed you changed your profile." He said well, yeah, that he had been sort of seeing someone and he noticed that he hadn't highlighted some of the important things about himself that she had on hers...And interesting, you know, I asked him a bit about the skiing, and again, he was another one that put the snow skiing down on his profile. Well, he'd skied but not for many years, so for me, there was some disappointment around that because when I'm talking with him, well, he doesn't ski. (lines 351 and 359)

Mark emphatically denied any dishonesty but then in the next breath admitted some deception:

I've only changed my profile once in the 2 ½ years that I have been on Lavalife, and that was to improve the accuracy of the description of the match I was looking for. I would never present information that was dishonest (alright I admit that my profile picture is somewhat out of date, but mainly because I have not gotten round to changing it and not because of a desire to deceive). (line 24)

Part of the problem with presenting oneself accurately stems from the technical constraints of the Internet. For instance, when checking off skiing as an interest, there is no way to indicate whether it is something that you currently do or whether it is just something that you would like to do or once did but do not anymore. Delia was adamant about not putting down anything that she was not currently doing, and expected others to do the same for the most part:

On Lavalife, you're checking off the activities and there's no way to indicate that you've just done it...If I check windsurfing because I want to appear to be this amazing person that does everything, and I know I no longer do then that's deception. But only I know my motivation and my reality because I can always say, "Well, I did windsurf ten years ago, but I'm not doing it anymore. I'm not interested." So I can say that and clear it up, but in the meantime, Joe Blow who got in touch with me just because they were so excited because there was a fellow windsurfer, especially on Lavalife, they pay for credits. So they've now paid for credits just to find out that she doesn't windsurf, so for me, I'm very careful about that stuff. If other people aren't, well I'm not all that insulted by it. (lines 194 and 204)

Mark also commented on the limitations of the technology but felt that any lack or ambiguity in the profile information could be clarified through further communication online or in person:

Of course, profiles often do not include all information about such things as marital and job histories and status. But if they are interested in me, these will usually be divulged online before a meeting if requested and if I am similarly open about my life. (line 16)

Despite her vigilance in accurately portraying herself, Delia admitted that she had inadvertently misinformed others on Lava when she was considering moving to another locale:

I was deceitful, but I didn't mean to be. I really thought I was moving down there and so I posted myself as [region name], not realizing until after I got the first few emails that it wasn't just about me looking at *them*. Because by posting myself as [region name], when I went online, it gave me this big feast of men in [region name]. And then it was like, "Oh, wow!" And then I was getting messages from them and it was like, oops. I realized they thought I lived down there. (line 230)

Although she realized that she was being deceitful and felt badly about it, Delia chose not to correct the situation, in part because she really did want to move:

So I could have undone it right away, but I already had so many communications going, it was just too hard, and that was deceitful... Well, it's not as bad as lying and saying you're single when you're married or something. You know, it's different [because] I was truly available. And actually, partly, if I met Mr. Wonderful down there, who knows? I could have moved anyway. And I guess, partly, I still think that. You know it would be nice to communicate with some people in some other places because I am open to moving... I thought I was moving... It was a tool to try and get to know people there first. My initial thinking was, "This is great. I can meet some men before I move down there, and that's where I want to be." And then it was like, this isn't working! (lines 238, 242, 244 and 250)

Impression Formation Online

Although certain details like smoking and drinking habits were important to some participants, all of the participants agreed that the three key components of online impression formation, prior to meeting, were 1) appearance, 2) commonalities (such as interests, personality and lifestyle), and 3) written and verbal expression. Mark summed this up nicely when asked how he formed his impression of others on Lava:

The first impression is from their photograph(s), if available. Then I usually scan their profile looking for common interests, e.g., certain sports or music. Then I read their profile statement and see how they express themselves. (line 10)

Appearance

In forming their impressions of others, all the participants agreed that the most important factor was appearance, as judged by the photographs included with the profile. Although Lydia initially indicated that the first two pieces of information that she looked at were education and occupation, appearance and commonalities were intertwined with these factors:

This is going to sound kind of harsh, but I do tend to look at the level of education and what they do for a living. It's not thinking that I'm superior to anyone; it's just whether I have things in common...I got a message the other day from a guy who said, "Oh, I like your profile; you seem nice. I'm a down-to-earth, easy-going guy, blah, blah, blah. I work for a couple of construction companies." You know, and then I look at his [profile] and his education is like high school, and he's sitting in his picture with a baseball cap and a beer. And I just thought, no, I'm not going to have anything in common with that guy at all. (line 76)

When asked if she would consider someone who had a high level of education, a professional job, and a picture showing him with a baseball cap and a beer, Lydia vacillated, and in the end, appearance seemed to take precedence:

I would probably give him a chance. It depends. I get turned off by a guy with a beer in the picture...the picture is part of it. It's also how they look. Like I saw a guy on there...He was a heavier set guy with a big smile. And his profile was really interesting, and he seemed to have a decent level of education and there was a job there, so I responded to that. It's not like I'm looking for, it's not the good looks thing, but it's just something about them. But holding a beer in your picture turns me right off. Like even the guy with the level of education or whatever, I'm kind of, I don't drink all that much. Like I do drink, you know, have some wine or whatever, but I, you know, there was one guy who was messaging me... and in his profile picture, he was just standing there with a beer, and yuck. I just kind of find it cheesy. (lines 78 and 80)

Finally at a later point in the interview, Lydia conceded that appearance was, in fact, more important than education, occupation, and commonalities by stating, "I will not respond to anyone who doesn't have a picture on there. I want to know what somebody looks like" (line 248). When queried as to whether this would still be the case if she saw a profile that

sounded really good but had no picture, she cemented the importance of appearance by saying that she would not respond:

No. Like why aren't you putting your picture on there? Like, what don't you want people to...I'm not comfortable, there's something about, if they don't have a picture, I don't really like that. Like I understand if you're really shy, but...(lines 250 and 256)

Larry and Delia also indicated that appearance would override all other factors:

...appearance is a big thing for me...they don't necessarily need to have a picture...if they describe themselves as we communicate, and I have an idea of what, you know, their body size might be, and so forth and so forth, you know, then I'll see if I can [meet them]. (Larry, lines 68, 70 and 72)

...but sometimes when the pictures come, I've just been like, "Oh, my God." You know, like, I just don't want to communicate with them anymore at all because I know that I would just have nothing...People make a big thing about saying, "Oh, it's about what's on the inside; it's not what's on the outside," so I reprimand myself at times for being too concerned about looks. But it isn't just looks, it's attraction. (Delia, lines 82 and 124)

Commonalities

The second important factor in forming impressions of others was whether or not daters had something in common. Larry clearly indicated that this was the element that he looked for after appearance:

Well, I'm looking for a certain type, you know. I'm the type of person that I kind of know sort of what I want in appearance, and I go by that. I'll read their profile, and then I'm also interested. Like, for myself, I have a lot of interest in outdoor activities, and I love music...so I kind of look for a link. (line 66)

Delia not only searched for men who shared the same activities,

Well, you're hoping to filter through and find people of like interests and like personality. I mean you can't tell a lot, but to me, as I was more involved, I would filter out. I wouldn't respond to people that weren't at least interested in golf or skiing or fitness or something because I felt we had nothing in common. (line 10)

but also she looked for men with a body type close to her own because, in her eyes, it was an indication of other similarities:

I'm sorry. I'm not fat. I'm not skinny, but I'm not fat. And the reason I'm not fat is because I look after myself. That's about lifestyle choices. That's about who I am. It's my personality. Do I want to be with someone who's fat? Probably not, because they probably don't have the same values, lifestyle choices, and look after themselves. And I wouldn't find them attractive, just like all those other men out there who won't find a fat woman attractive. (line 274)

Written and Verbal Expression

How daters expressed themselves verbally and in writing was another important factor in impression formation. Written expression, of course, was the first to be looked at in the other daters' profile descriptions, then in emails and IMs. Finally, before meeting, most of the participants would have a phone conversation that revealed the other person's voice and manner of speaking. In forming their impressions, participants looked at not only grammar and spelling but also the words people used and the topics they chose to discuss.

Grammar/spelling.

Delia indicated that she linked poor grammar and spelling to a lower socio-economic and educational level than what she had, and in turn to a lack of commonality:

Well, I read what they've written and if someone has really bad grammar or bad spelling, I'm not responding because, unless it indicates on there that they are university educated or something then that maybe, I'm ruling them out because I think we have a different socio-economic background and a different educational background and you need someone that you can...(line 16)

When asked what she would think of someone who had a university education but also bad grammar and spelling, she responded:

I might assume in that case that perhaps they're just using sort of computerese, but usually you can pick that out. Some of them write with poor grammar and stuff, but it's more in a style that's just Internet language. Others that have poor grammar that, actually I don't think I've ever seen it: someone who's well educated that just has straight poor grammar. But, I've certainly seen some that are university educated whose writing style might be different from mine, but it's not, I mean they might have dashes and commas or it might be more poetic or creative. (lines 18 and 20)

Larry noticed poor grammar, but he indicated that it was not one of the more important factors to him: "I find that a lot of people can't write very well – that's one thing. There's a lot of people that have problems with their grammar, but that's no big deal" (lines 48 and 50). Although Larry's writing in his profile was error-free, his spoken grammar often contained errors, as can be observed in the quote above. He also spoke with a French-Canadian accent, so many of his grammatical errors may have been the result of English being his second language.

When the communication moved from writing to speaking on the phone, Delia watched for grammar as well as the tone of voice and words chosen:

In the telephone conversation, he was like, "Yah, well, I was just out and helping my buddy, and I took his kids over to Superstore, and we were picking up some grub," and when he said that, I sort of smiled, and I thought, "No, it's not going anywhere!" (line 42)

There was one man I emailed first and then I talked to him on the phone and his voice put me right off. There was one guy in [region name] I should've talked to first because when I met him in person, his English was so bad. (line 330)

Well, speaking on the phone, to me, was the beginning of being turned off [dater's name]...He was too overbearing in his phone calls before we met. He was syrupy ridiculous. He would phone and say, "Oh, I hear that if I phone this number, I'm going to find a beautiful woman." I was just like, give it up! And, you know, the turn-off lines, it was just not appealing. He embodied all the phoniness that you see [in his profile]. (lines 371, 373 and 377)

Tone.

Jen indicated that the "tone of their profile" (line 10) ranked right up there with appearance in forming her impression of others, and Delia agreed that this was a draw for her as well:

A lot of the men really write like poetic or long or fun or they show their spirit. They show their sense of humour. And they might write like a page...So they're really trying to show who they are, and I think that's kind of neat. (lines 220 and 222)

Delia also admired men who could "play with words and play with the language" (line 397), and she delighted in men who could match her level of communication even though, as she said, "You don't want to spar with me, not with words!" (line 228).

Content.

Along with the words they used, other daters were judged on the basis of what they spoke about - the content of their written and verbal conversations. For Delia and Lydia, there were a number of things that turned them off, including references to past relationships, negative comments about women, and sexual innuendoes:

I read his profile and he just sounded bizarrely arrogant. You know, I get turned off by guys in their profiles who say things like, "I don't want anyone with any baggage. People should just deal with the fact that I have kids." Like, somewhere in there, they try to say what they want by making some negative comment about women. And I don't really like that...Or referring to past relationships in your profile is just kind of a turn off... it's a red flag. (Lydia, lines 68, 70 and 72)

Some of them slam their ex-partners. And I've never liked that. And he did a little bit of that but not a lot. But those are things that I find interesting in terms of attitude. I don't how appealing it would be to me to get together with someone who spends their time talking about the ex and how bad they were. So those are things to me to take a mental note. (Delia, line 114)

I have a pet peeve with men saying, "No game players please."...A lot of men have it in their profiles...I attacked a guy in [region name] on that. I'm like, "Okay, so what's a game player?" We ended up communicating back and forth, so I said to him, "So a game player is what? A woman who meets you and just doesn't want to see you again, yet if you met her and didn't want to see her again, it's not a game? So what's your definition of a game player?" (Delia, lines 224 and 230)

I remember one of the first times I went on, there was a guy who contacted me and we were talking on IM, and he started saying things like, "Oh, here's a picture of me at such and such a place – do you like what you see?" "Yeah, you look fine." "What do you look like?" "Brown hair, brown eyes." "What are you wearing?" "Clothes..." You know, and he starts saying like we should get together and go for coffee. And I'm like, "Well you know, maybe a coffee or something." And he's like, "Well how would you like to come over to my place tonight and listen to some music and have some wine." And I'm like, "No, how about coffee?" And he's like, "How about tomorrow?" "No, how about Saturday?" – like really pushing back. And then I ended up not showing up...and that kind of thing irks me..., that just made me feel

really icky, and I don't like that..., if a guy spoke to me like that at a bar, I'd tell him to get lost, to be perfectly honest... I don't like being spoken to in that kind of...I don't mind a guy who flirts and stuff like that, but the "You want to come over to my place?" and "Hey, you look kind of hot." I'm, like, oh go away. I don't like being spoken to in a really overtly sexual manner is all I can say... I don't like being treated like a little toy or something. (Lydia, lines 234, 236, 238, 240 and 242)

Communicating Online

Preferred Channel

When communicating online, most of the participants preferred email over IM for various reasons. Delia found IM to be intrusive, a bit more hyperpersonal than email, and a medium that did not represent who she felt she was in an accurate way:

I hate IM. It puts you on the spot if you don't respond. There's almost an edge to it. Plus, men tend to start talking with sexual overtones very quickly. I prefer email the best... A lot of people, I think, like that Instant messenger. And I think I actually don't like it. I think they use it as a way to sort of have conversation. But based on just how I am, I know that I can be much more witty with comebacks on IM than I can in person... So on personal note, I don't think it really shows who I am. So I don't know. And I don't like them either because I find them very intrusive. I might pop onto Lavalife just because I want to see if I've got a message from someone I've emailed. And then you're on there for like 30 seconds and there's no message, and I didn't have a lot of time anyway. But someone in the meantime gets onto that IM and they want a response. And again I have these issues where I feel like I'm being rude to someone I've never seen. I just hate IM! Actually, I should just go on my profile and say, "No IMs!" (lines 212, 220 and 330)

Because Larry felt like he was "not a whiz on computers" (line 28) and he "didn't know what it was" (line 36) to begin with, he had avoided IM up until just a few days before his interview:

Actually I just went through instant messages once. I figured it out just recently actually. I did an instant message with it. Before, I would just avoid it. The rest would send instant messages for me, but I would just ignore it. And then the other day... there was this girl I just recently met from [region name] and we were supposed to meet and I saw that she had chosen to instant message me. And so I, it wasn't too difficult to figure it out. And then I instant messaged her, but she was the only one. I wouldn't be afraid to do it again. (lines 32, 34, 36)

Although he “thought [IM] was kind of neat the way it works” (line 38), Larry still felt that email worked the best for him (line 44). Jen concurred, saying that her preferred mode of communication was “email first for a few times then telephone” (line 44). Although Lydia liked emailing, she would very quickly move from Lava emails to using the IM capacity of MSN (after giving out her personal hotmail address).

Length of Time

As participants gained experience with Internet dating, they spent less and less time communicating with potential partners online before meeting in person. All of the participants in this study had been on Lava for at least two years, with the exception of Larry who had been on Lava for only 3 months. Although involved in Internet dating for only a short period of time, Larry was already beginning to feel exasperated with the length of time spent communicating before meeting: “Well, I don't have 8 months to communicate with someone, you know, for 8 months and then finally find out that I'm not attracted to this person or something isn't there” (line 88). The seasoned daters, like Mark and Delia, found lengthy communications a waste of time because, ultimately, the true test of compatibility came when meeting in person:

When I first started, I was emailing a lot. You know, I was kind of shy to meet someone, but then, now, I'm more experienced...I [will] email once or twice just to set up a meeting. You know, I figure if we're not going to meet, I don't have the time to spend on emails... you can spend a lot of time emailing and then meet the person and find out you don't have that attraction, so why bother?... Now that I have reawakened my dating skills after many years of neglect and am enjoying the fun and adventure of it, I am less particular than I was at the beginning about sounding out a woman in depth online beforehand. If there is mutual attraction and sufficient common interests, I am now inclined to meet her fairly quickly and determine after whether I want to pursue the relationship further. (Mark, lines 16, 64 and 66)

After a disastrous meeting with a man she “had emailed enough that...it felt like we had a relationship because we'd had so much conversation - not intimate conversation in terms of

sexual, but intimate in terms of sharing our feelings about life” (line 58), Delia decided from then on to keep the communications online brief:

My first experience ever meeting someone through the Internet was way back...and it was a fellow that I had gotten in touch with from [region name]. And he had expressed interest in me and we had emailed back-and-forth for about 10 days - a lot of emails and wrote long emails. And both poured our hearts out, and we were both recently divorced and new to it...And when he came up and we met, I was just so disappointed in his looks because you build an image based on the conversation... And I can remember that one and, so, since then, I don't engage in a lot of e-mail conversation... If I think there's potential, if there's a picture that I think, "Well, maybe." I'd rather meet them right away and just end it or carry on because after that situation with the guy in [region name], when he came up, and he was a nice person, but I had zero attraction to him. (lines 46, 48, 50, 52 and 54)

Communicating online, however, “is a good starting point for meeting” (Mark, line 14).

Meeting in Person

All the participants in this study found that “the online impression differs from the reality but not necessarily significantly” (Mark, line 12). For the most part, the participants found that their online impressions of others were pretty close to their in-person impressions. Lydia found “a couple of times that people turn[ed] out to be a little different in person than they [were] online” (line 94), and Larry agreed:

I think they were pretty accurate. I mean I think the impression was, I think it was pretty close to, but, you know, there's little things that you don't see. You need to see a person live, right? (line 84)

In Mark's words:

In person the reality is different, sometimes better and sometimes worse than the original impression. In person, details emerge that are often different than anticipated from the profile description...I have now met 10-20 women in person and corresponded with a similar number beyond those...and I guess I'm now sufficiently mature and flexible enough to not let the differences necessarily get in the way of allowing the relationship to develop, if it is going to do so. (lines 12 and 14)

The differences were expected because “everybody's going to make themselves sound a little better on their profile. It's like a resumé” (Lydia, line 186); “people lie about their age,

they'll lie about this, they'll lie about that...people can be good liars" (Larry, lines 98 and 100); "you're not going to get everything online, you're just not" (Lydia, line 100); "pictures aren't the same as reality" (Delia, line 36); "action speaks louder than words" (Jen, line 14); and "there are some intangibles that you don't know until you meet" (Mark, line 58).

Differences Due to Deception

Age.

One thing that Mark had come to expect was that there would be a difference between the age that a woman reported on her profile and her actual age:

I have found that many of the women I have met were actually older by 2-5 years than listed on their profiles...I have learned to accept that many of the women in the age range that I am looking underestimate their age and have adjusted my strategy when looking for matches to account for it (i.e., 48 or 49 usually means 52 or 53). I now expect it and it is usually dealt with in a joking manner when we first meet...Age is not that big an issue with me anyway. (lines 16 and 32)

In Larry's opinion, however, men lied just as much, if not more, than women:

Age is one of the biggest things men will lie about because they want to meet younger ladies...from what I understand from the ladies I've talked to, men will change their, they'll lie about their age quite often, so they can meet a younger lady. When the lady meets them, you know, you're not 35, you're 49. So that's one of the things I'm hearing a lot. (line 160)

This was backed up by Delia who said, "I've found a lot of men lie about their age, but I don't think as many women. I certainly don't. In the long run, it's just not worth it" (line 397).

Delia also had experience with a couple of men lying about their age (one who stated that he was younger on his profile, and one who implied that he was younger by posting pictures of himself that were outdated by several years):

One fellow I had dated had lied about his age, and I still sort of keep in touch with him as a friend. But it was only after I had known him for several years that I pinned him down on the fact that his profile still said 49, and I think he's actually two years older than me or something, so he would be 57 now. I found it amusing. (line 278)

I remember one fellow that I met, his picture just threw me. And I liked what he said about himself, but when I met him, I could barely see that it was the same guy in the picture. And yet it was. Because I sat and I looked and I realized it was. I think the picture might have been quite old, I don't know: maybe three years, maybe five years, maybe 10. But it was him. (lines 32 and 34)

Appearance.

“Differences in appearance are also expected to some extent. Usually profile pictures are more flattering than reality for various reasons” (Mark, line 32). Jen’s picture is a case in point. Although it was unintentional, Jen was deceptive in posting an out-of-date picture that showed her at a lower weight, which resulted in some men being surprised about her appearance upon meeting:

One person thought that he wouldn’t recognize me in person in an unscheduled setting. Another was a little surprised about my weight. (I had gained some weight since the pic that was posted.) Honestly, it didn’t even cross my mind, and then I realized that for the first impression, I’d obviously gotten heavier than I noticed (15 lbs). Although he never came out and said it, he implied it by commenting that a lot of his dates had lied about their weight. (Jen, line 42)

Mark also posted an out-of-date profile picture but didn’t consider it deception because, in his words, “I always do forewarn the person when we make a date that my beard is now becoming grey” (line 32). Jen realized that she had misrepresented her weight, but in turn, she found that men tended to be deceptive about their height:

I am about 5’9” in my profile and in real life, so when the other’s profile reads 5’10”, we’ll find out. It’s not that I can’t have fun with a short guy, but if they’re not comfortable, they find out. I think guys exaggerate their height and women play down their weight. (line 32)

Activities.

Both Delia and Lydia encountered men who had indicated that they were involved in a number of activities when in fact they were quite sedentary:

I remember the first fellow I dated, he said he was active, but he didn't do anything...He didn't do anything! In fact, then when I confronted him on that, and I

actually quite liked the fellow - we saw each other for about a year. But, I confronted him with that in a teasing way, because it was like, "What do you do that makes you think we're compatible?" "Well," he said, "I was thinking that I need to get more active, and you're so active that you would help me be active." But yet his profile had indicated that he skied and that he did other things. But as I got to know him, that wasn't true. (Delia, lines 98, 100)

The guy that I dated earlier this year – I didn't meet up with him online. I was set up with him through a teacher, actually – after we broke up, after four months, I saw his profile online when I got back on Lavalife. And he, there's so much stuff in there that I laughed, I was like that's totally not true... online he says he's into all these sports and activities, and he never wanted to do anything other than sit on his butt and watch TV. (Lydia, lines 168 and 170)

Another activity that seemed to be lied about quite frequently in Delia and Lydia's experience was smoking:

And then there were other men that I met that definitely indicated non-smokers. Because I would filter...I wouldn't meet anyone that was a smoker. And they've said non-smoker, but, and the first time you meet them (and the last!), they're sitting there and they have yellow fingers and they stink of cigarette smoke. And their skin is so gray and aged looking even though they might be five to 10 years younger than me and it's just disgusting! (Delia, line 100)

My favourite one is whenever somebody says they smoke, no one ever says: Smoker? Yes. They always say: Trying to quit. They're not trying to quit!...[dater's name] had that on there – trying to quit – he never tried to quit once. (Lydia, lines 184 and 186)

Differences Due to the Nature of the Medium

Photographs.

Because pictures are "just a snapshot of someone at a moment in time" (Delia, line 42) and oftentimes not close up, expectations can differ quite substantially from reality. Delia couldn't see one man's face very clearly in his photo because he was at a distance, but she decided to meet him based on the overall look of his clothes and environment. Although he was not hugely different in his looks, little details like a missing tooth and the way he spoke pointed to huge differences between them in terms of their socioeconomic levels:

The guy had a picture. It was fairly distant. You know it would be like taking a picture of someone sitting on a couch from way off in the corner with a wide angle lens. But I could see he wasn't a creep. He wasn't inappropriately dressed or anything. I guess the picture, he was sitting in a decent room, and the general look, I thought, well, okay, he appeared to be not bad looking. But when I met him in person, had he put a picture on that really showed his face, I might have still met him because he wasn't unattractive, he just had one tooth missing back here, it wasn't like the whole thing. And he had a nice smile but when I met him in person, his grammar was poor and he came across as less educated... a really nice man in every way. There was nothing wrong with him as a person [but he] lives in a place down in the hood and I don't know, we're just in a completely different socioeconomic group. (lines 42 and 44)

She took a chance with another man whose picture was at a distance and was disappointed once again:

You see with that picture and this one here, I thought with what you can see in the distance, he looks okay...[but when we met] his eyes were a bit shifty, and he's not that attractive to me. He's very aged – his skin is very aged. He looks like he's a smoker although he's not now, but he looks like he would've been. He has kind of a greyish pallor – not vibrant at all. (lines 349 and 355)

Lydia also found that one man's photo was quite different from him in person: "He wasn't as attractive in person as he was in his profile picture. He was less clean-shaven" (line 84).

Asynchronous communication.

Communicating online forces a two-way conversation, so there is no way of knowing whether the other person will stay in that mode in person. Delia found with a couple of men that this was not the case:

Well, he talked and talked. He did a little bit of two-way conversation. I did get to tell him a little about myself, but not a lot. I think we were together about 2 hours. I just felt a little like I did in my marriage. You know, someone who was so into themselves there wasn't two-way. And of course, I listened and prompted him. At one point he did say, "Oh, enough about me." And I talked a little, but then it was back to him again. He wasn't loud or inappropriate, but it just wasn't appealing. (line 355)

In his profile, he certainly comes across as a very nice guy, and he is not a bad person. I think he's in his fifties. He was another one that when I met him, he talked

a lot more, and very self-righteous to the point of uncomfortable. He was friendly but overbearing. (line 369)

With the ability to think about their responses online, daters can often seem more adept conversationally than they actually are in person. As Delia said, “I’m a really quick wit writing, so I don’t think that presents me” (line 214). She agreed that in person she was not able to make those quick conversational comebacks that she could online (line 218). Lydia also found that one man she met was more engaging online than in person:

He sort of came across a lot more charming and warm online than he does in person...Well, it was kind of like chatting with him online, he was kind of flirty and kind of charming. And then dating him, though, he was kind of cold and shut off and kind of this dry sort of sense of humour or dry personality, where you couldn’t really tell if he was being serious or not. (Lydia, lines 20 and 22)

Disembodied selves.

Due to the lack of bodily presence online, daters are often unable to ascertain many things about potential dates until they meet in person, including such things as eye contact, humour, manners, and whether or not there is a comfort level or ease with the other person:

What you can’t read between the lines is, you know, how intense it’s going to be. (Delia, line 98)

When you meet someone in person, their mannerisms come through, personal interactions, communication, the overall presence of a person, tone of their voice, [and] eye contact. (Jen, line 16)

I think it’s how they treat people, or how they treat you. And we went to Second Cup and he just towered over me, and it was really funny. And we go to go out the door, and I’m in front of him, and he’s leaning over me to open the door (laughing and demonstrating his reach). It was really cute. (Lydia, lines 120 and 122)

[You find out] more about their personalities. Like you said, the nuances in conversation and their sense of humour and whether they laugh or anything like that. (Lydia, line 140)

Well, again in person, I look for a certain attractiveness in a person whether that be their looks or the way they smile or the way they laugh. You know, it tells you a lot. You don’t know how a person...even a voice or, you know, there’s an edge to a

person, or you know what they eat or feel, or if you feel that ease with them. You know, just all these little tangibles (sic), I guess. (Larry, line 116)

Little things I noticed that, you know, he was a gentleman. Um, we met at Tim Horton's and he was waiting just inside the door at Tim Horton's, not staring at the door, but waiting and keeping his eyes, so that I wouldn't have to be looking around the restaurant for him. And the minute I walked in, he smiled, recognized me, and he moved up beside me, and said, "Hi, I'm [dater's name]." And you know, we got to the counter, and you know I'm always wanting to be cautious, so I was ready to pay for my coffee, and he was like, "Oh, no, no, I'll get this." And this was a man who knew that we weren't necessarily going to, he had...manners, gentlemanly, and then you know, we found a table and sat and just polite, cognizant of two-way conversation. (Delia, lines 110 and 112)

Imagination/hyperpersonal communication.

When communicating online, with or without a picture to supplement the words, there is a danger of building an image of the other person that does not match with the reality. In Jen's words:

In the beginning, a lot takes place in the imagination, which is why meeting in person is where the real attraction needs to begin. Otherwise, you could be in delusion, or what you want it to be rather than [what] the reality of the situation actually is, all based on hearsay, i.e., profile plus imagination. (line 34)

Delia experienced this when she first started on Lavalife. Neither she nor the man had posted pictures of themselves, but they felt a strong connection based on intensely personal online conversations:

In a period of 10 days, we had probably exchanged two to three long emails a day without a phone conversation until the night before he came. And we had shared so much of our hearts. And so, I really liked what I knew of the person... But there'd been no picture. And he hadn't seen a picture of me either - neither one of us had a picture... I just had this image in my mind of who I was meeting and what he wrote and they didn't match when I met him. (lines 38, 50 and 58)

Chemistry

Ultimately, even if the other person accurately presented himself/herself online, the true test of whether a relationship was going to continue beyond just a few dates came down

to that indefinable, elusive quality called chemistry. As Delia said, "It isn't just looks, it's attraction" (line 124):

Well my first instance of feeling like I got to know someone really well and then finding that ultimate disappointment in person in terms of, we need both. We need physical, emotional, intellectual – we need all of those parts. So if you spend a lot of time getting to know someone on an intellectual/emotional [level] through communication, and then it's just a real dud physically, I mean...I don't know. It killed it. (Delia, line 136)

He's smart and pleasant, but I didn't feel any chemistry. He'll be a really nice partner for someone. (Delia, line 365)

We were both into each other right away – interested, and two-way conversation, and it didn't feel like a test. It didn't feel like an interview...It was like one of those times when you see someone and it was like, "Wow!" You're pleasantly surprised. Not that like, "Oh my God! How am I going to get through this coffee with this person?" which was more my experience on the weekend when I saw that fellow that came with the tattered jean jacket and the logger clothing. (Delia, lines 174 and 182)

Once early on with Lavalife I was intrigued enough to meet a woman because she had other attributes that I thought could overcome the lack of attraction (which was mild); plus, I reasoned that the pictures just may not have been flattering. In the other case, later on, I was not certain enough about the attraction and was by then sufficiently experienced with Lavalife dating that my curiosity about her and my sense of adventure were great enough to warrant our meeting. (Neither worked out, so likely I would not repeat such dates in future.). (Mark, line 18)

Well, that fellow that I saw this summer. We went out the first time, and I didn't find him attractive. I didn't like his picture, but it was a poor picture. So I thought, well maybe he's better in person. And he wasn't really better in person; in fact, he was probably a little better in the picture. But I really enjoyed his company. We visited for three hours. We laughed; we talked, so I saw him again even though, physically, I just felt no attraction because I thought maybe it could grow into something. And we went out about 5 or 6 times, but when it reached the point where he actually thought that it should step up to an actual kiss, I just couldn't. There was nothing there. (Delia, line 30)

Summary

The general consensus among the participants was that online dating was a great way to meet people and to establish a bit of common ground, but it was almost impossible to get to know someone and determine whether chemistry existed without meeting in person. Given

the intense competition to win the attention of would-be suitors and the fact that first impressions were highly manageable in CMC, deceptive daters were an undeniable and expected part of the online mix. However, the expectation of meeting in person tempered the magnitude of the deception that occurred. What was acceptable or not acceptable, in terms of deception, differed for each participant.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion

For the participants in this study, Lava was just another place to meet – a modern place beyond the noise and chaos of bars, and the most efficient way to meet a large range of eligible dates. Indeed, the biggest advantage of online dating was the fact that daters were presented with a huge pool of potential dates to choose from outside of their normal social circles. Daters who were more mobile, like Delia, could look for and meet dates in new locales where they had no established social connections. Daters, like Mark, who were newly single with children in their lives and no time to be out and about trying to meet compatible partners, could use their spare time at work or home to find someone. Daters like Lydia who postponed marriage in favour of establishing a career and who found themselves surrounded by women at work and couples after work, could expand their social circle and find other singles who met their exacting standards. Ultimately, it was a great way to meet new and interesting people (Jen, line 36), and there was no shortage of people to choose from (Larry, line 216).

While online dating does present a lot more opportunities to meet people, a recent survey by Madden and Lenhart (2006) found that “most people who are currently in serious long-term relationships or marriage either met through family and friends or in a work or school setting” (p. 6). Those who met at bars, nightclubs, or other social gatherings made up 13% of the population, while those who said that they met over the Internet made up just 3% of the population, which is only slightly more than the 2% who said they met at church (p. 6). At the time of writing, two of the five participants in this study were in relationships that were formed through Lava – one relationship was ten months old (Mark) and the other six

months (Lydia). Two participants (Delia and Larry) were still active on the site and one was no longer active (Jen) and had removed her profile. Interestingly, Lydia had removed her profile completely from the site after beginning her relationship; whereas, Mark's profile was still online but hidden.

Larry considered Internet dating to be a lot easier than traditional dating, but Madden and Lenhart's (2006) survey found that online daters were roughly split on this idea, with about half in agreement and nearly as many (44%) in disagreement (p. 16). This split was not quite reflected in this study with only Larry stating it was easier. Both Delia and Lisa acknowledged that meeting men in more traditional ways was not easy either, but at the same time they expressed frustrations with online dating. Mark felt that meeting more traditionally would be easier, but for him it was also highly unlikely:

Of course, if you meet an appropriate match casually during some unrelated experience or via a friend/relative, it would be more effortless and "natural," but for me the perception was, and still is, that meeting someone in that manner is less likely than via Internet dating (and such a meeting has not happened to me yet). (line 34)

Jen had no comment one way or the other.

Although it is easier than traditional dating in some respects (personal details are readily available, so you can filter through the masses and choose only those who meet your particular criteria; approaching someone is as effortless as clicking your mouse and sending a smile; and ending a relationship with someone is easily accomplished by simply not responding and essentially disappearing), it is also just as difficult (the pain of rejection is still experienced, and often at a rapid-fire rate, whether it be through dealing it out or receiving it; lengthy or numerous dates with inappropriate matches have to be endured; and background checks on potential dates are a little harder to manage without the aid of a social connection).

Self-Presentation and Misrepresentation

For any relationship to get off the ground, a good first impression is important, and research has shown that people “actively manage their behavior to make positive first impressions” (Feldman et al., 2002). In the online dating arena where there are thousands of profiles competing for attention, the first impression becomes crucial. Daters must decide what aspects of themselves to present and what to keep hidden. As noted by Whitty and Carr (as cited in Champagne, 2008), “If individuals are to successfully develop a romantic relationship from an online dating site, they need to present a balance between an ‘attractive’ and a ‘real’ self on their online profiles” (p. 163).

Profile Descriptions

The participants in this study did, as they say, “put their best foot forward” in their profiles. Profiles were constructed to show the “best” self at the same time as being an authentic representation of the actual self. In some cases, the profiles of other daters showcased the ideal self, which was the case with several men that Delia and Lydia met who indicated they were active because they “wanted” to be active not because they actually were active. Profiles were also composed with an awareness of the competition on the site in that some daters admitted to reading other people’s profile descriptions before writing their own. All of the participants tried to be as honest as they could in portraying themselves, but as is often the case in any resumé or face-to-face encounter, only the positive aspects of self were revealed.

With the exception of Mark, all of the participants chose to omit personal details about themselves in their profile, and Lydia completely eliminated the open-ended description of herself. Rather than presenting something that might be perceived as negative

and affect a positive first impression, daters chose to say nothing at all, which backs up the research findings on early relationship development and negative self-disclosure. In Delia's case, the omission of details was more the result of having been involved with online dating for a longer period of time and not wanting to be bothered with giving out too much information before meeting in person. When she first posted her profile, she said a lot more about herself, but as she gained experience with online dating, she shortened her profile description and omitted quite a few details, preferring to meet and present herself in person. This sentiment was echoed by Lydia who felt that she could not adequately describe herself in writing. Mark provided a lengthy description of himself along with all the necessary personal details, but he, like Delia, did not want to waste time disclosing too much information online before determining whether there was any chemistry in person. This reluctance to disclose any more information than was necessary before meeting face-to-face is contrary to the research done by Gibbs et al. (2006), who found that participants whose face-to-face goals were more important engaged in higher amounts of self-disclosure. However, my study and the study done by Gibbs et al. were similar in that the participants reported being honest in their self-presentations.

From my observations as the researcher, even though the profiles were the "best" versions of self, all of the participants were honest in their descriptions of themselves and in the details that they provided. Just as he described, Mark was gifted scientifically, musically, and athletically, and he was his stated age and height. Larry was also honest about height and age, and because I was privy to his photographic work, his proclaimed love of photography was readily observed. Because she was an acquaintance, I knew that Delia was exactly what she described herself to be: optimistic, fit, and attractive. She also provided

accurate demographic information as did Jen. Jen's profile description was creative and this was reflected in her chosen profession, outlook, and interests. Lydia, of course, provided no open-ended description, but the details she provided were accurate.

Photographs

In this study, the participants chose only the most flattering pictures, but all of the pictures were accurate representations of them. Despite the fact that Mark and Jen's pictures were out-of-date, in my opinion they were not so different from the reality as to constitute deception. Just as Mark said, his beard was a bit grayer in person, but his overall look was the same as his picture, and although Jen may have gained some weight, it was not that big of a gain to make a difference in her appearance. Keeping these outdated pictures posted may have been due to the fact that Jen and Mark had simply "not gotten round to changing" their pictures "not because of a desire to deceive" (Mark, line 24) or it may have been due to inaccurate self-images in that both participants felt that their pictures were still accurate reflections of them. As Brown and Dutton (1995) note, people are often "better served by having views of themselves that are a bit more positive than realistic" (p. 1288), and a mild dose of self-deception is actually a good thing according to Kirsch (2005): "Indeed an overly positive but false assessment of one's ability may actually bolster one's chance of achieving success by providing one with the confidence necessary to undertake projects or tasks that one would not otherwise undertake" (p. 410).

Impression Formation

Even though Lava allows users to present themselves and communicate by video, at the time of this study, it was a relatively new phenomenon. None of the participants in this study made use of the video capacity to either present themselves or to form their

impressions of others. As Biggs (2000) noted, this may have been because “the added visual and audio aspects decrease the perceived anonymity and safety as well as increase the perceived vulnerability, especially in first contact situations” (p. 662). Impressions were formed on the basis of the photographs; the information provided in the personal details section of the profile (e.g., age, education); and the linguistic cues in the profile description, subsequent emails, IMs, and phone conversations.

Photographs

Research has shown that physical attractiveness and similarity are major determinants of attraction (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Peretti & Abplanalp, 2004), and in this study, the participants all agreed that the photograph was the first thing that they looked at and the most important factor in determining whether to contact or respond to another dater. The photograph determined not only whether participants were attracted to another dater but also whether they had anything in common. Whenever the facial features were unclear, judgements were based on the overall look of the person (e.g., clothing and facial hair) and the background features in the photo (e.g., furniture and presence of alcohol). Based on these minimal cues, participants often engaged in the overattribution process that Walther (1996) noted in his research. For example, Delia judged one man to be similar to her based on his clothing and the room he was sitting in, in his picture. However, when she met him in person, she discovered that they were in completely different socioeconomic groups and did not have much in common. Looking for commonalities in photos and picking up on small cues was something that Lydia did as well. She decided that she had nothing in common with another dater when she saw that he was wearing a baseball cap and holding a beer in his picture. Jacobson (1999) found that participants in virtual communities often based their

images of others on stereotypes, and in this case, Lydia appeared to have conjured up a stereotypical image based on a photograph. The beer and baseball cap in the picture generated the image of the stereotypical beer guzzling recreational baseball player that Lydia found “cheesy” and a “turn-off” (line 80).

Because photographs were chosen so carefully, and are always only a snapshot at a moment in time, they were often not a realistic portrayal of the person. Flaws or physical characteristics that were undetectable in the picture(s) and that subsequently emerged in person resulted in participants feeling surprised and a bit bamboozled by the unexpected differences. At other times, participants were pleasantly surprised when the other person turned out to look better in person. When there were a lot of pictures posted, participants had a greater sense of what the other dater looked like, and there was a smaller perceived discrepancy between the online and offline selves.

Personal Details

Similarity was also, of course, determined by what the daters said about themselves. All the participants in this study looked for people who shared the same interests and activities while some were also looking for a similar level of education and socioeconomic status. The fact that some daters would strategically match their interests (legitimately not deceptively) to another dater’s interests before firing off a smile or an email underscored the importance of similarity to one’s mate. However, similarity was sometimes difficult to determine on Lava for technical reasons. When signing up for Lava, users were asked to check off their interests, but there was no box to check to indicate whether these were past, current, or future, hoped-for interests. Consequently, participants were often confronted with other daters who did not actually share the same interests: they had only checked a particular

activity because it was something they had done years ago and rarely did anymore or else because it was something they “wanted” to try. Other attributes that were often deal breakers for participants if they were not similar were smoking and drinking habits and body type.

Written and Verbal Communication

In accordance with Walther’s (1996) notion of hyperpersonal interaction, in the absence of face-to-face cues, participants paid close attention to the cues found in the text-based communication (grammar, spelling, and overall tone) and in the verbal communication (grammar, content, and tone of voice). Indeed, “text-based communication is capable of providing complex and subtle social and cultural information” (Whitty & Gavin, 2001, p. 625). Poor grammar and spelling were linked to lower socioeconomic and educational levels and a lack of commonality. Interestingly, if the potential date’s poor writing was combined with a university degree, then the writing took on less importance or was attributed to “just Internet language” (Delia, line 18).

Compliments were perceived as either honest or phony depending on the words chosen. A syrupy sweet, overused pick up line was treated with disdain; whereas, a simple straightforward compliment like, “Well, you are a cutie” (Delia, line 395) was received with pleasure. Anything overly sexual in nature too soon in the communication process was a deal breaker. And slamming an ex-partner was a “red flag” – a sign to proceed with caution, if at all.

Even though participants realized that they could be wittier on paper and in IMs, they still responded positively to others who were articulate and witty in their communications. Disappointment often ensued when participants found that their dates were not quite so charming in person. As Whitty and Gavin (2001) found, many men in their study “lived” in

email, that is, they “came alive” in their online communications, and they experienced “the Internet as a liberating medium” (p. 628). The asynchronous nature of the medium allowed the users to choose their words carefully and to come across as witty and intelligent.

Unfortunately, this did not always convert to face-to-face communication. As Lydia said about one man,

Online, he was a little more articulate and kind of funny in some of the stuff that he said. Like, the conversations were different...what he is, is a guy who spends a lot of time at home on the Internet. (lines 20 and 142)

In addition, the forced two-way conversations often did not translate to the real world.

Partners who seemed to be listening to every word and reflecting ideas online sometimes turned out to be conversation hogs and “only into themselves” (Delia, line 355) in person.

With experience, online daters came to understand the hyperpersonal nature of computer-mediated communication and the degree to which they often built inaccurate images in their minds about their communication partners based on their online interactions. As Champagne (2008) points out, “imagination will play a crucial role, and conceptions of love, past experiences, stereotypes and phantasms will be used along with the actual information gained from communication to construct an image of the potential partner and the story of their meeting” (p. 164). As a result, seasoned daters shortened the time spent communicating online before meeting in person in an attempt to circumvent deception and avoid the disappointment that often ensued when their partners turned out to be nothing like they imagined.

Perhaps because the participants in this study were older adults, their preferred communication channel was email. IM was a new enterprise for one participant while another found it intrusive and a poor reflection of who she really was. The youngest

participant was the only one who indicated that she used IM frequently, but more so through her hotmail account than through Lava's IM system. Once there was interest in another dater, participants usually moved from email to a telephone conversation in order to set up a meeting in person.

Meeting in Person

All the participants in this study found that the online presentation could approximate but never accurately capture the whole essence of a person. As Mark commented, the differences found between the online and offline self were sometimes better and sometimes worse than expected, but the fact remained that there were always differences and these differences were expected. However, much the same as Toma et al. (2008) found, these differences were not significant enough to cause any great concern, and for the most part, people were who they presented themselves to be. The mismatches that occurred between the online self and the embodied self were usually unintentional and due to (1) the limitations (lack of non-verbal cues and technical constraints) of the medium, (2) the enhancements (selective self-presentation, hyperpersonal communication, and idealization) of the medium, and (3) the representation of an inaccurate self-image. In some cases, however, the mismatch was due to plain old outright lies – small in magnitude, but lies nonetheless.

Deception

Undeniably, there are deceptive daters in the online dating world, but then again deception can be found in the offline dating realm as well. As Mark said, "Deception is possible in any relationship, including more traditional dating styles" (line 22). And according to Tosone (2006) "lies are an expectable part of the social interaction...Men tend to lie more in order to have sex while women may do so in order to attain a committed

relationship” (p. 337). Some deception, whether it is through omission, exaggeration, or simply presenting the best or ideal self, is expected in both dating arenas. However, what was acceptable to the participants in this study in terms of deception was as varied as each individual. Basically, any deception that was hurtful, life threatening, or that affected the participants’ well-being was considered unacceptable. Generally, however, deception was disapproved of by all the participants, which echoes the findings by Gibbs et al. (2006) in that 87% of their respondents said that misrepresenting themselves in their profile or online communications was not acceptable.

Delia’s incidence of deception stemmed from a lack of knowledge about the way the website worked. She was planning to move to another region, so she decided to post herself as living in that region in order to have a look at the men that were available there, not realizing that by placing herself down there, the men were looking at her, too, and thinking she lived there (line 236). Interestingly enough, once she realized her error, she did not fix it because she “already had so many communications going, it was just too hard” (line 238). She admitted that this was deceitful, and she felt a little bad about it. However, she did not think that it was harmful to anyone because she “was truly available” and thought she was moving there (line 244). In fact, in a diary study done by DePaulo et al. (1996), it was found that people described their everyday, little lies as not causing them very much regret or preoccupation. However, as the researchers noted, “the people to whom these lies were told may have a different point of view about just how little or inconsequential these really are or how grateful they feel for the ‘protection’ when others lie to spare their feelings” (p. 993). Judging from the different opinions in this study of what was acceptable or not in terms of deception, it would make sense to assume that what one person considers a harmless lie

might be considered far more critical to another. As Jen indicated, even white lies, which are generally considered harmless, could affect her well-being and, therefore, were just as harmful. Indeed, in a study done by Kaplar and Gordon (2004), the lie tellers considered their lies to be more altruistically motivated, spontaneous, and justified by the features of the situation than did the lie receivers.

Mark's experience was that a lot of women were deceptive about their age, while Larry thought that it was the men who lied more about their age. A study done by Toma et al. (2008), found that there was no difference between men and women in age-related deception. Similarly, other research studies have shown that men and women lie about the same amount, but the content of the lies often differs (DePaulo et al., 1996; Feldman et al., 2002): men tend to tell more self-oriented lies to promote themselves while women tend to tell more other-oriented lies that protect the feelings of others. In this study, this was Jen's experience as well. In her words, "Men are good at promoting themselves and exaggerate quite a bit" (line 32). Interestingly enough, in the study done by DePaulo et al., the women engaged in more self-promotional lies when they were interacting with men than when with other women. This would seem to indicate that in the online dating world where the daters have to promote themselves in order to attract and hold the attention of other opposite sex daters, women may lie just as much as men. And this is supported by the findings of Feldman et al. that people tell more lies when they have a goal to appear likeable. Jen's observation that men "exaggerated" their height while women "played down" their weight is supported by Toma et al.'s findings.

Chemistry

No matter how closely people matched their online presentations, participants agreed that the ultimate test of whether the relationship continued depended on the presence or absence of “chemistry” when meeting in person. In a study done by Peretti and Abplanalp (2004), chemistry was found to be made up of six main ingredients: physical attractiveness, similarity, spontaneous communication, reciprocity, warm personality, and longing. In this study, all of these factors were combined with some unknown ingredient to ignite that spark of feeling loosely called chemistry that was needed in order to continue with a relationship. As much as the daters connected emotionally and intellectually and liked the looks of other daters, if there was no chemistry in person, the relationships fizzled very quickly. Delia met one man whom she liked in terms of his looks and personality, but because she felt no chemistry in person, the relationship did not carry on past the first meeting. Three of the participants, Delia, Lydia, and Mark, met people who they were not physically attracted to but liked based on their similarities and/or personalities. In each case, the relationships did not continue, even on a friendship basis.

Conclusion

Despite the common perception that deception is rampant on the Internet, it appears to be no more prevalent than what occurs in everyday life. In fact, deception is a natural part of society – it is neither good nor evil but instead simply a mechanism for surviving in a complex world (Goffman, 1959; Toma et al., 2008; Tosone, 2006). For the most part, the deception that occurred in this study was unintentional and due to the nature of the medium in combination with an inaccurate self image. These results replicate the results of Gibbs et al. (2006) who found that misrepresentation was not always intentional and occurred for the

same reasons noted above. However, they also uncovered one more reason for deception: “fudging demographic information such as age to avoid being ‘filtered out’ in searches” (p. 170). Since none of the participants in this study lied about their demographic information, I was not able to uncover this reason.

My study also supports the research that the majority of online dating participants claim they are truthful (Gibbs et al.; Brym & Lenton, 2001). Although the current literature relies on self reports, this study is unique in that I attained not only self reports but also back up information in the form of photos, profile descriptions, emails, and one participant’s observations of another participant combined with my own observations. In this way, I was able to compare the participants’ actual characteristics with their reported characteristics.

The computer definitely enhances the ability to selectively self-present, but because online dating participants were typically looking for a romantic partner and expected to meet face-to-face (FtF), the amount of deception or misrepresentation was minimal, which replicates the findings of Toma et al. (2008). Just as different selves are brought out in different situations or environments, so too a different self is emphasized on the Internet. The profile highlighted the best and ideal aspects of the self in order to attract potential dates but also included parts of the actual and true self. Just as Ellison et al. (2006) found, participants “attempted to present a vision of self that was attractive, engaging, and worthy of pursuit, but realistic and honest enough that subsequent FtF meetings were not unpleasant or surprising” (p. 13). Further online communication tends to bring out more of the true self (Bargh et al., 2002), while the anticipation of a future FtF interaction will inhibit participants from indulging in the presentation of too much of their ideal or even true self (Whitty & Carr, 2008, as cited in Champagne, 2008). Upon meeting, the actual self is presented with the

knowledge that, in some cases, the partner is familiar with parts of the true self. At this point, it appears that physical attraction or chemistry takes precedence over any connection to, or liking of, the true or the actual self that was established online. Participants who liked the true self that was presented and did not mind the looks of the person in front of them, might carry on the relationship a bit in order to determine whether their chemistry could “heat up,” but more often than not, if there was no chemistry, the relationship was abruptly terminated.

In essence, when online dating partners meet offline, the relationship is backwards because they are already armed with a lot of information about each other (Rheingold, 1993). This knowledge can lead to a relationship that is greatly accelerated in its development or its demise. But in other respects, Internet dating is very similar to traditional dating in that everyone puts their best foot forward in the initial stages of dating. This is not deception – it is simply a presentation of the best self, which is something that occurs quite naturally in everyday life (Goffman, 1959). In this study, misrepresentation was expected because the participants realized that other daters were trying to attract potential dates. Even outright deception was expected to a certain extent, and it is in the acceptability of this deception that my study adds to the literature. In general, participants accepted deception when it was harmless to them. For example, Mark found that most of the women in his age range lied about their age, and because age was not important to him, this was acceptable to him. When deception occurred in an area that was important to the participants or that affected their well-being in any way, it was not acceptable. Also, if the magnitude of the lie was small, and it was revealed before meeting in person, it was acceptable, especially if the dater’s motives were good.

Ultimately, the Internet imitates real life – outright lies to small exaggerations exist online just as they exist in general society, and “deception by one of the people involved will have to be dealt with as in any dating situation” (Mark, line 30).

Future Studies

Additional research needs to be done to develop a more detailed understanding of the acceptability of deception online and to see if there are any age-related differences in what is acceptable. It may be that younger adults have a completely different viewpoint on the acceptability of deception, and in addition they may lie about different things.

The participants in this study did not make use of the video capabilities of the site due to its relative newness and their inexperience with it. Future research is needed to explore the ramifications of the video as a tool in presenting oneself online. Does this format reduce misrepresentation and deception or confound it? And how many people are actually comfortable with this technology?

In this study, chemistry seemed to be a major determinant in relationship development; therefore, more research is needed to determine the components of chemistry and whether the chemistry between two people can ever be determined online without the presence of the physical body.

This study also only focussed on the Relationship section of Lava, but both of the male participants had profiles posted in the Intimate section. It would be interesting to delve into how this sexual aspect figures into self-presentation and if there are any gender differences (since none of the females had profiles in this section).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Due to the small sample size, the fact that the sample is limited to older adults in western Canada, and the qualitative nature of the inquiry, the results are not generalizable to the online dating population. However, the purpose of this study was to obtain a detailed, in-depth analysis to yield as many insights as possible for the topic at hand, so the issue of generalizability is not relevant. Since only a select group of people agreed to participate in this study, there may be a self-selection bias. For instance, online daters who engage in extreme forms of deception may have been unwilling to take part in the study. There is also no guarantee that participants responded truthfully, but on the other hand, I did have their profiles printed off before I interviewed them as cross validation, and I also had the observations that one participant had made of another.

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Appendix A

Letter of Introduction

Dear _____,

Hello, my name is Rene Madill. I am a current member of Lavalife and also a graduate student at the University of Northern British Columbia, working towards a Masters of Education degree in Counselling.

Although I am contacting you through Lavalife and I do have a personal profile posted on this site that was not created for this study, please understand that I am approaching you as a researcher and my correspondence with you is for research purposes only. I am conducting a study on the online dating environment. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which people negotiate the complexities of self-presentation given the unique features of the Internet.

I would like to find out what you have to say on this topic through a brief interview either in person, by telephone or email, whichever you prefer. Please be assured that your identity will be protected at all times. Should you participate by email, I will never have access to any personal information other than that which is part of your profile. Whether you participate by email, telephone or personal interview, you will be assigned a pseudonym, and all information (paper) provided will be kept in a locked cabinet in a secure (locked) private residence. Neither paper nor electronic data will include information that could identify you or any other individual. Electronic forms will be stored on a personal computer that is password protected and itself kept secure. Only my university supervisor or I will have access to these data in either form. When the study is concluded and its results have been reported, the data will be destroyed.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time; any information collected about you will be destroyed at that time. You are also free to simply not answer particular questions as you see fit. You will also be given the opportunity to review and approve the information you have provided prior to inclusion in the results of this investigation.

This study is intended to provide information to counsellors so that they will be able to help clients who are either thinking of, or currently involved in, online dating. The results of this study will also be offered to you in recognition of your contribution.

If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact me through my university supervisor Dr. Peter MacMillan at 250-960-5828 (or peterm@unbc.ca). Any further concerns that you may have about this study may be directed to the Office of Research at the University of Northern British Columbia, 250-960-5820 or by email: reb@unbc.ca

If you agree to be interviewed, please indicate your consent by copying the following statement and forwarding it to me with your name and date typed at the bottom:

This is to acknowledge that I have read the letter of Rene Madill, and I am aware of the nature of the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may choose not to participate at any time. I understand that an in person interview will be recorded. My name typed below indicates that I consent to participate in this study.

Name: _____ Date: _____

I (want/do not want) a copy of the results of the study.

The results of the study can be sent to the following email address:

If you would prefer to be interviewed in person or by telephone, please let me know what days/times would be convenient for you.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Rene Madill M.Ed. (Candidate)

Appendix B

Relationship Profile

1.) In My Own Words (Users write a description of themselves.)

2.) Have In Common...

My idea of romance includes: (Users must choose three items from a drop-down menu.)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a country drive | <input type="checkbox"/> dressing up for dinner |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a drive-in movie | <input type="checkbox"/> flowers for no reason |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a horse-drawn carriage ride | <input type="checkbox"/> going to the opera |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a moonlight swim | <input type="checkbox"/> going to the theatre |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a picnic | <input type="checkbox"/> holding hands |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a secret location | <input type="checkbox"/> listening to music |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a singing telegram | <input type="checkbox"/> love letters |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a surprise at work | <input type="checkbox"/> love notes in special places |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a trail of flower petals | <input type="checkbox"/> love poems |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a walk along the beach | <input type="checkbox"/> ordering in food |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a walk in the park/forest | <input type="checkbox"/> random acts of kindness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a weekend getaway | <input type="checkbox"/> serenading my partner |
| <input type="checkbox"/> celebrating special dates | <input type="checkbox"/> slow dancing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> champagne on ice | <input type="checkbox"/> snuggling by the TV |
| <input type="checkbox"/> chivalry/gallantry | <input type="checkbox"/> special deliveries |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cooking a meal | <input type="checkbox"/> stargazing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cuddling by a roaring fire | <input type="checkbox"/> surprise gifts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dinner by candlelight | <input type="checkbox"/> watching a sunset/sunrise |

In my spare time I enjoy: (Users choose three from a drop down menu.)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> arranging flowers | <input type="checkbox"/> painting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> arts and crafts | <input type="checkbox"/> photography |
| <input type="checkbox"/> autobiographies | <input type="checkbox"/> playing a musical instrument |
| <input type="checkbox"/> baking | <input type="checkbox"/> pottery/sculpting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> best-selling novels | <input type="checkbox"/> praying |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bird watching | <input type="checkbox"/> rock climbing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> board games | <input type="checkbox"/> rollerblading |
| <input type="checkbox"/> camping | <input type="checkbox"/> romance novels |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cards | <input type="checkbox"/> sailing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> chatting on the Web | <input type="checkbox"/> shopping |
| <input type="checkbox"/> collecting | <input type="checkbox"/> sleeping |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cooking | <input type="checkbox"/> snowboarding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> darts | <input type="checkbox"/> spending time alone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> doing absolutely nothing | <input type="checkbox"/> sunbathing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fishing | <input type="checkbox"/> surfing the Web |

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> gardening | <input type="checkbox"/> surfing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> golf | <input type="checkbox"/> travelling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> horseback riding | <input type="checkbox"/> visiting a park |
| <input type="checkbox"/> hunting | <input type="checkbox"/> volunteering |
| <input type="checkbox"/> listening to music | <input type="checkbox"/> watching sports |
| <input type="checkbox"/> meditation | <input type="checkbox"/> windsurfing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> my pet | <input type="checkbox"/> woodworking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> mystery novels | <input type="checkbox"/> working out |
| <input type="checkbox"/> non-fiction | <input type="checkbox"/> writing poetry |

I value: (Users choose three from a drop down menu.)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a curious mind | <input type="checkbox"/> open communication |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a religious upbringing | <input type="checkbox"/> open-mindedness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a sense of humor | <input type="checkbox"/> openness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a sense of justice | <input type="checkbox"/> optimism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a strong work ethic | <input type="checkbox"/> patriotism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> an entrepreneurial spirit | <input type="checkbox"/> pragmatism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> being a good listener | <input type="checkbox"/> putting your family first |
| <input type="checkbox"/> being non-judgemental | <input type="checkbox"/> respect for animals |
| <input type="checkbox"/> common sense | <input type="checkbox"/> respect for other cultures |
| <input type="checkbox"/> compassion | <input type="checkbox"/> respect for the environment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> education/high intellect | <input type="checkbox"/> self-knowledge/awareness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> following a healthy lifestyle | <input type="checkbox"/> sensitivity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> generosity | <input type="checkbox"/> showing affection freely |
| <input type="checkbox"/> good manners | <input type="checkbox"/> social consciousness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> having a zest for life | <input type="checkbox"/> spirituality |
| <input type="checkbox"/> integrity | <input type="checkbox"/> taking life as it comes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> knowing what you want from life | <input type="checkbox"/> the ability to laugh at yourself |
| <input type="checkbox"/> loyalty | <input type="checkbox"/> thoughtfulness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> non-materialism | |

3.) Personal details... (If users select “prefer not to say,” they will not be found by members searching for those criteria.)

*Gender: (Male/Female)

*Age: (Year/Month/Day of birth)

Height: (Select from 3 to 7 feet and 0 to 11 inches)

Body Type: (Choose one: slim, fit, muscular, average, few extra pounds, queen or king sized, prefer not to say)

Ethnic Background: (Choose one: white, black, asian, hispanic/latino, first nations, east indian, middle eastern, west indian, mixed, pacific islander, other, prefer not to say)

Smoking Habits: (Choose one: do not smoke, occasionally, regularly, trying to quit, prefer not to say)

Have Children: (Choose one: have none, have and live with, have and live with part-time, have and do not live with, prefer not to say)

Want Children: (Choose one: want, do not want, undecided, prefer not to say)

Education: (Choose one: secondary school, CEGEP, vocational/technical, college, university, grad school, prefer not to say)

Annual Income: (Choose one: less than \$25,000, \$25,000 to \$50,000, \$50,000 to \$75,000, \$75,000+, prefer not to say)

Religion: (Choose one: new age, islamic, jewish, catholic, buddhist, hindu, non-religious, anglican, sikh, methodist, christian-other, baptist, lutheran, presbyterian, other, prefer not to say)

Drinking Habits: (Choose one: non-drinker, socially, often, prefer not to say)

Language(s) spoken:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> English | <input type="checkbox"/> Hebrew |
| <input type="checkbox"/> French | <input type="checkbox"/> Danish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish | <input type="checkbox"/> Swedish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Portuguese | <input type="checkbox"/> Hindi |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Italian | <input type="checkbox"/> Thai |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Russian | <input type="checkbox"/> Hungarian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> German | <input type="checkbox"/> Polish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mandarin | <input type="checkbox"/> Finnish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cantonese | <input type="checkbox"/> Tagalog |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dutch | <input type="checkbox"/> Croatian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Greek | <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese | <input type="checkbox"/> Korean |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arabic | <input type="checkbox"/> Ukrainian |

*Country: (Countries are listed from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe.)

*Province: (Provinces in Canada are listed with the option of “prefer not to say.”)

*City: (Cities are listed for the province chosen.)

*Zip/Postal Code:

Note: *Indicates a required field.

4.) Interests...**Outdoor Activities / Fitness**

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aerobics | <input type="checkbox"/> Martial Arts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Biking | <input type="checkbox"/> Mountain Climbing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Boating / Sailing | <input type="checkbox"/> In-line skating |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Camping | <input type="checkbox"/> Snow skiing / Snowboarding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fishing | <input type="checkbox"/> Snowmobiling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hiking | <input type="checkbox"/> Swimming |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Horseback Riding | <input type="checkbox"/> Walking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hunting | <input type="checkbox"/> Water skiing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ice Skating | <input type="checkbox"/> Weight lifting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jogging / running | <input type="checkbox"/> Wind surfing / surfing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kayaking/Canoeing | |

Sports

- | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Auto racing | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Badminton | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Baseball | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Basketball | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Billiards | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Bowling | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Boxing | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Diving | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Cricket | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Extreme Sports | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Figure Skating | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Football | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Golf | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Hockey | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Olympic Sports | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Rugby | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Soccer | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Squash/racquetball | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Tennis | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |
| Volleyball | <input type="checkbox"/> Participate | <input type="checkbox"/> Watch |

Entertainment

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bars/pubs | <input type="checkbox"/> Music-Pop |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Casino/gambling | <input type="checkbox"/> Music-Jazz |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Concerts | <input type="checkbox"/> Music-Rap |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cultural events | <input type="checkbox"/> Music-Rock |

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dance clubs | <input type="checkbox"/> Poetry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dancing | <input type="checkbox"/> Reading |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Darts | <input type="checkbox"/> Surfing the web |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dinner parties at home | <input type="checkbox"/> Traditional games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fashion events | <input type="checkbox"/> TV: Entertainment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fine dining | <input type="checkbox"/> TV: Educational/news |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Movies | <input type="checkbox"/> Video games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Music-Classical | <input type="checkbox"/> Wine tasting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Music-Country | |

Hobbies and Other Interests

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Antiques/furniture restoration | <input type="checkbox"/> Investing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Astrology | <input type="checkbox"/> Motorcycles |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cars | <input type="checkbox"/> News/politics/Current events |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cats | <input type="checkbox"/> Painting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Collecting | <input type="checkbox"/> Philosophy/spirituality |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Computer/software | <input type="checkbox"/> Photography |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crafts | <input type="checkbox"/> Playing a musical instrument |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Creative writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Shopping |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dogs | <input type="checkbox"/> Social cause/activism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family/kids | <input type="checkbox"/> Traveling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fish/aquarium | <input type="checkbox"/> Vegetarianism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gardening | <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gourmet cooking | <input type="checkbox"/> Yoga |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Home improvement | |

Appendix C

Smile Categories and Choices

I couldn't resist:

- ☐ your great sense of humor
- ☐ the confidence you exude
- ☐ your many great qualities
- ☐ your values
- ☐ your sensuality
- ☐ the fact that you know what you want
- ☐ your honesty
- ☐ your openness
- ☐ your spirituality
- ☐ the way in which you express yourself
- ☐ the fact that we are complete opposites
- ☐ the fact that we have so much in common
- ☐ the fact that you live in a part of the world unknown to me
- ☐ your sense of adventure
- ☐ your outgoing nature
- ☐ your interest in family
- ☐ your style
- ☐ message me and I'll tell you
- ☐ your ambitious nature
- ☐ your career orientation
- ☐ your lifestyle
- ☐ your outspoken nature
- ☐ your unselfishness
- ☐ the fact that we have many common interests
- ☐ your worldliness
- ☐ your down-to-earth nature
- ☐ your curious mind
- ☐ your healthy lifestyle
- ☐ your passion for life
- ☐ your love of the outdoors
- ☐ your keen wit
- ☐ your religious upbringing
- ☐ asking – Can I see your Backstage?
- ☐ seeing more of you. Care to share a video?
- ☐ the fact that you are a real hunk
- ☐ your hair – you still have it
- ☐ your attractive build
- ☐ your eyes
- ☐ your smile
- ☐ your sex appeal

A little teaser, ask me about:

- ☐ my hidden talent
- ☐ my motto for life
- ☐ my most impressive asset
- ☐ my idea of romance
- ☐ my favorite restaurant
- ☐ my pets
- ☐ my favorite bottle of wine
- ☐ what I picture doing on our first date
- ☐ the meaning of life
- ☐ why my teachers always loved me
- ☐ my biggest thrill
- ☐ what keeps me up at night
- ☐ how I plan to rock your world
- ☐ my idea of a perfect date
- ☐ why Homer Simpson is my hero
- ☐ my last home improvement project
- ☐ why Dilbert hits close to home
- ☐ my garden
- ☐ my collection of...
- ☐ the best movie I've ever seen
- ☐ my favorite Web sites
- ☐ what my friends consider to be my best quality
- ☐ what I really do for fun
- ☐ my season tickets
- ☐ my hot sports car
- ☐ the 3 things I would take with me to a deserted island
- ☐ access to my Backstage pictures!
- ☐ getting to know me better through Video