Chapter 11

“Don’t Tell Us You’re Handsome……Post Your Great Photo and Let It Stand”:
Creating and Enforcing Credibility in Online Dating

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the issue of credibility in online dating. 200 posts to a website called eDateReview.com were inductively analyzed. Examination of these posts revealed that online daters negotiate the potential for selective self-presentation by developing strategies for evaluating the credibility of online dating profiles which builds on established theories of self-presentation in online spaces, including the warranting principle developed by Walther and Parks (2002). These strategies include determining the credibility of the dating sites themselves, assessing the credibility of online profiles, and the demonization of dishonesty to establish norms. Implications and future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

I post recent photos, including full body pics. I’m not gorgeous, but I have nothing to hide. I am honest in my profile and I don’t use a long list of adjectives to describe myself. No one is all of those things. Besides, if you really are compassionate, handsome, healthy, stable, honest, understanding, dependable, funny, active, handy, hard-working, loyal, secure, and a good listener—then how is it that you’re divorced? Don’t tell us you’re handsome......post your great photo and let it stand. Don’t tell me you’re funny......say something funny in your profile and let the reader decide… and pleeeeeeze don’t post three photos of your motorcycle and one of you wearing sunglasses and a beanie. (Rebecca, personal communication, 2007)

Online dating continues to increase in popularity as more and more people turn to sites like Match.com to find their ideal partners. Because online dating allows people to meet and interact virtually, there has been a debate over whether one can trust the profile a person has put together to be a true representation of the self. While some researchers argue that self-presentation in online spaces is more honest, because people feel they can be their “true” selves online (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimmons, 2002), others argue that the asynchronous nature of the Internet allows people to create an identity that may be quite different than their offline selves (Bailey, 2001; Hardey, 2002; Morse, 2001; Nakamura, 2001; Poster, 2006; Stone, 2001; Turkle, 2001). With the popularity of shows like MTV’s Catfish and Dateline’s To Catch a Predator, the question of the credibility of one’s online identity has taken center stage, particularly when there is an expectation that those online interactions will transfer into offline relationships. This research builds on established theories of self-presentation in online spaces including the warranting principle developed by Walther and Parks (2002). In the context of online dating, credibility is often tied to the concept of honesty and is based on perception rather than an inherent quality within a source. For the purpose of this paper, the author defines credibility based on the concept of perceived source credibility (O’Keefe, 2002) as judgments made by a perceiver about the veracity of a communicator or communication.

The flexibility of online self-presentation is stifled by the knowledge that the presentation will ultimately need to be read as authentic in a face-to-face meeting. This approach not only shows how online daters work to decipher the credibility of information presented in profiles, but also how they create norms in the online dating community that encourage honesty by demonizing dishonesty. The purpose of this chapter is to explore “establishing and evaluating credibility” in the digital genre of online dating. This chapter will look specifically at how the discourse of Internet daters in the online dating forum eDateReview.com functions to create and enforce a perception of credibility in dating profiles. The author asserts that credibility in online dating is determined by the credibility of the online dating website and the profiles themselves, and argues that online daters actively work to establish norms of credibility by demonizing dishonesty.

BACKGROUND

With the growing ubiquity of computers and the Internet in contemporary society, the online personal ad is another move to utilize media as a resource for goal attainment in an evolving society. Online dating has become part of a cultural discourse about dating, and the implications of credibility in dating online have not been fully explored. Potential mates used to be vetted by families and communities, so that questions of credibility were managed through close social networks. Merskin and Huberlie (1996) argued that modern times have changed strategies for finding mates. Urbanization, industrialization, and the changing nature of family and religion have all contributed to a society where traditional matchmakers and arranged marriages are unworkable, influencing a cultural shift towards online dating and away from the security of having trusted persons vouch for the credibility of a potential partner. Given the current popularity of using computers to facilitate dating, research on the phenomenon is increasing, and it is important to look at the ways computer-mediated communication (CMC) and, more specifically, online dating are conceptualized and discussed by scholars. This section begins with a brief overview of relevant literature on CMC, followed by theories of online self-presentation and credibility in online dating.