

I am Honest but I am Not Stupid: A Study on Self-Disclosure in Online Dating Profiles

by

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ABSTRACT

Assisted by smart phones, improvements in website design, and societal changes internet dating has grown in popularity over the past decade. Fascinated by the growing popularity of internet dating, and the concerns that people are not honest in their profiles, I began this project. Using a modified grounded theory approach, and content analysis, I examined blog entries of seventeen subjects who discussed their experiences with seeking romance online. This approach helped me understand what people chose to omit from their profile and how they then managed the omitted information. The study found that what was included in a dating profile was often vague and shallow. However, the process that went into choosing what to include, or omit, was quite complex. Subjects wanted to highlight their general interest, their financial independence, and their social skills but did so in ways that did not compromise their safety. The subjects managed the omitted traits by using discretion when creating their profile, and slowly sharing details about omitted traits as time passed, and trust and the relationship grew.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade there has been a dramatic increase in the use of the internet to find romantic partners. According to the Pew Research Center, around 10% of people between the ages of 18 and 24 had used the internet to seek romance in 2013, and by 2016 that number had nearly tripled to 27%. For people over 50, the rate of internet dating doubled from 6% to 12% in the same three-year span. This increased popularity has made internet dating a lucrative industry. MatchGroup, which owns the websites Match.com and OkCupid, amongst others under its umbrella, recorded revenue of just over \$2 billion in fiscal year 2015 (Anon, 2016). This increased popularity, combined with the societal factors that caused the rise of the internet as a dating platform in the first place, makes the subject a significant sociological topic to study. Sociology is a field that is driven by the desire to understand the effects that new social settings, changes in the environment, and modes of communication have on human interaction. With this in mind, this study attempts to answer the following questions: what do people not disclose on online dating sites and how do they manage these undisclosed traits?

Some scholars have argued that the search for romance online is related to changes in American society. Americans are now living a fast paced lifestyle where work consumes most of their time, and the traditional means of meeting romantic partners, like going to the park or out to a bar, are no longer as convenient as they used to be (Ansari & Klinberg, 2016) because Americans work forty-five, or more hours, a week (Moodie, 2016) just to pay for necessities. Thus, some view a traditional approach to dating, such as going out to a bar in hopes to find someone that they find attractive, who finds them attractive, and who shares a common interest, to be too time consuming.

With the decline of ‘traditional’ means for finding a romantic partner, the individual seeking sex and/or love online now has a litany of options. For example, Tinder, an application for the smart phone, gives users the chance to find partners they are attracted to by scrolling through and “liking” pictures of prospective matches. The other option is the typical online dating website where people fill out profiles of themselves and search through the profiles of prospective mates looking for a match assisted by the sites algorithms. Whether it is a phone application like Tinder, or a website like OkCupid, the driving force to use either one is convenience (Ansari & Klinberg, 2016), and the convenience factor has certainly had a dramatic effect on the traditional bar scene dating market (Healy, 2017).

The current study has been further inspired by one of the more pervasive fears regarding internet dating-that prospective romantic partners are not honest in the presentation of themselves in their dating profile (Zytka, et. al., 2016; Couch et. al., 2012; Toma et al., 2008). With past researching showing that people often omit their negative traits in order to put their best face forward in hopes of increasing their chances of getting a date (Drouin et. al., 2016), the concern about dishonesty in someone’s profile can be considered a legitimate concern. This study looks to go further than past research and not just look at whether or not people are dishonest in their profile, but understand the specific reason why they choose to hide certain personal details from their potential partners and how they manage those undisclosed traits.

In this study I take a qualitative approach to answering these research questions. This approach and the small sample size limits the ability to generalize the results. However, the importance of this study lies not in the generalizability of the results, but rather that it might inspire larger, more generalizable, studies. It is for this reason that I chose the method of performing a content analysis of online blogs for the current study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One possible reason for the growing popularity of internet dating is that the internet allows individuals the opportunity to construct ideal versions of themselves to present to a potential partner (Toma, 2017; Lawson, 2006). This fantasy, which is more difficult to construct in the physical world, allows people to explore what they really want in a long-term relationship (Arvidsson, 2006). While spending too much time in the fantasy world may harm a person's ability to function socially in the physical world (Turkle, 2016; Whitty, 2008), the overall consensus is that it has more positive than negative effects. For example, fantasy of any kind allows people to discover their hidden desires (Birnbaum et. al., 2012; Plummer, 2002) and what they desire most in a potential partner.

The second factor that has led to the growing popularity of internet dating is that in modern America we are simply too busy. Americans live a fast-paced lifestyle with heavy workloads that make traditional dating inconvenient. People do not have the time to get to know someone (Ansari & Klinberg, 2016) and this makes it difficult to develop a relationship organically. To solve this problem, internet dating websites offer quick and efficient ways for someone to find an ideal romantic match (Smith & Anderson, 2016). More importantly, the fact that people can message potential partners at their convenience on dating websites gives people in a busy world the chance to get to know someone (Quiroz, 2013). Overall, the most attractive thing about online dating is that it streamlines the process of meeting new people, especially for those who lack the time to meet new people the traditional way (Finkel et. al., 2016).

Dishonesty in Online Profiles

Despite the popularity of internet dating, many still have concerns regarding using the internet to seek romance. One reason for this is the fear that potential partners are not honest in

their profile (Zytke, et. al., 2016; Couch et. al., 2012; Toma, et. al., 2008). It is well-documented that people use online dating websites and social media to put their best face forward (Drouin et. al., 2016), and that once a person has been dishonest they will continue to lie in order to save face. With past research consistently indicating that dating profiles are filled with inaccuracies, the fear that a potential partner is not being totally truthful appears to be justified.

If someone possesses an unattractive trait they often cover up that trait in order to make a good first impression (Olmstead et. al., 2013). They do this because it increases the likelihood of making contact with a potential partner (Corrieo & Tong, 2015). Those who seek romance online also tend to omit stigmatized traits. For example, people often hide diseases such as HIV in order to protect themselves from the pain of rejection (Davis et. al., 2006). If a stigma is one that is likely to cause a negative social reaction, people are less likely to discuss that trait in conversation with individuals that they do not know (Adler-Nissen, 2014). Even though the trait's importance is often not as significant in the eyes of the potential partner as it is perceived to be by the person who possess the trait (Mayo & Mayo, 2012), there is still enough of a societal taboo attached to certain stigmas that people feel the need to cover it up. Further studies have also shown that if people are able to successfully cover their stigma, it increases their self-esteem. As their self-esteem grows the individual gains the confidence to open up about their stigmatized trait at a later date (de Vries, 2016).

Gender is also a factor in dishonesty and stigma. Men and women both perform stigma management on dating profiles; however, they lie about different aspects of themselves. Men who are bisexual often cover up their sexuality in dating profiles out of fear of being rejected by the opposite sex (Schrimshaw et. al., 2016). While there is some stigma attached to female bisexuality, bisexuality is more likely to affect male romantic relationships in a negative way

than women (Anderson & McCormack, 2016). Men are also more likely to lie about their social status or income, while women are more likely to lie about their physical attractiveness or weight (Schrimshaw et. al., 2016).

The gendered differences in deception are related to the different frameworks in which men and women work. Men have a tendency to lie about their income because they believe that women are looking for a tall, handsome, wealthy man. Women lie about their age and weight because they believe men are looking for someone young and “in-shape” (Abramova et. al, 2016; Schwartz, 2014). In other words, men and women lie in order to make themselves fit the description of someone they perceive the opposite sex to find attractive. This is a pattern that appears in LGBT dating as well (Chan, 2016).

Self-Disclosure and Relationship Formation

Gender also factors into the realm of self-disclosure and communication. Both are important parts of relationship maintenance, and women have a tendency to focus on self-disclosure and communication in their relationships more than men (Kimbrough et. al, 2012; Hendrick et. al, 1988.) One reason for this is that women are under more societal pressure than men to build and maintain a fairytale-type of romantic relationship, so they open up more in order to maintain the relationship they feel they are expected to have, as opposed to what their own desires for a romantic relationship may be (Loscocco & Walzer, 2013).

Men, on the other hand, do not feel the same societal pressure as women do to maintain committed relationships (Welker et. al., 2013; Stanley & Markman, 1992). This lack of pressure to maintain a committed relationship is one reason men do not feel the need to constantly perform relationship maintenance, such as opening up to their partner (Kimbrough et. al, 2012). In general, men simply do not feel as comfortable disclosing as much information about

themselves as women at any point during a relationship (Fischer, 2000), including platonic friendships.

The assumption that can be made based on previous scholarship is that women are more willing than men to open up and share information about themselves. However, both sexes, when trying to attract a mate will disclose information tailored towards what the individual believes their potential partner wants to hear. This means that men and women are sharing and omitting information based on what they think the person they are interested in will find attractive. For example, since there is less of a stigma connected to age for men, they are much less likely to lie about their age (Ojala et. al., 2016; Toma & D'Angelo, 2017). Men are likely to hide traits that they will find unattractive, like bisexuality (Lemke & Weber, 2017), and accentuate traits that are more acceptable for their gender. This strategy of initially not disclosing information that a potential partner may find unattractive is used by both sexes (Chappetta & Barth, 2016; Ruthhaven, 2016).

Self-disclosure in evolving relationships

Privacy is of great concern amongst those who not only use internet dating websites, but those that do any form of interpersonal communication in cyber space (Aquisti et. al., 2015). Now that we are increasingly communicating through the internet and smart phone applications, how does this effect interpersonal communication? The answer to this question is the same for both platonic and romantic relationships, People initially increase their privacy seeking behaviors when interacting online with those that they have had no previous relationship with (Stutzman, Gross, & Acquisti, 2013). However, as people get to know one another, they become more willing to open up about the intimate details that were initially left out of conversations (Utz, 2015).

With this scholarship in mind, I conduct the current study in hopes of answering the questions: what do people not disclose on online dating sites, and how do they manage these undisclosed traits? This research question was formulated because earlier research revealed what people withhold and why they choose to withhold information, but it does not show why people reveal hidden information, or how they manage the details that were left out of their profiles. That is what the current study attempts to do, add detail to the discourse surrounding the omission of information and the subsequent revelation of the omitted details.

METHODS

This is a qualitative study using online blog entries as data. This method was chosen because it was thought that that some may feel stigmatized by admitting to seeking out romance on the internet. To combat the possibility that a subject may not open up about certain subjects if I were present, it was decided that it would be best to give the subjects a series of questions and allow them to answer them anonymously in a blog. It meant losing the ability to ask follow-up questions immediately, but the strength of this method comes from creating an atmosphere in which subjects would feel like they could answer personal questions without judgement. Analysis was done using a modified grounded theory approach and content analysis.

Participants were recruited by placing invitations on Facebook and in discussion forums on the websites OkCupid, Plenty of Fish, and Match.com. On Facebook, the invitation was placed on a Facebook page which was then promoted by Facebook as an advertisement. OkCupid, Plenty of Fish, and Match.com all have public forums in which people can post comments about their dating experiences, give advice to others who are using the internet to seek romance, and interact with other users of the websites. I placed invitations to participate in this study in those forums. The invitation for both Facebook and the E-dating websites were the

same. They contained a brief description of the study, a description of what the blogs would be used for, and an email address to contact if they were interested in participating.

When someone emailed me expressing interest in participating in the study I would send them two links. The first link would be to the website docusign.com where the subject would sign a standard informed consent form that let the subject know the purpose of the study, that their privacy would be protected to the best of my ability, and that the blogs would be destroyed the moment the study had been completed. The subject would then receive the link to the blog that was located at the website wordpress.com. The blog was password protected and only the subject and myself had access to that password.

I recruited a total of seventeen participants, eight females, one male to female transgender person, and seven males. In regards to ethnicity, one subject was African American, one subject was biracial with a Caucasian and Hispanic background, and fifteen of the subjects identified as Caucasian or White. The age range of subjects consisted of one over the age of fifty, eleven between the ages of twenty-six and forty-five, and five between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. The subjects came from various regions of the United States and Canada bringing a diverse set of regional experiences to the study.

Subjects participating in this study are those who had had experience with online dating through phone applications like Tinder or a typical online dating website like Match.com. Tinder, and dating applications with a similar design, give people the opportunity to view three or four photographs of someone, along with a two to three sentence description of that person. If someone likes what they see in a profile that person swipes right on their phone, which indicates that they are attracted to the person in that particular profile. If the other person swiped right on their profile as well, then the two would be connected and could then send private messages to

one another. On the typical online dating website subjects were given the ability to post more photographs of themselves than what would be allowed on a phone application like Tinder, as well as a biography section that gave them a paragraph or two to describe themselves to potential partners. Individuals who used these websites were also helped in the matching process by computer algorithms that connect people with similar interest.

The significance of discussing the difference in these two platforms, and the experiences of using them, lies in the design of each website which gives users different options in regards to sharing information about themselves. In an app like Tinder, people are not given the ability to write lengthy biography sections that would reveal a lot about themselves. They are forced to tell a potential partner who they are in about two hundred words, while the typical dating websites structure is one in which users do not have to be as concise. Therefore, I will take the type of platforms into consideration when discussing what people reveal about themselves and how they manage this information in developing relationships.

The questions for the blogs encouraged subjects to discuss their experiences of designing an online dating profile, how they decided what to include in their profile, and how they managed what they left out. A total of five questions were included in the initial blog. Those questions were as follows:

- 1) Please explain how you go about creating your profile for an online dating site. What are your thoughts when you put together your profile?
- 2) Which aspects of yourself do you emphasize in your profile? Why?
- 3) Do you have personal trait that you think potential partners might find unattractive?

4) Once you have met someone in person, how do you manage information that you left out or ‘embellished’ as the relationship is developing? Do you eventually reveal that information?

Why or why not? Are you nervous about being found out?

5) What traits would you find unattractive in potential partners, and why? Have you ever found out that someone had a trait you didn’t like that was not revealed in their initial profile?

What was your reaction? How did you both deal with it? Did it affect the relationship?

While the answers to these questions did provide the data to answer how and why people choose to disclose information to potential partners; the role of the internet in regard to disclosing information to potential partners remained unclear.

In order to gain more clarity about the effect that the internet had on disclosing information to potential partners two follow up questions were asked. Those questions were as follows:

6) Is there information about yourself that you feel is best disclosed in offline meetings?

Why would you, or wouldn’t you, disclose that information in your profile?

7) How do you disclose information that has been omitted in your profile?

Once all subjects had completed their blogs the contents of the blogs were copied and pasted into word files, and then the blogs were deactivated. This was done for two reasons. The first was to protect the subject’s blogs from being made public, and because it was simple and efficient to analyze the blogs in Microsoft Word.

Once the blogs were ready for analysis I would go line by line and highlight In-Vivo codes and significant words and phrases in each of the blogs using the track changes tool in Microsoft word. I would then group related codes into categories. It was this process that allowed me to develop a narrative of the findings. This method was chosen because it follows the

grounded theory approach where the researcher asks a question or series of questions designed to lead to generating theoretical concepts regarding some aspect of social life (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

The final two aspects of analyzing the blogs were content analysis and memo writing. After developing categories, I would begin a content analysis of the blogs looking for words and phrases that fit underneath the categories, as well as looking at the context in which those words and phrases were used. Some words and phrases required multiple word searches in order to truly understand the experiences of the subject and the message that the subject was trying to convey in their blog.

Memo writing was equally as important to the analysis of the blogs as coding and content analysis. During this process I wrote memos after every third blog using pen and paper being careful to take notes of trends in the data, interesting or confusing answers, and ideas and thoughts how the data related to prior research and theory. It was the memos that kept ideas and thoughts fresh in my mind, and were thus essential to writing up the results.

THEORY

This project is guided by Erving Goffman's Dramaturgy theory, Goffman says that all social interaction is a performance that is shaped by environment and audience. It is constructed to provide others with the impression that their actions are consonant with the desired goals of the actor (Goffman, 1959). Goffman expands on this idea by saying that people are not just passively waiting for things to happen to them. Rather, people are knowledgeable of the environment around them and use that knowledge to guide and control how others perceive them.

Essentially through the lens of Dramaturgy, all human interactions are seen as stage performances in which people are actors and those around are their audience. Goffman goes on to describe what he calls the front and backstage. The backstage is an area that is outside of the public eye, where people are able to rehearse their parts. After practicing their role in the backstage, the person is then able to move into the front stage, or a given social setting, and correctly behave in a way that meets the expectations of an actor in that particular role. All of this is done in order to gain an object that an individual desires.

In regards to the current study, the object of the subject's desire is a romantic connection with someone. Online daters are playing the role of a desirable bachelor or bachelorette. They use their dating profile to portray the image of an ideal mate, to whom a potential partner would be attracted to. It is equivalent to a potential employee putting their best self forward during an interview. They may have flaws, but during the interview, or in the profile, they present their strengths in hopes that it will outweigh any possible negative traits. It is this performance aspect of online dating that makes a theory, like Dramaturgy, important to the current study. Dramaturgy offers a lens that explains why that performance aspect exists.

Goffman also said, "when a line and internal image of one's self are harmonious, one is said to "have," "be in," or "maintain" one's face (Goffman 1955, 339)". This means in order to maintain the face presented, individuals must remain vigilant of their actions as to keep those actions in line with the role that they're playing. By assuming that those who use online dating sites are putting their best face forward in their profile, it can be further assumed that there may be information or character traits that individuals possess that are not included in their profiles. One reason that this information may be omitted is that information may not match the self that is presented to potential partners.

In order to understand how the subjects manage undisclosed traits, I use Goffman's theory on Stigma management. Goffman defines social stigmas as any aspect of an individual's identity that is devalued in a social context (Goffman, 1963). According to Goffman, when an individual possesses a social stigma they are either discredited, or discreditable. If a person is discreditable it means they possess a socially stigmatized trait that has not been revealed yet. Therefore, the danger, and fear, regarding the stigma is in the thought that it could be made public and damage the individual's social status, and they become discredited. Once discredited, individuals will face the social ramifications that are associated with a given stigma in society.

If a person is discreditable they will attempt to pass as normal, or as someone without the stigmatized trait. Goffman defines passing as, "a cultural performance whereby one member of a defined social group masquerades as another in order to enjoy the privileges afforded to the dominant group". There are three strategies that the discreditable person uses in order to pass as a member of the non-stigmatized group.

The first strategy is fabrication. This is a strategy that requires the individual to purposely present false information about themselves in order to pass as someone without a stigma. Simply put, fabrication is where someone lies about who they are in order to gain acceptance from the non-stigmatized group. The second strategy is concealment, where individuals who possess a stigma will try to cover up the stigma. For example, considering the stigma of male bisexuality, a bisexual male attempting to get a date with a female would conceal his stigmatized trait by avoiding the discussion of also being attracted to men. The third strategy is discretion. Here, individuals are very open about themselves, but they are still careful not to reveal too much information that may hint at the fact that they may possess a stigmatized trait.

Goffman describes three ways how people reveal their stigmatized traits to others once they decided they want to do so. The first way is signaling. Here a person may drop hints and send signals to potential partner about the possibility of them possessing a stigmatized trait without completely revealing their stigma. The second is normalizing. People may attempt to diminish their stigma and may make themselves look as normal as possible. Another way to reveal a stigma is to differentiate oneself from others that possess a stigma. Essentially, stigma bearers tell potential partners that they are different from others who share this trait.

Considering that the current study is about people who use dating website or apps, and are attempting to make a good impression on a potential partner, Goffman's theory on stigma management is relevant. It is a lens that will help explain why they choose to reveal some information, withhold other information, and how they are managing omitted information. By looking at this study through the related lenses of Dramaturgy and stigma management, we will be able to answer the research question: what do people not disclose in online dating profiles and how do they manage the undisclosed traits?

FINDINGS

What subjects chose to reveal or not reveal in their dating profile, and why they made these decisions was not surprising. They included traits that would seem attractive in the eyes of a potential partner, and traits that would attract a potential partner with similar interest. What was omitted, or at least partially concealed, were traits that were thought to be unattractive and decrease the likelihood of a first date. For example, being overweight, having acne, political affiliations, mental health conditions, and family issues were all traits that were consistently omitted from profiles.

Subjects were careful in how they presented their weight or skin conditions because those traits may prevent the subject from being seen as physically attractive. A subject's political affiliation could lead to disagreements at the beginning of the relationship and this was seen as a poor dating strategy. Finally, subjects chose to omit mental health problems and family issues from their profiles because they thought those issues should only be revealed after a partner was determined as worth entrusting such personal information. On the surface the results seem unsurprising and the creation of the profile seemed quite simple. However, after a closer examination of the data, the complexity of thought that was put into presenting oneself in a profile became evident.

Multiple factors influenced the decision to share or omit information from potential partners: from what specifically a subject was looking to get out of online dating, to how much trust a subject had in their potential partner, to how long they had known their partner, and whether or not the information could be harmful in the hands of the wrong person. In order to understand how each of these factors influenced omissions and how subjects managed the omitted data we will look at each factor individually.

Checking your basic dating boxes

The purpose of online dating was summed up nicely by Katie, a thirty-one-year-old married female, when she said:

The whole point of online dating is to meet the person in real life...you can ask someone a million questions online and think you know them to their core...but in real life, your chemistry may be totally different or lacking altogether, or your communication awkward. The whole point of online dating is to establish a basic yes or no if the person

seems like someone who you might have a connection with and/or checks your basic dating boxes.

Katie had no expectations of immediately falling in love on a dating website, because that is not the purpose of an internet dating website. Its purpose is to provide a platform in which you can get to know someone by asking them questions through direct messages and skimming their profile. Even if a potential partner answers the questions in a way that is satisfactory, and their profile is attractive, that does not guarantee that there will be offline chemistry. Essentially an internet dating website, or phone application, is merely a tool that allows an individual to make connections with potential partners who they hope to have chemistry with.

Whether a subject was seeking a sexual hookup, or a long term relationship, the purpose of the online dating tool did not change. They all wanted someone that they would enjoy being around outside of sex. For instance, Sara a subject whose husband had passed away eventually regained her desire to become sexually active again. She sought a casual hook-up online because the internet allowed her to do so without risking judgement from friends and family. Talking about what she was looking for in a potential partner she wrote in her blog:

My bar is set at the level it is for a reason. Yes, I wanted to get laid no strings attached, but I didn't want to be in misery during the date beforehand.

While Sara was looking specifically for casual sex she still wanted a partner with whom she shared similar interest so the pleasure of the date would extend past the bedroom.

All subjects wanted to find someone with similar interests. Those who were looking for a serious relationship expressed this openly in their profile. Those who were looking for casual sex, especially if they were female, felt uncomfortable sharing this in their profile. As one

subject said in her blog:

I leave out the casual sex option, even though that is something I would be interested in. I never disclose that I would be open to a casual encounter with someone because the level of messages from people is overwhelming.

While it may be true that both those searching for long-term relationships and casual sex want to find someone that they can be friends with, those searching for casual sex must be more cautious about revealing that desire in their profile.

Since the purpose of internet dating, in the eyes of the subjects, was to connect to those they were most likely to share common interests and goals with, it was not a surprise to find that most participants designed their profiles in a way that would catch the eye of the type of person that they were interested in. The subjects accomplished this by highlighting their career goals, what they were passionate about, and what they liked to do socially in their profiles; with careers and passions often being lumped into the same category.

Visual presentation of the self

How subjects presented themselves in their profile from a visual standpoint also yielded no surprises. As expected, people post pictures that are flattering. A twenty-four-year old female subject wrote:

I then worry about choosing pictures, which is my least favorite part, yet in the age of dating via apps and websites it is one of the most important parts. I usually try to intersperse full body pictures with selfies, in order to give a good idea of what I actually look like.

She wanted to post pictures that made her look attractive, but she also wanted to make sure that the pictures gave potential partners a realistic image of what she looked like.

Others took the opportunity to show that they had lost weight. The point of this was to show potential partners that they were working to improve themselves. Like the female subject mentioned above Paul posted pictures that were accurate so that his potential partners “knew what to expect” when they met him. He points this out in his blog when he says he:

Wanted to emphasize the fact that I had lost a large amount of weight.

There was a sense of pride in presenting his before and after photographs.

The importance of photographs was affected by the type of dating site a subject was using. Photographs were much more important with an app like Tinder. Tinder is geared towards casual hook-ups and finding physically attractive partners, according to the subjects of this study. On the other hand, typical dating websites are designed for those who seek a deeper connection with others. Here, more importance is placed on sharing information about yourself and your life. This is why subjects like Stan, a twenty-six-year old male, would post two to three good pictures of themselves on Tinder and then wait to match up with someone before divulging any information about himself.

Even though Tinder was generally used for casual relationships and photographs were used to show off physical characteristics, the subjects still found a way to allow the photographs to convey a deeper meaning. Through photographs subjects showcased their capability to form normal friendships and relationships. Photographs were also used to show potential partners what hobbies a subject enjoyed, and maybe more importantly photographs were used as proof that a subject was honest in the description of themselves in their profile.

Variables that affect self-presentation

How women discussed their careers in their profiles was much different than men.

Women discussed their careers in order to highlight what they were passionate about, while men

discussed their careers and financial status in order to demonstrate their independence. This is the one aspect of online dating where gendered differences emerged.

Paul, a thirty-six-year-old male, explained:

I wanted to emphasize three main aspects. First of all, that I was employed and owned my own home. This is probably the most obvious because what woman wants to date a complete stranger without a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.

The possibility that prospective female partners may find men who do not have good jobs as someone that they, the woman, may have to take care; was a great concern for our male subjects. This is why it was important for men like Paul to show that they were responsible and able to provide for themselves. As another male subject put it, “I don’t want to come off as a guy who still lives in their mom’s basement.”

Females in this study were less concerned about highlighting their careers as a way of showing off their socio-economic status and independence. Instead, their focus was on letting potential partners know what they were passionate about. Elizabeth, a twenty-six-year-old female, chose to highlight things that were important like volunteering and her work with animals as a way of weeding out those that did not share similar interest and passions.

Deal breakers

The discussion of careers and passions, especially for women, was a popular way for subjects to bring up the matter of deal breakers. Sarabeth, a twenty-three-year-old female, discussed her career in her blog:

I strongly believe that the “deal breaker” traits should be disclosed upfront to keep people from wasting time on someone they never like or accepted based on morals, lifestyle or mindset.

In Sarabeth's case, her deal breaker was children. She had no interest in having children, or "being a mother to someone else's children", because children interfere with her work and life style choice.

Some subjects decided to include the fact that they had children in their profile because they knew parenthood could be viewed by others as a deal breaker. Ashley, a twenty-six-year-old female, wrote in her blog:

I emphasize, above all else, that I am a mother of a toddler who will always come before any man that decides to join my adventures in life.

Another mother also added in her profile that, "if a man does not speak to his family, how can I expect him to care for me or my child." Essentially, if a man did not have a good relationship with his family it was not a good sign that he was a supportive person.

Brandon was the one male who was passionate enough about his work as a deal breaker that he felt the need to bring it up in his blog. He states:

If the person doesn't respect what I want to do, or the various community work that I do with people who have disabilities then the relationship has no interest to me.

The rest of the male subjects who discussed their careers had the singular concern of broadcasting self-sufficiency. On the other hand, the female subjects made clear that their passions and careers come first.

It was interesting to see how subjects were able to use their passions and careers to send different messages to potential partners. Whether it was used to prove to a partner that they are self-sufficient, to find a partner with similar interests, or to weed out partners who may see certain aspects of their lives as deal breakers; the subjects were able to accomplish all of those task by talking about their passions and family life in their dating profiles.

I am not awkward

Subjects made a point to show potential partners that they were not socially awkward. Men and women in the study wrote that they wanted to give potential partners proof that they were capable of forming normal relationships outside of the internet. When describing what she liked to emphasize in her profile Laura, a twenty-three-year old female, said:

I like to emphasize my love of humor and my closeness with friends and family. By emphasizing humor, I can show that I not only can be funny, on occasion, but I enjoy funny people, or people with a good sense of humor. This kind of balances me out because I am more of a homebody who doesn't like to go out to bars and clubs, but I can still have fun.

It was important to Laura to include this information in her profile, so that when people viewed her profile they would be able to tell that she was capable of forming and maintaining normal friendships.

Other subjects mentioned that they purposely chose pictures for their profiles that show them taking part in social events, and this was done, as Paul puts it, to show potential partners:

That I really like to have a good time doesn't matter what I'm doing. I'm enjoying every aspect of my life. I did this to through the pictures that I chose, pictures of me at bars, or football games, or various vacation pictures."

As I examined Paul's blog further, I once again noticed that he too wanted to make sure that potential partners would know that he wasn't a socially awkward person.

Previous research on internet dating shows that people who seek out romance online are commonly perceived as socially awkward. While none of our participants said they were worried about being perceived as a weird person, some of the comments indicated that this was lurking in

the back of their minds. When someone discussed their social life, they almost always included a picture showing them in a social situation and thus proving their social skills.

Even those who admittedly were somewhat awkward emphasized that they were working on changing. For example, Russell who brought up the fact that:

I feel like I can come off as too rigid and not spontaneous, but I try to emphasize in my profile that I'm working on my spontaneity.

Subjects placed a high level of importance on their social life because it was their way of emphasizing that even though they are on an internet dating website, or a dating app, they were capable of socializing like “normal” people. The emphasis on social skills also signaled to potential partners that if they chose to go on a date with the subject it would be an enjoyable time.

What people include in their profiles is not surprising on the surface because they post what most people expect them to. For example, they post several pictures and stories that give a potential partner a general idea of what they enjoy doing, and what they are passionate about. What is interesting is the amount of thought that goes into innocuous, and sometimes vague, profiles. Men made an effort to show their potential matches that they are self-sufficient. Women make it clear that their passions and family come first.

Why is information omitted from profiles?

Subjects opted to omit certain traits and information for reasons quite similar to why they included information. They wanted to ensure their profile was as intriguing as other online profiles in the eyes of potential matches. David, a twenty-five-year old male said:

I present people with enough positive traits so that hopefully the number of positive traits will outweigh the bad.

It would be too simplistic to say that subjects like David were only trying to make a good impression on a potential partner. The truth was a little deeper. The reason that people like David shared their best traits is they felt that making a good enough first impression would allow the relationship to survive when unattractive traits were later revealed.

Safety concerns and omission of information

Omission of personal information from profiles went beyond the management of one's self-image. Omission of specific details was done for safety reasons as well. Elizabeth, a twenty-six-year-old female, reflected on the subject of safety when she said:

I also wanted the profile to be a bit private, but that's tough because I have a unique name which they could easily find on Facebook. So, I made sure not to include any pictures of where I lived or be wearing any college sweatshirts, etc.

Not revealing details about oneself due to safety concerns was a gendered issue. For women specifically, where they lived and hung-out was often left out, out of fear that someone that they're not interested in could find them in public. Some even feared that they could be found on social media.

Safety concerns not only revolved around the fear of a subject's physical safety, but fear of negative social consequences as well. Sara, our subject who was seeking casual encounters, was afraid that if she was too detailed in her profile that it may make it easier for her friends, or family, to find her on a dating website. She wrote:

Naturally, I'm extremely nervous while filling out the profile. At first I left it as completely vague as possible. Once I had a profile, I just explored for people that I knew. Somehow, knowing that people I knew could find me, made me hate the entire idea even more.

Sara was petrified that if someone she knew found her on a dating website that she would be labeled a slut or whore.

The revelation of information that could possibly put a subject in physical, or social, danger was excluded from a dating profile. Subjects would make sure that they did not post photos of shirts that had work or school logos printed on them, or they would use photos where the location was not easily ascertained just by looking at the picture. Some even made their biography section as vague as possible in order to prevent others from identifying them. How much effort a subject put into hiding things from others was dependent on how serious they thought the consequences would be if that information was discovered.

Furthermore, some withheld information because they had fears that online communication could lead to misunderstandings. As one subject said in their blog:

I believe anything online has a high probability of being misinterpreted.

The fear that some had was that unless they could discuss the omitted traits at a later date, and in person, they ran the risk of their potential partner misinterpreting what they said, and thus ending any hope of a relationship developing. In other words, some information may be misinterpreted if it was not shared within the proper context, and that can only happen in a face-to-face conversation.

Managing and Disclosing Omitted Traits

Trust

It was not until an individual had grown to trust their potential partner that they felt comfortable enough to share certain information, especially the information that had been tactically left out of their profile. This is why subjects felt that “some things are best shared at a later date.”

The topics of mental health, family, and the location of where subjects lived were often omitted from the biography section of a dating profile. Most felt uncomfortable discussing these aspects of themselves with people who were complete strangers. To put it simply, information that was omitted from a profile often were things that required trust to share.

As I began to notice the importance of trust in the responses I realized that it required a second round of analysis. During this analysis I did a content analysis for the terms “trust” and “supportive” and looked at the context in which they were used. While trust was the category in which I had organized the data, the words “support” or “supportive” appeared throughout the blogs and were used interchangeably with the word trust. The second word search found that trust and support were used within the same context. When a subject discussed these terms they were discussing the need to know that they could trust the potential partner with the omitted information and that the potential partner would be supportive

It was at this point I noticed that trust is something lacking at the beginning of relationships formed on internet dating websites and phone applications. Elizabeth wrote in her blog:

Communicating about tough topics in person gives you a much better read on how the other person is reacting, and allows the conversations to flow more seamlessly. Without miscommunications in tone, or them misreading what you have typed and you not knowing that the miscommunication resulted.

Elizabeth wanted to reveal what she omitted at a later date, after she could gauge how supportive her potential partner was. As many others echoed this sentiment, it became apparent that trust was something earned as time passed and the two people got the opportunity to know each other outside of messaging through the dating website.

Consistently, the discussion of omitted information is tied to trust and how trust was needed in order to create an atmosphere in which one feels comfortable enough to open up regarding personal information. No one in this study was able to open up about sensitive subjects while interacting solely on the internet. It was only after the meeting in person that they shared omitted sensitive information.

Time

It was a combination of time, and the relationship moving from online too offline, that gave people the chance to become comfortable enough with one another to share personal information. As many subjects noted they needed to determine whether or not the other person was worthy of entrusting with what they had omitted from their profile before they would, or could, share.

What it came down to was that people need time in order to get to know someone well enough to make a judgment regarding whether or not it is safe to entrust them with sensitive information. Especially if it was something that could be a physical threat, like where they lived, or hung out. Katie, in her blog, addressed this subject:

Of course you reveal your “skeletons in the closet” at some point – sooner or later, depending on the nature of the skeletons and whether the person is worth entrusting them with.

When people first meet on a dating website, it is impossible for them to get to know one another immediately. The only way trust and openness developed was with the passage of time and growth of the relationship.

Honesty

Many of the subjects in this study made comments like “I am an honest person”, “I’m straightforward”, “I do not embellish” etc. These statements are universal throughout the blogs, and they stuck out because those claims were usually followed up with an admittance of omitting information, or a statement like “I’m honest, but I’m not stupid, everyone makes mistakes.”

At first glance, this came off as the subjects talking out of both sides of their mouth. However, after further analysis this was not as hypocritical as it appeared. The subjects in the study seemed to distinguish between omitting sensitive information, and misrepresenting oneself. As we discussed in the previous section, many of the subjects felt as if there were traits and information that required support and trust to share, so they were omitted until a later date. They may have left out some information, but it was not done with the intent of making the person look like someone they are not.

Russell wrote in his blog:

I have never embellished anything on my profiles. The only information left out would be information not important to a dating profile, such as past dating history/relationships etc. That eventually does come out in conversation while getting to know someone better.

This gets to the point, that as long as a person isn’t omitting information that would misrepresent their personality or physical appearance, it was considered acceptable.

However, what was seen as unacceptable, and unattractive, was misrepresenting oneself completely. As Michael explained in his blog:

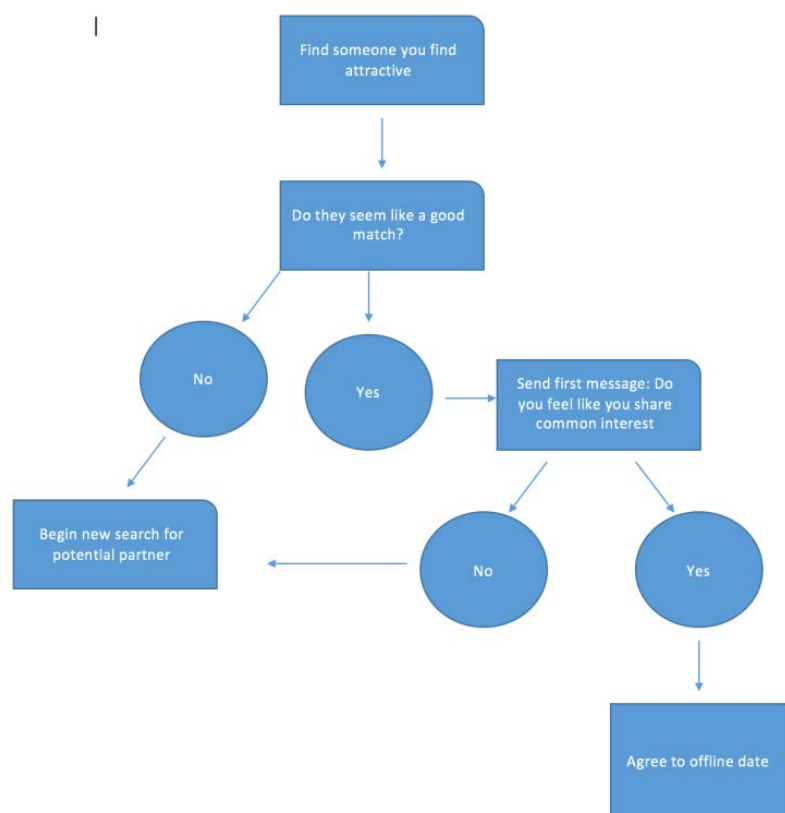
Dishonesty, like blatant dishonesty, was a quick turn off to the point where when it came time to meeting the woman for the first time, if it was obvious from her appearance that she was full of shit, I just kept walking.

It was not that the potential partner had not shared everything about herself that turned him off; it was the fact that she had deliberately misled him.

DISCUSSION

Internet dating is an efficient way for people to find potential partners that share similar interests. When people create their online dating profiles they share shallow details about themselves, but put a lot of thought and effort into choosing what is shared or omitted.

Figure 1. Decision Making Flow Chart



The decision making flow chart depicts how people decide about interactions and disclosure of information. First, a subject would look for someone that they found attractive or

shared similar interest. If they were not attracted to someone in a profile or that person did not seem like a good match, the search would start over. However, if someone was deemed attractive, some time was spent interacting with this person and the person was deemed trustworthy, they would then share things that may have been omitted from their profile.

However, before the decision making process could begin subjects first had to create a profile and write a biography highlighting their positive traits and passions, so that it would intrigue potential partners with similar interest that may be perusing their profile. While one motivation of omitting information was to avoid negative reaction and increase the likelihood of a good first impression, it went further than that. People chose to omit specific traits and information for three reasons: safety, the possibility of social repercussions, and the concern that some things could be misinterpreted. It is this pattern of behavior that answers the first half of the research question which is, what do people not include in their dating profile? People omit information in their profiles that might put them, or their children, in physical danger, information that might lead to being ostracized from friends and/or family, and information that required a great deal of trust to share.

The second half of the question is how do people manage the traits and information that were omitted. According to Erving Goffman one strategy that could be used when managing stigma is discretion where people openly share information about themselves except for when it comes to topics that may be related to something that they are hiding. We see this strategy used by almost all of the subjects in this study. Our subjects claim to be an open book in their profiles; yet they also purposely avoid topics that may lead to revealing something before they were ready to do so.

While discretion was the main tactic used most often when subjects were performing stigma management, I did notice that some subjects took measures to conceal their weight when choosing what photographs to include in their profile. Photos that were taken at a more flattering angle were most likely to be included in a subjects' profile, while those that were less flattering were left out. Subjects justified this by saying that they were not being dishonest, rather they were just trying to show a potential partner that they are attractive. As Michael said in his blog:

I made sure those, photographs, were cropped so that my face and shoulders were all the prospective hunny bunny could see. It's not like it was entirely false advertising, as there were always those options for 'body type,' where I tended to be more honest.

Simply put, the subjects would conceal unattractive traits in order to make a good first impression, but at the same time they would hint that an attractive trait exists in order to not appear totally dishonest.

The desire to not be disingenuous in one's self-presentation was strong amongst the subjects in this study. They valued honesty, but understood that good impressions were key to getting a date. So, they highlighted their good traits and attempted to diminish their negative traits. This was done without necessarily lying. Thus, fabrication was avoided. Subjects were immediately turned off by partners who blatantly fabricated information.

The reason why people omitted information was that they did not feel that they could trust a stranger that they had just met on the internet. The only way they felt they could develop trust was to get to know that person better over the course of time. So in essence, information omitted from someone's profile was kept hidden until they knew they could trust their partner with it.

Finally, subjects used what Goffman called signaling to reveal the omitted information. According to Goffman when a person wanted to test how another person would react to knowing about a stigmatized trait they would drop hints, or use cryptic language, that would hint at the stigmatized trait, but not necessarily reveal it. Once the person was satisfied with how the other would react they would disclose what was hidden. This was also observed in this study. Some subjects discussed making jokes about a “skeleton” that they had in their closet, and if the other person did not appear taken aback they would reveal the “inspiration” for the joke.

Outside of the research question some interesting trends were noticed during the study. One such trend was that male subjects chose to prominently display their financial success and stability which seemed to confirm findings from previous studies that in both online and offline settings men believe that by showing off their wealth to potential partners it increases the likelihood of getting a date. However, what was unique about the responses of the men in this study is that they are not interested in showing a partner that they would provide for her. Rather, their focus was on showing her that she will not have to provide for him.

If this is the case, it suggests a significant societal shift in how men view their role in romantic relationships. In the conservative past, men and women both saw the man as the person expected to be the bread winner, which is why men would often point out their financial stability and career. However, men and women may now be less concerned about someone’s ability to provide for them; rather their focus is on whether or not the other person can take care of themselves. This is a finding worth exploring further in the future. This is also the only factor in online self-presentation, outside of safety, with a significant gender difference. Other than that, men and women both used their pictures to highlight their social skills, to communicate what they are passionate about, and to show their potential partners they are what they say they are.

To summarize the current study, the trends that were found in the analysis of the blogs revealed that people managed their hidden traits by withholding information until the time was right - and how long that took differed from person to person and from omitted trait to omitted trait. Once partners trust each other, they would reveal hidden information. When it was time to reveal, subjects would allow the hidden information to come up naturally in conversations or by making jokes. The strategy of signaling to potential partners that something may have been omitted from their profile was also common. Signaling was seen as a good way of testing a potential partner's reaction to information that was initially hidden from them. This was especially important if the hidden information was sensitive.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that the study had a small sample size and the results are not generalizable, the findings provided interesting trends that could inspire future studies in the realm of internet dating. One such trend was that men are no longer trying to be providers for women, rather they are attempting to prove that they are self-sufficient. This could indicate a changing of societal norms in how men view their role in relationships with women. The finding of this study lead me to ask if studying online courtship might be a good way to discover changing social norms and gendered patterns of contemporary romantic relationships. Also, considering the effect that time and trust had on the willingness to share information I suggest that time and trust should be studied further as pivotal aspects of developing online relationships. Observing the development of romantic relationships is a way to explore changing gender dynamics. Studies that would further explore how trust develops between individuals in virtual settings would be useful.

At the conclusion of this study, I am inclined to state that when an individual peruses online dating profiles they are not getting a full picture of who that person is. Rather, they are getting a snapshot of the general interests and passions and who that person wants to be. Those who use the internet to seek out romance are aware of this fact because they themselves likely withhold information. Subjects in this study generally accepted some level of deception, or omission of information, as long as what was omitted was not something that completely misrepresented who that person was. In other words, subjects drew a line between omitting information that required a trust to share, and blatantly lying about oneself. The knowledge that others would be deceptive in their dating profile might explain why subjects would share only information that would give a prospective partner a general idea about who they were, but omit information that was sensitive to them.

Another notable reason that subjects omitted information from their profile is the fear that some things could be lost in translation online and lead to misunderstandings. Sensitive topics not only required trust to share, but a mode of communication where someone can explain the topic in a way in which it could be understood within the context of the situation. The types of sensitive topics ranged from mental health issues to family problems.

Even though the small sample size prevents me from being able to say that all people on internet dating websites and phone applications will behave like the subjects in this study, I believe that by utilizing blogs as a way of answering question gave the subjects an anonymous environment in which they felt comfortable enough to open up about their experiences of online dating; which is why I can confidently state that one should expect some level of deception in online dating. It is unrealistic to expect someone to share every detail about one's life to complete strangers in an online environment, especially when information can easily

be taken out of context and people simply do trust those that they interacting with enough to share sensitive information. Finally, this study has shown that dramaturgy remains relevant as it helped explain the strategies that were used by the subjects when they were attempting to manage the traits that were omitted from their dating profiles.

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