



Profile as promise: A framework for conceptualizing veracity in online dating self- presentations

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Abstract

This research explores how users conceptualize misrepresentation (their own and others') in a specific genre of online self-presentation: the online dating profile. Using qualitative data collected from 37 online dating participants, we explore user understandings of self-presentational practices, specifically how discrepancies between one's online profile and offline presentation are constructed, assessed, and justified. Based on our analysis, we propose the *profile as promise* framework as an analytic lens that captures user understandings about profile-based representation through a qualitative analysis of their retrospective reflections.

Keywords

asynchronicity, common ground, deception, hyperpersonal, identity, online dating, profile, self-presentation

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Philosophers have long struggled with the existential inquiry, ‘Who am I?’ (e.g. Descartes, 1960/1637), but this fundamental question is now routinely posed to internet users each time they construct an online representation of self, or profile. These self-presentational performances may take many forms: a user bio in Wikipedia, a profile on an online dating site, or a personal homepage on the Web. In many online fora, a critical aspect of self-presentation is the extent to which it reflects or diverges from the corporeal self as experienced through face-to-face (FtF) communication. Given the impossibility of translating an embodied self into a relatively brief and static self-description, some discrepancies between one’s online and offline presence may be expected – and even accepted – while others are definitely not. Although research to date has examined the extent to which these discrepancies occur (Hancock and Toma, 2009; Toma et al., 2008; Whitty, 2008), we still lack a conceptual framework for understanding how users conceive of and justify these discrepancies. Why are some discrepancies perceived as benign and intrinsic to the process of constructing online profiles, while others are not?

This research explores how users conceptualize misrepresentation (their own and others’) in a specific genre of online self-presentation: the online dating profile. Using qualitative data collected from 37 online dating participants, we explore user understandings of self-presentational practices and how discrepancies between one’s online profile and offline presentation are assessed and justified. In order to better understand user perceptions and understandings, we take a qualitative approach influenced by grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) that enables us to build upon previous empirical work while exploring online dating participants’ experiences and perceptions using their own language. Based on our analysis, we propose the *profile as promise* framework as an analytic lens that captures user understandings about profile representation through a qualitative analysis of their retrospective reflections.

Profile self-presentation

Online dating profiles

Online dating profiles are typically static self-presentational portfolios consisting of textual descriptions and photographs. Profiles are essential for online daters because they constitute a gateway for future FtF dating. Often, individuals are pursued or ignored by would-be romantic partners based on a quick perusal of the profile (Heino et al., 2010). Thus, daters are motivated to construct versions of self that are attractive to potential romantic partners. Perhaps in response to these pressures, they admit to including ‘exaggerations’ in their profiles (Whitty, 2008).

However, online daters are also pressured to present themselves accurately, for several reasons. First, they run the risk of alienating potential partners if their online profiles are judged as too inaccurate upon meeting (Ellison et al., 2006; Whitty, 2008). This anticipated FtF interaction is a salient component of the online dating experience because the explicit goal of many participants is a romantic or sexual relationship. Second, most people desire partners who will understand and appreciate them as they truly are, rather than an idealized version inconsistent with reality (Swann et al., 1994). Finally, online daters may embellish rather than lie for intrinsic reasons: being honest is a cherished

aspect of one's self-concept, and outright deception can challenge this self-view. Mazar and Ariely (2006) argue that the desire to view oneself as honest constrains individuals' deceptive behavior, even when there is no chance of being caught. Similarly, extensive research by Bavelas and colleagues (Bavelas et al., 1990) reveals that when presented with two courses of action, both of which have negative consequences (i.e. 'avoid-avoid' situations), individuals tend to use equivocation, or statements that are neither true nor deceptive. For many online daters, self-presentational decisions constitute avoid-avoid situations, because telling the truth entails appearing less attractive but telling a lie invites negative repercussions.

In short, online daters must manage the tension between comprehensively honest and selectively positive self-presentation in a context in which deception is technically effortless but potentially damaging to relational goals and self-views. We argue that online daters' decisions of how to reconcile these competing demands are influenced by three key factors associated with computer-mediated communication (CMC): reduced cues, asynchronicity, and shared contextual expectations. We draw on the hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996) and common ground (Clark, 1996) to explicate these factors.

The hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996) specifies how technological characteristics affect relational outcomes by considering how properties of online environments can transform sender, receiver, channel and feedback dynamics. Below we focus on the most relevant factors: sender and channel dynamics. The perspective provides a theoretical framework for explaining and testing specific technical and relational aspects of CMC but generally does not address the contextual expectations that may emerge over time in specific online communities or settings. To account for the dynamics through which participants in an online dating community develop and rely upon shared expectations, we draw on the concept of common ground (Clark, 1996).

Presentation of self in a reduced-cue environment. The hyperpersonal model describes the process of selective self-presentation, a concept that draws heavily on self-presentation theory as articulated in psychology and sociology. In this view, self-presentation is behavior aimed at conveying an image of self to others (Schlenker, 1980) and has as a primary goal influencing other people to respond in desired ways (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Self-presentation involves strategically disclosing and/or concealing information in order to portray the self in a desirable way (Goffman, 1959). For Goffman, self-presentation is a critical component of social interaction.

As articulated by the hyperpersonal model, the online environment gives individuals more control over their self-presentational statements, because many characteristics that would be evident in FtF communication are not apparent. Walther notes that 'the information one gives about oneself is more selective, malleable, and subject to self-censorship in CMC than it is in FtF interaction because only verbal and linguistic cues – those that are most at our discretion and control – are our displays' (1996: 20). Most scholarship in this tradition has focused on the extent to which CMC enables selective self-presentation (and, in the extreme, blatant deception). However, consider the pressures introduced by the absence of these cues. When meeting FtF, descriptions of one's body type, ethnicity, attractiveness or personality are not necessary. In profile-based CMC, the physical cues that would communicate these identity characteristics are absent and must be explicitly

documented. Because online daters cannot 'show' characteristics such as age, gender, or location, they are forced to 'tell' them through text-based communication.

This act of telling introduces ambiguity into the self-presentation process, especially in relation to subjective characteristics. This ambiguity can stem from three sources: lack of self-knowledge, conscious efforts to disguise the self, and the technical affordances of the online dating context which constrain self-presentational choices. For instance, given the limits of self-knowledge, it may be impossible for some individuals to produce self-descriptions others would see as honest, a constraint known as the 'foggy mirror' phenomenon: 'Sometimes it's not truthful, but it's how they see themselves' (Ellison et al., 2006: 428). On a more conscious level, daters can exploit the reduced-cues environment by explicitly selecting what information to include or omit from the profile. For instance, unattractive or difficult-to-explain information can be withheld by taking advantage of the 'I'll tell you later' option in profile fields or leaving them blank. Finally, as users acknowledge, the profile version of self is dictated by the technological affordances of this interaction space (Ellison et al., 2006).

Asynchronicity and temporal factors. The hyperpersonal model asserts that asynchronous communication gives users more time to contemplate and edit their messages and frees up cognitive resources (Walther, 1996). Asynchronicity can thus enable selective self-presentation (as well as explicit deception and deception through omission) and contribute to idealized impressions.

Consider the temporal gap between when an online dating profile is created and when it might be read. Unlike FtF settings, where 'what you see (now) is what you get,' profiles are written with the knowledge that they will be consumed at an unknown time in the future – perhaps hours later, perhaps months. This temporal ambiguity (enabled by asynchronous communication) gives profile creators the challenging task of anticipating the version of self that will ring true at an unspecified future date.

This task is further complicated by the fact that identity itself is temporally situated. Markus and Nurius (1986) state that individuals hold notions of their *past* selves, *present* selves, and *future* selves. Even when considering one's present self, additional layers are presented by distinctions between one's *ideal* self (containing qualities individuals strive to possess) and *actual* self (containing qualities individuals currently express) (Higgins, 1987). Ideal selves may contain qualities expressed in the past, currently, or imagined in the future, and research suggests that presenting one's ideal self is one strategy for resolving pressures to be both honest and attractive (Ellison et al., 2006).

Shared contextual expectations. While the hyperpersonal model focuses on how socio-technical factors affect self-presentation and interpersonal dynamics online, it does not speak directly to the kinds of social norms or community-based codes that can emerge in an online environment over time. These contextual considerations are prominent, however, in the study of conventions in language use. In one of the dominant accounts, Clark (1996) refers to the shared expectations that are relied upon during communication as *communal common ground*. Communal common ground consists of the facts, norms, procedures, and lexicons that can be assumed to be known to any member of a community. Slang and jargon, for example, can be assumed to be understandable within one particular community but not in another. Examples in online communication abound, such as the notion of 'Netiquette' (Scheuermann and Taylor, 1997).

In online dating, common ground around profile terminology may affect how discrepancies are conceptualized by participants. Users may rely on perceptions of how descriptive terms are typically interpreted by those in the dating community and shared expectations about normative behavior. For example, previous work has found that online daters may exaggerate because they assume that others in the community are doing so (Ellison et al., 2006; Fiore and Donath, 2004). Some embellishment in online dating profiles is expected, as articulated by an online dater in an early study who explained: ‘Everybody lies about their age or a lot of people do ... So I have to cheat too in order to be on the same page as everybody else that cheats’ (Ellison et al., 2006: 427).

These kinds of shared expectations around communal understandings of embellishment should influence assessments of unacceptability because users learn to account for these embellishments when assessing other daters’ self-presentational messages. If deception is ‘a message knowingly transmitted to foster a false belief or conclusion’ (Buller and Burgoon, 1996: 205), some profile embellishments may not be seen as deceptive (and thus unacceptable) because they should not create a false belief. Thus, a dater may believe that claiming to be 5’10” will be interpreted as signifying a height of 5’9”; although factually incorrect, this claim might be acceptable if the dater does not perceive it as creating a false belief.

Consistent with this reasoning, Heino et al. (2010) found that online daters developed strategies for interpreting physical descriptions that took into account a certain degree of embellishment. These strategies and expectations regarding typical and appropriate behavior develop over time, as users learn from past transgressions and triumphs (their own and others’). In contexts in which embellishment is a shared expectation, assessments may be correspondingly adjusted, which would affect subsequent relational processes (e.g. potentially dampening the idealization process described by Walther, 1996).

The present study

This study proposes to extend previous work on self-presentation in online dating by examining how users conceptualize profile self-presentation in light of the factors described above. Where past research has examined the accuracy of profiles (Toma and Hancock, 2010; Toma et al., 2008) and online daters’ self-presentational (Ellison et al., 2006), uncertainty reduction (Gibbs et al., 2011) and decision-making (Heino et al., 2010) strategies, this study explores how online dating participants evaluate discrepancies in their own and others’ profiles. By focusing more narrowly on the production and assessment of profile misrepresentations we hope to gain insight into how users conceptualize the relationship between the profile and the person. Thus we ask:

RQ: How do online daters conceptualize the acceptability of discrepancies between one’s profile self-presentation and offline presence?

Method

Participants, research site and procedure

Data collection took place in New York City, a location that provided access to a diverse pool of online daters. Participants were recruited through the *Village Voice* and Craigslist.

com advertisements and included heterosexual users of the four most popular traditional online dating sites in the US at the time (Yahoo! Personals, Match.com/MSN Match.com, American Singles, and Webdate). Eighty participants were included in the general study (reported in Toma et al., 2008), of which the first 37 were interviewed individually, providing the dataset for this analysis. We stopped interviewing when we achieved saturation and were no longer hearing new insights from participants. We interviewed 12 men and 25 women, ranging in age from 18 to 47, with an average age of 30 years. On average, participants had been engaged in online dating for approximately two years, with the shortest duration being two months and the longest seven years.

First, participants were presented with a printed copy of their online dating profile and asked to rate the accuracy of each profile element, as well as the general acceptability of lying on that topic. Profile elements included age, height, occupation, and religion. Participants then completed a survey and were interviewed by the third author. Finally, participants were asked to engage in measurement procedures and were thanked, debriefed, and given a \$30 incentive. See Toma et al. (2008) for details about the larger study design.

Data collection

We used qualitative methods that enabled us to capture and analyze participants' perceptions, understandings and experiences, using their own conceptual frameworks and terminology. Interviews lasted 30 minutes on average. First, the interviewer selected profile elements rated by the participant as inaccurate and used them as prompts, asking questions such as 'You gave yourself a low score on accuracy for the question about height. Can you tell me about this?' or 'Let's talk about your answers. You say that you're "athletic" but you noted this is not entirely accurate.' Interviews were semi-structured, meaning that a general interview protocol was used as a guide, but the researcher was able to probe deeper into topics of interest and the participant was free to focus on areas of particular salience. The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' perceptions about the acceptability of various kinds of misrepresentations and the logic guiding their assessments through questions such as:

- Can you describe your thought process when you were deciding how to answer this profile question?
- What kinds of misrepresentations in profiles are OK? Why?
- What kinds of misrepresentations in profiles are not OK? Why?

Data analysis

Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed by an undergraduate research assistant and then checked for accuracy by the interviewer. Interview transcripts were analyzed using Atlas.ti. The constant comparison method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was used to locate common themes and to gain greater insight into our research question. The analytic process employed a grounded theory approach, where successive levels of analysis create an 'abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience' (Charmaz,

2006: 4). First, the first author read the entire interview corpus in order to identify broad categories that emerged from the data, such as ‘self-presentational strategies,’ ‘social acceptability’ or ‘definition – what is a lie?’ Using an open coding process, excerpts from the dataset were coded into these higher-level categories using a unitization scheme whereby each question–answer set was treated as one unit.

In the second step of analysis, excerpts in categories related to the acceptability of profile misrepresentation were highlighted and explored more deeply through a process of selective coding and memo construction. For instance, excerpts coded as ‘What is a lie?’ were reassembled into themes such as ‘degree of misrepresentation’ (sample quote: ‘Is it OK to use a dated photo?’ ‘I think it depends, if you still look like that even if it’s five years old, if you actually look like that, I think it’s fine. Um, but no if you’re 40 and it’s from when you were 18 then no, not acceptable’). This system of analytic memos, which was intensively discussed and revised by the researchers, highlighted the various categories, such as malleability, that emerged when participants discussed the acceptability of various misrepresentations.

Finally, through an iterative process involving frequent discussions among the authors, refinement of these acceptability categories, and reassessment of the dataset, a common lens for interpreting the data emerged: *the promise*. This lens, which was not explicitly articulated by our participants but served as a unifying framework through which to understand our dataset, evolved into the ‘profile as promise’ framework explicated below. We then reviewed the literature on the concept of promises in other contexts, such as job interviews, in order to better understand the ‘promise’ phenomenon.

Findings

Our analysis explored how users conceptualized the acceptability of discrepancies between profile statements and offline presence. The three factors reviewed earlier – reduced cues, asynchronicity, and context-specific expectations – all featured in our participants’ accounts. Participants did not expect the profile to be an exact digital representation of a corporeal being, but rather a consciously constructed amalgamation reflecting a fluid sense of identity drawing from past, present, and future selves, subject to daters’ limited self-knowledge and the social and technical constraints of the online dating context. Assessments regarding the acceptability of profile discrepancies were derived from this more flexible understanding of the profile, giving participants license to embellish within certain guidelines.

Time shifting in the profile: asynchronicity as license to lie?

Our data suggest that the malleability of profile descriptions and the magnitude of the discrepancy between online and offline self-presentation affected conceptions of acceptability as articulated by participants. We believe that these insights illustrate how the *time-shifted*, asynchronous nature of the profile affects how statements are assessed. The knowledge that profiles would be read in the future seemed to give participants tacit permission to draw from a library of selves when constructing their profile: to represent a self they might achieve in the future or which was a salient component of their past.

Given this, some discrepancies were perceived as acceptable, especially those that could be minimized before an actual FtF meeting.

More specifically, the *malleability* of the trait influenced the acceptability of the discrepancy. For some individuals, discrepancies about characteristics that were possible to change in the future (such as hairstyle) were considered more acceptable than discrepancies about things that could not be changed (such as age or height). As long as the discrepancy was not too significant and the future self was within the realm of possibility, the misrepresentation was generally described as acceptable. For instance, one participant who used a five-year-old photograph claimed it was acceptable because he looked the same other than having a beard, which he said he could grow back in a month. When asked about acceptable discrepancies, this female participant evoked the difference between achievable and non-achievable goals:

If a lie is an approximation of the truth or if it represents an ambition, for example I'm actually in sales but I would prefer to be in marketing someday and so I check off marketing instead of sales. [I: Because that's a goal of yours?] Because it's a goal. It's not like me saying I'm a janitor, and then lying and saying that I'm a CEO. You know, that's unacceptable.

For this participant, claiming to have achieved a professional goal is acceptable if it is a malleable trait and constitutes a salient and achievable component of one's future self.

Second, participants discussed the *magnitude* of the misrepresentation when assessing its acceptability. Generally, small discrepancies were acceptable, but large ones were not. As one participant explained: 'Someone says they're 6' and they're 5'11", you know, that doesn't really matter. But if someone says they're 6' and they are 5'5", that matters.' Another participant echoed this distinction when asked about whether it was acceptable to use older photographs on one's profile:

It depends on what's happened to yourself since the time you've taken that last picture. If you were 150 pounds and you took this picture at 21, but now you're 250 pounds, that's not good. But if you're 21 and then 24 and you look pretty much the same, then I have no problem with it.

Consistent with the time-shifting nature of the profile, smaller discrepancies, especially ones that could be made truthful in the near future, were more acceptable than larger ones. Wearing heels could add one inch to one's height, but not seven – thus, a one-inch discrepancy was likely to be more acceptable than a seven-inch discrepancy. Similarly, an older photograph of someone whose appearance had not changed much was more acceptable than an older photograph of someone who had gained 100 pounds in the interim.

Our data suggest that users often rationalized their own misrepresentations by appealing to the notion of multiple selves. Participants drew upon a range of selves from a wide temporal spectrum, including future and past selves, when constructing a digital self-representation. This allowed them to highlight positive characteristics that they identified with, even if they recognized these characteristics weren't part of their current identity. Choosing aspects of the self that they believed they would one day reclaim or describing a characteristic they once possessed enabled them to present a positive version of self while still avoiding having to self-identify as a 'liar.' For instance, one

participant explained the difference between a blatant lie and presenting aspects of one's ideal self. She explained:

You want to represent yourself at your ideal... I think that if you're lying and you have no intention of ever being that person, then that's unforgivable, reprehensible, but I think that to say 'yeah I go to the gym 2-3 times a week' ... well, yeah, I ideally want to be at the gym, so when I have a gym membership, when I actually have money, income coming in, I will have a gym membership and will be there.

In this instance, because going to the gym is part of this individual's future self-concept, she justifies listing this misrepresentation (as opposed to it being 'reprehensible').

Participants also exploited the use of past, present, and future tense in their self-descriptions. For instance, smoking was generally perceived to be an unattractive characteristic, and thus almost all of our smoking participants incorporated some degree of ambiguity when describing their smoking habits. Smokers who wanted to meet a non-smoker often incorporated future (non-smoking) selves into their profiles. As one woman explained,

I'm a smoker. I quit and then I started up again a few years ago. I just feel like it's an unattractive habit so I don't put it on my profile... If I met the right guy, I'd quit without him ever knowing ... I have no problem saying I'm a non-smoker hoping to potentially meet someone who would potentially be a non-smoker as well.

As illustrated here, the focus on one's 'potential' self enabled users to justify profile discrepancies, a strategy perhaps invited by the asynchronous nature of the profile and the knowledge that profile consumption and any FtF meetings would occur in the future.

The present participle tense, specifically the concept of 'quitting,' was exploited by participants who still smoked but publicly declared they did not. Embracing liminal labels like 'quitting' gave them the ethical latitude to engage in the activity, but still lay claim to a future self who did not (i.e. self-identify as a 'non-smoker' in the profile). Ambiguities around past/present/future selves were exploited in the profile, as illustrated by a male participant who explained: 'I've never updated that [field] ... At the moment I'm smoking, but I mean I have intentions. ... It's a work in progress. ... [This 'non-smoking' answer] would probably give someone the impression that I've done it when in fact I'm still dabbling.'

As illustrated by the example above, a common method of exploiting the time-shifted nature of the profile by evoking a past self was passive: failing to update a profile with more current, accurate information. For instance, one participant gained weight after creating a profile but chose not to update this field: 'The last update to that was in September, and as of today I have a couple of, few more pounds, but I didn't think it was that serious that I would have to put myself as "heavy."' Smokers employed this technique as well: 'When I [created] the profile, I wasn't smoking, but then I started getting stressed out... I kind of liked it as not smoking, so I didn't go back to correct it.'

In summary, our data suggest that the magnitude and malleability of the projected trait affected how profile discrepancies were judged. We believe this is related to the ambiguities generated by the time-shifted nature of profile construction and consumption in that

discrepancies that could be potentially fulfilled in the future (because they are small or malleable) were seen as more acceptable. When users evoked characteristics that were still part of their vision of self (gym-user, non-smoker), they rationalized these identity claims because these were alternative selves that could be realized in the future or were true in the past. The asynchronous nature of profile creation and consumption may have provided a basis for these rationalizations.

Reduced cues: having to tell rather than show

In the reduced-cue environment of the profile, daters were forced to explicitly 'tell' things that in FtF contexts would be passively 'shown,' such as body type.

This telling rather than showing could result in misrepresentations stemming from lack of self-knowledge (i.e. 'the foggy mirror,' Ellison et al., 2006). For instance, in response to a question about whether most people on the site describe themselves accurately, one woman answered:

They think they're accurate.... You know, I think that I'm attractive [but] you could put three guys in a room and they could all have different opinions.... I don't think that anybody deliberately lies. I went out with one guy who thought he was like God's gift to women, and I disagreed.

When profile descriptions reflected an inaccurate self-concept, within reason, these discrepancies were generally considered to be acceptable misrepresentations, especially in the case of subjective assessments such as 'attractiveness.'

One strategy for resolving the tension between honesty and self-presentational pressures was equivocation – that is, making statements that were neither true nor deceptive. Equivocation was enabled by the ambiguity of certain profile self-descriptors (such as an 'average' body type) and the reduced-cue environment. As in the case of the 'quitting' label, users interpreted closed-ended options in ways that enabled them to self-present positively while staying within the realm of acceptable misrepresentation. For instance, one participant admitted he had a 'tummy' but kept his profile description of body type as 'athletic' because he still had muscles under a layer of extra padding: 'Even with a little bit of tummy here, I am still athletic, you know ... muscular... I still have muscles even if they are covered.'

For this participant, presenting himself as 'athletic' was acceptable because having muscles was part of his core identity, even if they were 'covered.' In other instances, users who had to choose between two inaccurate answers and chose the more positive option rationalized this because their ability to be completely honest was stymied by the reduced-cue environment: 'If those are my two choices I definitely would want to pick in my mind the more positive portrayal, but I think if it actually had the right option I would have picked it.'

'Fudging to get over the hump': expected misrepresentations within online contexts

When describing acceptable misrepresentations, participants also appealed to shared expectations about the meaning of profile information. For example, participants generally

accepted the use of euphemistic terms, such as ‘curvy,’ and interpreted them in light of community-specific shared understandings. The use of such euphemistic terms enabled daters to save face when describing characteristics about which they might rather be silent. For instance, one participant explained that he reviewed a female friend’s profile and told her to avoid the word ‘curvy’: ‘I told her that when you write “curvy,” that usually means, to me, that you’re just big and you’re trying to make it sound like you’re not as big by saying “curvy,” and then the reader will interpret that as meaning that you’re fat.’ In this example, the term ‘curvy’ signaled a larger body size to our participant, who assumed this understanding was part of the dating community’s common ground.

Participants’ comments displayed a shared expectation of some degree of enhancement in the profiles, which had implications for judging whether factually false information was acceptable. For instance, a male participant explained: ‘Some enhancements are ok. I mean, I’m not totally inflexible. If they want to enhance it to make it look as best as it could possibly look, then that’s cool.’ Several participants noted that they expected some profile misrepresentation. One male participant articulated his sense of these shared expectations by noting that:

For the most part people give a fairly accurate description of themselves. They might have a little leeway here and there like I do.... I kind of expect that, you know, they’ll say ‘I’m 35’ and in fact they’re 39. I mean if they don’t look the difference, what’s the big deal to me? It’s not skin off my nose. If they’re 19 and they say they’re 29 then I’ve got a problem with that.... If you misrepresent to the point where it’s going to be a problem in the relationship, that’s not acceptable. If you’re just fudging to get over the hump, so to speak, OK, it’s “no harm no foul.”

This expectation of ‘fudging to get over the hump’ was shared by many of our participants, as suggested by another participant who observed, ‘I imagine most people lie a little bit and some people lie a lot.’ Our data suggest that online daters hold shared expectations about profile misrepresentation and that they account for and accept ‘fudging.’

While common themes emerged regarding the expected acceptability of various kinds of misrepresentation, there were individual differences in regards to the kinds of traits that could be acceptably misrepresented. One participant, a tall woman, explained:

It might be different for different people because for me, height is important. I hate, hate, *hate* people that are 5’10”, guys that are 5’10” say they are 6’ all the time. And if I’m in an email relationship with them I’ll say, ‘I really am 6 feet tall. ... If you’re 5’10”, you really are going to be shorter than me ...’ For me [there are] things that really are a hot button, but I might not know what that is with somebody else.’

In summary, our data suggest that online dating participants’ assessments of the acceptability of profile discrepancies are influenced by three factors: the asynchronous (time-shifted) nature of the profile, the reduced-cue environment, and the shared expectations that are part of the communal common ground of online dating. We believe there is a common logic animating these seemingly disparate criteria for judging profile discrepancies: the conceptualization of the profile as a promise. Below we discuss this perspective and how we believe it can explain our participants’ accounts of their discrepancies and their rationalizations.

Discussion

The present research is the first to explore how online daters conceptualize and rationalize discrepancies in their online self-presentation. User conceptions of the acceptability of profile misrepresentations were explored in relation to the temporal shift between profile creation and consumption, the reduced cues available in the online dating content, and the communal common ground of the online context (in this case, online dating).

Findings suggest that our participants drew from a library of past, present, and future selves when constructing their profiles, giving them license to evoke qualities they wish they had, used to have, or planned to have. Users did not expect the profile to completely and accurately represent others on the site, and thus they forgave certain discrepancies such as those stemming from lack of self-knowledge. As a way of organizing these findings, we propose the following framework and reframe our findings using this conceptual lens.

The profile as promise framework

Based on our analysis and insights from past literature, we believe that the profile is usefully conceived of as a *promise* made by profile-creators to their audience, rather than an exact representation of one's offline presence, and that this framework explicates how users distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable profile discrepancies. We believe this notion of a promise is salient to online daters and captures the spirit of the online dating profile, which is structured upon a mutual understanding that *the profile constitutes a promise made to an imagined audience that future face-to-face interaction will take place with someone who does not differ fundamentally from the person represented by the profile*. The framework presumes that profile representations will not be (and are not expected to be) exact replicas of one's offline identity, and that what is considered a 'fundamental' discrepancy will shift depending on the particular online context. In online dating, because a romantic relationship (and thus FtF interaction) is often the goal, certain characteristics (such as physical attributes) are more important than they would be in other contexts, such as an online forum where dyadic relationship formation and FtF interaction are not assumed (e.g. a health discussion board).

The *profile as promise framework* conceptualizes the profile as a 'psychological contract' (see Rousseau, 2001) between the dater and future potential dates. This contract presumes that information is exchanged in a mutually agreed-upon and equitable manner. Violations of this assumption are perceived to be unacceptably deceptive misrepresentations. According to speech act theory, 'The point or purpose of a promise is that it is an undertaking of an obligation by the speaker to do something' (Searle, 1979: 2). In the case of our participants, the profile is an obligation by one dater to another dater to operate in good faith given the constraints of a reduced-cues, asynchronous environment and within the shared expectations of the online dating context.

The metaphor of the promise has been applied successfully to other contexts, such as the organizational realm, where interviews and day-to-day human resource management are inherently ambiguous contexts that require good faith to operate well (Rousseau and Greller, 1994). There are a number of useful parallels between the résumé and the online dating profile, and previous research suggests that online daters view the profile as a

résumé of sorts (Heino et al., 2010). As Rousseau (2001) notes about résumés, ‘Information that applicants and employers provide to each other is typically viewed as a warranted communication, that is, what each provider offers is assumed to be true. Lying to an employer during recruitment is grounds for dismissal’ (pp. 532–533). Likewise, blatant deception in one’s online dating profile can be grounds for terminating a budding relationship (Whitty, 2008). Additionally, both profiles and résumés are recordable and archived documents (see Hancock et al., 2004), which means that they can stand as testimony to the promises made by the self-presenter. In fact, online daters report saving early correspondence in order to check it against later emails for evidence of deception (Heino et al., 2010).

The profile as promise framework highlights three properties of promises that are important when constructing or assessing a profile. First, promises need not be stated explicitly but can also arise from a context that signals the intention to promise, whether or not the words ‘I promise’ are used (Grice, 1989). Second, promises embody an aspect of temporality, as they are by definition future-oriented. As demonstrated in our interviews, the profile as promise framework suggests that online daters’ unspoken assumption is that the person presented in the profile will not diverge in important ways from the person encountered in future FtF interactions. This allows online daters to promise aspects of the self that they believe are feasible in the future, and our data suggest this happened frequently. Third, given that all aspects of a future relationship are impossible to anticipate, promises are typically incomplete. It is impossible to specify all of the conditions and contingencies of a promise in advance; thus, they are subject to ambiguity, and expectations about the way certain promises should be fulfilled may exist.

Indeed, Goffman (1959: 249) discussed the moral obligation of promises inherent in self-presentational cues. He notes that when full information about a person is not available, individuals tend to use substitutes, such as status symbols and cues, as predictive devices:

The individual tends to treat the others present on the basis of the impression they give now about the past and the future. It is here that communicative acts are translated into moral ones. The impressions that the others give tend to be treated as claims and promises they have implicitly made, and claims and promises tend to have a moral character.

Goffman points out that this promise is mutually shared by two individuals, and that if individuals are to be ‘gentlemanly’ (sic), they will not consciously try to manipulate observers’ impressions.

In our framework, the profile serves as a predictive device that is assumed to offer accurate cues about the future self of the presenter. In line with Goffman’s conceptualization, violations of this assumption (e.g. a discrepancy that is too large or unachievable) carry a moral dimension and are seen as unacceptable. This moral dimension is evident in our data, as can be seen in this participant’s explanation of what makes a discrepancy unacceptable: ‘if you’re lying and you have no intention of ever being that person, then that’s unforgivable, reprehensible.’ As articulated by the promise framework, online daters who wish to self-identify as ‘promise-keepers’ will engage only in profile discrepancies they do not consider to be lies.

Applying the profile as promise framework to the interview data

The 'profile as promise' framework offers a new conceptual framework for understanding self-presentational processes in online spaces. As mentioned earlier, past work has focused on general motivations for self-presentation in online dating (Ellison et al., 2006) or the actual practice of deception (e.g., Hancock and Toma, 2009; Toma et al., 2008). This conceptualization contributes to extant research by providing insight into how online daters conceive of their self-presentational statements and how they assess those of others.

Conceptualizing profiles as promises provides insight into why some profile discrepancies are perceived as acceptable. One criterion that influenced acceptability was whether the 'promises' made in the profile could be fulfilled in the future. For instance, losing ten pounds, stopping smoking, getting a promotion at work, or going to the gym more frequently are all activities that could plausibly take place in the future. To the extent that 'promises' were perceived to be realistic and achievable, they were acceptable. However, profile promises that could not be kept, such as losing 100 pounds quickly, erasing one's children, or becoming significantly taller, were deemed unacceptable. Discrepancies needed to be sufficiently malleable and small in magnitude to be considered acceptable in this regard.

Our data suggest that online daters rationalized profile discrepancies by appealing to the temporal nature of promises. Specifically, participants selected attributes from a library of selves – past, present, and future – to construct a collection of identity claims that enabled them to include 'enhancements' while still self-identifying as an honest broker or promise-keeper. We believe the promise framework provides an important insight into the ways in which individuals construct online personae, as it enables scholarship on online self-presentation to move beyond assumptions that anything but complete accuracy is perceived as unethical or that online presentation takes the form of fantastical identity experimentations (e.g. Turkle, 1995). Future research should consider the ways in which the temporal dimensions of online interaction affect self-presentation and assessment.

The reduced cues context of the profile meant that profiles, like promises, were necessarily incomplete. Incompleteness stemmed from both the difficulty of representing a dynamic and evolving self in a static profile and from the technical constraints associated with the profile options. Our participants exploited the reduced cues nature of the profile by declining to disclose certain characteristics, as mentioned by the woman who said she would 'prefer to explain [a profile field] as opposed to have it be an arbitrary statistic.' Discrepancies were more forgivable if they stemmed from one's inability to or discomfort with having to articulate aspects of the self.

Finally, when making profile promises, daters relied on shared expectations about how others used deception (e.g. 'I imagine most people lie a little bit') or about the coded nature of some statements (e.g. 'curvy' as a proxy for 'overweight'), which suffused their interpretation of the profile and what was actually being promised. As is the case with all language use (Clark, 1996), participants relied on their presumed context-specific common ground when producing and interpreting information

promised in the profile. These shared expectations of the norms and lexicons of the online dating context thus seemed to affect perceptions of acceptability regarding profile discrepancies.

Future directions and limitations

Our findings both challenge and complement existing literature. Although previous work has considered temporal factors, such as the role of asynchronicity in enabling selective self-presentation (Walther, 1996), we focus more specifically on the implications of the gap between profile creation and consumption for users' concepts of self-presentation and the rationale it provides for displays of the future self. More research is needed to understand how this psychological construct impacts self-presentation and impression formation in other asynchronous contexts, such as those with a more clearly defined period of time between when a message is constructed and when it is expected to be read. Following our framework, we expect harsher judgment of discrepancies in situations with shorter time gaps. Second, we extend discussion of how the reduced-cues nature of CMC affects self-presentation. Previous research on online dating has found that users try to 'show, not tell' in order to add credibility to their identity claims (Ellison et al., 2006). Our findings complicate this observation by exploring in more depth the implications of having to 'tell' characteristics that would be apparent in face-to-face communication. Future research should examine how the act of profile creation affects one's sense of identity, self-esteem, and self-knowledge. Finally, our findings suggest that when studying relationship development in online spaces, the hyperpersonal perspective might productively be paired with consideration of context-specific shared understandings.

Limitations to this study include the fact that we only spoke with online daters in the New York City area and we limited our sample to members of large online dating sites such as Match.com. Our procedure, whereby individuals first rated their profiles and then engaged in an interview, may have inadvertently primed participants and made issues of misrepresentation more salient. Finally, our participants spoke retrospectively about their profile construction, which may have lead them to engage in post-hoc rationalizations of their behavior; future work that captures participants' thinking during the act of profile creation will be important for exploring our predictions about the promissory nature of the profile.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, the explosion of online fora such as social network sites, online dating sites, wikis, blogs, video-sharing sites, and news aggregators – each with their own set of technical characteristics and social norms – invites theorizing about how best to explain how and why communication practices on these sites (and their interpersonal outcomes) differ. A large corpus of scholarship by Walther (1996) and others has explicated the effects of general CMC features, such as the reduced-cue environment, on interpersonal communication and relationship development. Simultaneously, scholarship on online community, which is concerned with distinctive online cultural contexts

as opposed to CMC features, suggests that the specific shared expectations that develop among members of a particular online environment will affect the communication practices of its members (e.g. Baym, 1995; McLaughlin et al. 1997). However, these two approaches have not been integrated into a comprehensive theoretical perspective that considers both specific contexts (e.g. online dating norms) and general CMC features (e.g. asynchronicity).

In light of this, we believe the *profile as promise* framework illustrates the need to consider both general CMC and specific context-based factors when exploring mediated message production and assessment. Undergirding this framework is the assumption that the technical and social factors of a particular online context will shape message production and assessment in important ways. These factors include the time-shifted nature of the profile, the reduced cues of the CMC environment, and the community-specific shared understandings associated with a particular online forum.

The 'profile as promise' framework helps explicate the process by which online daters decide what to include, and not to include, when they create a profile. It is erroneous to assume that online daters feel that the profile should be a static, digital replica of a dynamic, multidimensional human being. Rather, when it came to creating their own online representation, online dating participants gave themselves – and others – permission to employ a flexible sense of identity that drew upon past, present, and future selves. The profile as promise framework enables us to better understand these dynamics and to consider when a misrepresentation is a lie and when it is merely a promise that may soon be fulfilled.

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