Chapter 10
‘Masculine Normal Guy Here’: Lonely Hearts and ‘Normal’ Gays in Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the discourse of dating advertisements on a small-scale dating site, NormalGay.com. I analyse the deployment of linguistic resources of identity-making, in particular, the term, normal, and how members take up or reject this position. Examining the profiles as strategically managed displays of capital on the dating market reveals normal to have a number of meanings which are encoded in different ways. Many profile creators deploy the rhetorical strategy of the enthymeme to covertly define the term with respect to heterosexual norms. Others, who see the dating site as an extension to their off-line lives, define the term against the backdrop of “the gay scene”. The interpretation of identity terms such as normal requires construing the positions taken up with respect to their imagining of the community, heteronormative masculinity and understandings of gay male sociality.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter explores the meanings of the term normal deployed, dismissed or questioned in the profiles on a dating website/online social network for gay men. The term itself appears in the domain name, NormalGay.com and its presence framing the site seems to have inspired members to claim that characteristic for themselves or for the men they hope to connect with, or question the interpretability of the adjective in the context of gay men, or to dismiss it as inappropriate for their identities. The compounding of the two terms seems to suggest to the members of the site a number of meanings. Analysing how the profile owners deploy normal in their descriptions of self and target identities reveals their own interpretations of the word. The analysis of discursive strategies incorporating this identity feature into their online presentation of self or rejecting the identity feature demonstrates how they imagine others to understand it. The different interpretations of normal and the strategies of using
it in a text of identity also explains how sociality and relationship-seeking via computer mediated communication requires imagining the community populating an online social network.

**BACKGROUND**

Research into the lonely hearts print advertisement is not new. Published inquiries have largely focused on heterosexual advertisers. The suite of research that Coupland (1996) and others (Davis, 1990; Jagger, 1998, 2001; 2005; Koestner, & Wheeler, 1988; Marley, 2002, 2008) deliver key findings for linguists interested in the discursive constructions of texts of desire and the desiring and desired identities they contain. Coupland (1996) provides a benchmark for the analysis of the generic discourse architecture of the print lonely hearts ad that has been used in subsequent research conducted by her and others. The majority of research however has taken the heterosexual market place as its subject and seems to be confined to the print media. Non-heterosexual identities on the lonely hearts market has seen little focus on the research (Davidson, 1991; Gonzales & Meyers, 1993; Jones, 1997; Thorne & Coupland, 2000). These studies, however, tend to take a contrastive approach between populations of advertisers, or inquire into the impact of HIV/AIDS on the gay lonely heart. The internet 2.0 revolution too has seen the market migrate to online contexts. It seems that despite the presence of the lonely heart online and a cultural obsession with the possibilities of computer mediated romance, little research has been conducted in this context. Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) provide an excellent analysis of the processes of identity management in online dating contexts. Their research with members of *Connect.com* breaks new ground in understanding interaction and interpretation in this emerging communication domain. Their analysis focuses on managing authenticity while creating an attractive identity and used interview techniques to understand the way participants interpret reference to identity features. This contrasts to the approach taken in this research, where discourse analysis of the texts of profiles allows us to see the self-positioning and identity management in the data.

Of course the development of online sociality has not been invisible to researchers of computer-mediated communication. The emergence of social networking software and the communities and networks built upon them has been of increasing and ongoing scholarly interest. Relevant studies to the research presented here clusters around the work of danah boyd (2004; 2006) and colleagues (boyd & Ellison, 2007; boyd & Heer, 2006; Donath & boyd, 2004). The quantitative analysis of profiles has been central to much of this work, though the focus has often been revealing and mapping the architecture of social networks. How friendship rather than romance is constructed and construed on social networking sites is very much to the fore in boyd’s work and sexuality as a key variable in the profiles is not centre stage.

As to dating in online contexts, Lee and Bruckman (2007) and Ward (2008) seem to be pioneering this field, though their research focuses on social networks sites for the former and *Craigslist*, an online classifieds service, in the case of the latter. This transferral of an old genre to a new medium has changed, I argue, the way identities participate in this discourse. The persistence of online profiles allows for new possibilities for sociality on the dating market place that align some dating sites with social networking sites such as *friendster.com, myspace.com* and *facebook.com*. The next section addresses the differences between dating online and the print media and the possibilities afforded the lonely heart in cyberspace.

**NormalGay as Dating Site and Social Network**

The site investigated in this paper, *NormalGay.com* debuted on the Internet in 2004. This is one