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CHAPTER THREE

A New Twist on Love's Labor: Self-Presentation in Online Dating Profiles

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Perhaps nowhere are first impressions as important as in romantic encounters. Romance can thrive if first impressions are positive, or may not even take off if they are negative. An important question, then, is what kind of information people rely on to form these first impressions. In traditional forms of dating, such as being introduced by a mutual friend or simply sharing a glance across the room, first impressions are typically based on the other's physical appearance, dress, and conversational style. This limited amount of information allows people to gauge romantic "chemistry," but it tends to lack breadth (i.e., information about exact age, occupation, family) and depth (i.e., information about personality and core beliefs).

With the growing popularity of social network websites, such as online dating, impression formation in romantic contexts has witnessed a significant change. Online dating involves constructing detailed profiles describing the self and then browsing others' profiles with a view to finding a good "match." In contrast with face-to-face dating, online profiles reveal information that has both breadth (e.g., age, height, weight, education, occupation, income) and depth (e.g., personality traits, political beliefs, religious beliefs). While this repository of information may be beneficial when scrutinizing others' profiles, it presents a significant challenge when constructing one's own. How do online daters construct their self-presentation, given the pressure to reveal a wealth of personal information and the importance of making a good first impression? How do they strategically select which information to disclose and which to circumvent? Most importantly, how honest are their self-presentations?

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the process of self-presentation in online dating profiles, from both theoretical and empirical lenses. We first offer a general theoretical framework for online self-presentation that encompasses both psychological factors and the role of the communication medium. Then we apply this framework to the distinct context of online dating and provide empirical support for it by reviewing findings from a large study we conducted on this topic (Hancock & Toma, 2009; Toma & Hancock, 2010; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008) as well as from other relevant studies (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Whitty, 2008).

Online Self-Presentation: A Theoretical Framework

We begin by introducing a general framework for online self-presentation. While our main focus in this chapter is on self-presentation in online dating profiles, we intend this framework to be applicable more generally to self-presentations in online environments. As briefly mentioned earlier, online self-presentation differs from face-to-face self-presentation in form (i.e., the type of information that gets included, the manner in which the self-presentation is constructed, the audience to whom it is available), but it can be similar in function (i.e., it serves the same fundamental purpose of finding love, connecting with friends, or impressing employers) (see also Walther, 2007). This theoretical framework draws on the quintessential psychological factors that guide self-presentation and offers a detailed discussion on how features of the communication medium are expected to interact with these factors.

Following Leary and Kowalski's (1990) two-component model of self-presentation, we view self-presentation as consisting of (1) motivational processes, or the degree to which self-presenters are motivated to control how others see them; and (2) construction processes, or the actual implementation of a desired impression. Below we elaborate on both processes, with an emphasis on how the computer-mediated environment can alter them.

Motivational Processes

When do people care about how others see them? Generally speaking, people care about others' impressions when those impressions are relevant to the fulfillment of their goals (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 2002). Simply put, if others' opinions matter in achieving certain goals, one will invest time and effort into influencing those opinions. For instance, if the goal is to attract a desirable mate, it is vital that potential mates perceive one as attractive. Similarly, if the goal is to land a job, it is important to impress the interviewer with one's knowledge and competence. Let it be noted that these goals are fundamental to human nature and should not be affected by the online environment.

A corollary of this principle is that the motivation to control others' impressions should increase as the importance of the goals increases (Beck, 1983; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). For instance, if one perceives finding a marriage partner as more important than connecting with friends, one will be more motivated to carefully control one's online dating self-presentation than one's self-presentation on friendship-related websites, such as Facebook.

A second corollary of this principle is that the anticipation of future interaction with others should increase the motivation to control how others see the self (Walther & Parks, 2002). This is the case because people who are a more stable presence in one's life are more likely to affect the fulfillment of one's goals. The online environment facilitates encounters where there is (1) an anticipation of future face-to-face interaction, such as online dating; (2) an anticipation of future

online (but not face-to-face) interaction, such as many discussion boards or blogs; and (3) no anticipation of future interaction, such as anonymous chat. Generally speaking, the anticipation of future interaction, whether face-to-face or mediated, should result in greater motivation to control impressions than when there is no anticipation of future interaction. The anticipation of face-to-face interaction should result in greater motivation to impression-manage than the anticipation of mediated interaction when the self-presenter's goals need to be accomplished in the face-to-face environment, such as dating.

A third corollary is that publicness, or the degree to which one's behavior is visible to others, should increase motivation to manage impressions. Public behaviors are more likely to be relevant to the accomplishment of goals than private behaviors, and hence people should be more motivated to control them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The online environment alters the publicness of one's behavior in several important ways. At one end of the spectrum, it can render online behaviors completely anonymous, in a way that is impossible in face-to-face settings (see McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Turkle, 1995). In this case, the motivation to impression-manage should be low. At the other end of the spectrum, the online environment can offer a considerable degree of publicness to people who may never have such arenas for public behavior in face-to-face environments. For instance, personal websites and blogs are visible to audiences of millions, and users are in a position to broadcast their opinions and thoughts to the public at large. The online world can also make self-presentational acts more permanent by preserving a record of the self-presentation that is available for long periods of time (see Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie, 2004). By contrast, face-to-face self-presentations tend to be fleeting—only available to observers who are present when the behavior occurs. When online behaviors are permanent and have a large audience, we expect self-presenters to be highly motivated to control how others see them.

Construction Processes

Depending on how much self-presenters are motivated to control how others see them, they will invest time and effort into constructing a desired image. But how exactly do they go about constructing this image? According to Leary and Kowalski's (1990) framework, self-presenters first need to decide how they want to come across to their audience, and then to implement this desired image by engaging in various self-presentational strategies.

Deciding on a desired impression. The first step in image management occurs a priori to the actual self-presentational behaviors: people decide how exactly they want to be perceived by their audience. Two factors determine the construction of this desired image: how self-presenters see themselves and what they perceive the values of their audience to be. In other words, self-presenters select out of their repertoire of self-images the ones they think will best mesh with the values of their

audience. Let us first examine the role of the self-concept, or how people perceive themselves, in the construction of a desired image.

The self-concept includes several dimensions (Higgins, 1987): 1) the *actual self*, which consists of characteristics one currently possesses; 2) the *ideal self*, which consists of characteristics one would like to and could possess in the future, but does not possess currently; and 3) the *ought self*, which consists of characteristics one thinks one should possess given social norms and expectations from others. Self-presenters can choose characteristics from all these three dimensions when constructing their desired image, and research has shown that they tend to strike a balance between presenting themselves candidly (i.e., selecting characteristics of the actual self) or presenting themselves at their best potential (i.e., selecting characteristics of their ideal self) (Schlenker, 2002). However, the more motivated self-presenters are to impress their audience, the more they tend to select aspects of their ideal self (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 2002). It is also noteworthy that people are often proud of aspects of their actual self, and when the motivation to impress the audience is high, they are likely to make a deliberate effort to display these aspects.

A further and critical consideration in choosing which self-aspects to present is the audience. As strategic self-presenters, people consider the values of the audience and then tailor their images to those specific preferences. For instance, people constructing self-presentations for job searches will emphasize job-related skills and competence, whereas those looking for romantic partners will play out to the preferences of these potential partners. These characteristics often correspond to the *ought self*, or how people think they should be in order to be successful in a certain social arena. A particularly important of such characteristics is honesty, as social norms dictate that people are who they appear to be (Goffman, 1959). Self-presenters then face pressures to present themselves in a flattering manner, while not deviating from the truth substantially, or in ways that cannot be justified.

Implementing the desired impression. Once self-presenters have decided precisely how they want to come across to their audience, they need to implement this desired self-presentation—a process which is profoundly affected by the communication medium: self-presentations conveyed in face-to-face settings differ substantially from those conveyed over the telephone or over email.

Generally speaking, the communication medium affects self-presentation in terms of 1) content, or what gets presented; and 2) delivery, or the manner in which the self-presentation is conveyed to the audience. Let us first consider the content of the self-presentation. As mentioned earlier, the key characteristic of face-to-face self-presentation is that it is embodied, meaning that the physical self is directly displayed. By contrast, online self-presentations are disembodied, with self-presenters interacting with others in the absence of the physical self. As a result, information about self-presenters' physical appearance is usually transmitted via photographs or textual self-descriptors (i.e., participants describing their appearance verbally). Some of these descriptors are objective and straightforward, such as

mentioning height, weight, age, eye color, or hair color. However, other descriptors, such as photographs and subjective assessment of one's appearance (e.g., "average build" or "curvy") are malleable and open to interpretation. In fact, an argument can be made that photographs can never portray reality the way we see it with our own eyes, because they are bi-dimensional and generated by technologies that differ from the way our eyes operate (Hancock & Toma, 2009). At their best, photographs can offer viewers an impression of verisimilitude, or a good enough approximation of how the person portrayed in the photograph looks in real life. Photographs are also highly susceptible to manipulation: they can be staged, digitally altered, or simply old (thus depicting a younger version of the self).

More generally, textual statements describing any aspects of the self can be easily altered in order to present a more favorable version of the self. For instance, it is easy to claim a higher salary or a more prestigious occupation without having to prove the veracity of those claims immediately. For this reason, the textual and photographic elements of online self-presentations can be conceptualized as *conventional signals* (Donath, 2007), or statements that are not costly to produce and hence are easy to fake.

An additional issue to consider is the role of technological parameters in dictating the content of online self-presentation. While many online environments do not instruct users on what information to disclose (e.g., discussion boards, personal websites), the majority of profile-based Websites request users to answer a set of pre-determined questions (e.g., height, weight, occupation, income). This may place pressure on users to manage the self-presentation of very personal pieces of information that are not normally disclosed in face-to-face environments (i.e., exact age, weight, income).

Let us now turn our attention to the manner in which self-presentation is conveyed to the audience. According to Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal model of impression formation in computer-mediated environments, online self-presenters may have increased opportunities to control and carefully manage information flow compared to their face-to-face counterparts. This occurs because many online environments offer users a set of affordances that are absent in face-to-face communication:

- *Editability*, or the opportunity to revise one's self-presentation after it has been posted. By contrast, face-to-face self-presenters cannot "take back" an unthoughtful remark or a bad hair day.
- *Asynchronicity*, or the time lag between composing a self-presentation and making it available to others for scrutiny. This allows self-presenters to take as much time as they need to prepare their desired self-presentation. Asynchronicity is an important technological affordance for all profile-based websites, but it may not be available in more interactive environments, such as instant messenger.
- *Redirection of cognitive resources*, or the ability to focus solely on composing the self-presentation, without distractions or interferences. Unlike face-to-face settings, where self-presenters need to be mindful of their environment while delivering their self-presentation,

online users can compose their self-presentations in the privacy of their home, where they do not have to attend to any distracters.

Together, these affordances allow online communicators to engage in *selective self-presentation* (Walther, 2007), a more controlled and optimized version of face-to-face self-presentation. Additionally, the conventional nature of online self-descriptors (both textual and visual) makes it possible for online self-presenters to truly put their best foot forward.

To summarize, this theoretical framework of online self-presentation postulates that online self-presenters are often highly motivated to control how other people see them, because of the publicness and permanence of their self-presentational acts, and because of their ability to achieve important interpersonal goals online, such as finding love, connecting with friends, or seeking jobs. Additionally, highly motivated self-presenters have the opportunity to create flattering self-presentations, which cater to their audiences and draw upon the best aspects of their actual self, and also aspects of their ideal self. Let us now apply this theoretical framework to self-presentation in online dating profiles and summarize current empirical research that provides support for it. To facilitate the presentation of these results, we begin with an overview of the large study we conducted on self-presentation in online dating profiles.

Study Overview

To assess the self-presentational strategies of online daters, we selected a sample of 80 online daters (40 men and 40 women) from the New York City metropolitan area, who subscribed to one of four online dating services: Match.com, Yahoo Personals, American Singles, and Webdate. These services were selected because they were widely popular, catered to mainstream as opposed to niche audiences, and requested subscribers to compose detailed online self-presentations.

Participants were invited to a study of "self-presentation in online dating profiles" through advertisements in a local newspaper, the Village Voice, and on a popular online forum, craigslist.com. Interested online daters were invited to the study if they were heterosexual and over 18 years of age. We also attempted to match participants' age as closely as possible to the age of a national sample of online daters (Fiore, 2004), in order to increase the generalizability of results.

Participants were invited for a research appointment at the New School University in Manhattan. Prior to their arrival, their online dating profile was archived and printed out. The research procedure comprised several steps. First, participants were asked to go through their profiles and rate the accuracy of their statements on each profile element (e.g., age, height, education, occupation, activities, photographs). Participants were also asked to rate the acceptability of lying on each profile element (e.g., "How acceptable is it to lie about age?"). Second, participants' exact deviations from the truth were measured on three profile elements: height, weight, and age. Participants' height was measured using a standard measuring tape; their weight was

measured using a standard scale; and their age was recorded from their driver's licenses. Third, several photographs were taken of each participant: a head shot, a fullbody shot, and a photograph in which participants were asked to replicate the pose of their main profile photograph. Fourth, participants filled out a questionnaire about their online dating experiences and self-presentational tactics. Finally, participants were interviewed about their profile self-presentation. All participants were compensated \$30 each for their time and effort.

After the completion of the study, participants' lab photographs were shown to a group of judges in order to derive (1) measures of the accuracy of profile photographs and (2) measures of daters' overall physical attractiveness. Specifically, to obtain measures of photographic accuracy, participants' lab photograph was shown side-by-side with their profile photograph to a group of judges, who were undergraduate students at Cornell University. Judges were told that the lab photograph represents daters' everyday appearance, and they were instructed to rate the accuracy of the profile photograph compared to the lab photograph. Another group of judges was shown all three photographs that were taken during daters' research appointment (i.e., headshot, fullbody shot, and replica of profile photograph) and were asked to rate each dater's physical attractiveness based on them.

We now apply the theoretical framework of online self-presentation to online dating profiles and provide support for it with the findings from this study, as well as several other relevant studies.

Self-Presentation in Online Dating Profiles

Impression motivation. Consider first online daters' motivation to control their profile self-presentation. The above framework postulates that (1) the basic function of self-presentation is to aid in the fulfillment of personal goals, and (2) self-presenters are more likely to devote time and effort to the creation of their self-presentation the more they value these goals. It goes without saying that the goal of online dating is to establish personal relationships, which many people believe to be the single most important source of personal happiness (Kelley, 1982). Given the importance of establishing romantic relationships, we expect online daters to devote a significant amount of thought to the creation of flattering profiles that can help them succeed in finding a desirable partner.

While all daters are expected to care about their self-presentation because of the importance assigned to romantic relationships in general, an interesting question is whether daters' specific relational goals (i.e., whether they are looking for serious or casual relationships) impact their motivation to control their self-presentation. It can be argued that finding a long-term relationship partner is a more important goal for most people than finding casual dates. Additionally, establishing long-term relationships requires more frequent future interactions than casual relationships. Hence, we expect daters looking for serious relationships to be more motivated to carefully manage their self-presentation. Consistent with

this prediction, the participants in our study who were looking for serious relationships wrote more about themselves in the "about me" section of their profile and reported more of a tendency to alter the profile than those looking for casual relationships. Also, serious-minded daters posted photographs that independent judges deemed more realistic. Given the subjectivity of photographs and the difficulty of selecting photographs that present a realistic view of the self, one possible conclusion is that daters motivated to find serious relationships put more thought into the presentation of their physical appearance. Similarly, Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino (2006) found that online daters seeking long-term relationships engaged in higher levels of self-disclosure in their profiles, disclosed more personal information, and reported making more conscious and intentional disclosures.

Another factor that should influence online daters' motivation to control their self-presentation is publicness. All online dating profiles are, by definition, available for others to scrutinize and this audience is potentially very large. In fact, the number of potential mates who could scrutinize one's personal information in online dating is much larger than in more traditional forms of dating, such as meeting others in a bar or at a party. We then expect this high degree of publicness to increase online daters' motivation to control their self-presentational behaviors.

One interesting aspect of publicness in online dating is that the audience is not only large, but also undifferentiated—that is, in many online dating services, it is impossible to know who exactly views one's profile. A distinct possibility is that the profile might be viewed not just by potential mates, but also by people from one's own social circle. As strategic self-presenters who wish to be perceived positively, online daters should be mindful of this possibility and engage in self-presentational acts that take into account this particular audience. Consistent with this hypothesis, we found that online daters whose friends and acquaintances were aware of their online dating profiles posted photographs that were more accurate. Additionally, participants who posted profile photographs and hence made themselves visually identifiable to anyone who accessed their profile, were generally more accurate about their profile statements, and in particular about their relationship status. In other words, online daters were mindful of their audience and engaged in self-presentational acts meant to maintain their credibility in front of the people who knew them well.

Finally, online daters should be motivated to control their profile self-presentation because the profile is a permanent record of their claims, that can remain posted on the online dating site for an unlimited amount of time. This contrasts with face-to-face self-presentations, which are transitory and leave no tangible "residue." Indeed, the online daters in our sample reported that they often save their dates' profiles with a view to comparing them with information that transpires later on in the relationship.

To summarize, the motivation to engage in impression management should be elevated for online daters, because (1) the purpose of online dating profiles is

to facilitate romantic relationships, which is a valued goal for most people; (2) statements about the self on online dating profiles are available to a large and undifferentiated audience, which includes both potential mates and friends and acquaintances; and (3) the profile stands as a permanent record of self-presentational claims, that can be scrutinized for a long period of time. Having established that the motivation to control one's image is high, what kind of self-presentations do online daters construct?

Impression construction. Recall that image construction processes involve two steps: figuring out what the "desired" image is, and then implementing it. The desired image is based on the self-presenters' self-concept (i.e., how they see themselves), but also incorporates the self-presenters' perceptions of what their target audience values.

Generally speaking, online daters' desired image should be flattering and positive, such that it attracts potential mates, but also realistic, such that it makes it possible to develop and sustain relationships. Indeed, deception can have caratrophic consequences for relationship development because (1) it makes it hard to gauge whether somebody who appears attractive online will also appear attractive in person; and (2) it undermines trust (Whitty & Joinson, 2008). Consistent with these predictions, the participants in our study reported that encountering deception in others' profiles was generally unacceptable, with deception about important relationship parameters, such as relationship status or having children, considered completely unacceptable.

Given the norms against deception in online dating profiles, we expect online daters to draw upon their actual self, or the characteristics they currently possess, when constructing their self-presentation. Indeed, online daters reported that it is important to present their actual self in their profiles because presenting oneself honestly is necessary for relationship development (Whitty, 2008). Similarly, the online daters interviewed by Ellison and colleagues (2006) reported they felt it was necessary to articulate versions of themselves that were grounded in reality, such that future meetings would not be unpleasant or surprising. When asked to report the accuracy of their profiles, the online daters in our sample reported a high degree of accuracy for all profile statements: on a scale from 1 (completely inaccurate) to 5 (completely accurate) all profile elements were rated higher than 4.

It is important to note that presenting one's actual self is not necessarily a simple, uncalculated exercise—in fact, it takes conscious effort to select and display the aspects of one's actual self that one is proud of (see Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Consistent with this, we found that online daters who were judged as physically attractive by a group of independent judges posted more photographs of themselves than their less attractive counterparts, presumably in an effort to showcase their physical attractiveness.

While online daters face pressure to portray themselves accurately in their profiles, they also need to present a version of the self that is attractive and worthy of

pursuit. This may lead them to present aspects of their ideal self—or characteristics that they would like to possess, but do not currently possess. One way to introduce elements of the ideal self without undermining one's credibility is to select aspects of the self that are either attainable in the near future or justifiable in some other way. For instance, the online daters interviewed by Ellison and her colleagues (2006) reported presenting themselves as thinner online because (1) being thinner was part of their ideal self-conceptualization; and (2) they thought they could lose weight before meeting other daters in person, thus eliminating the deception. In fact, presenting a thinner persona in the online profile served as a motivation to lose weight. Similarly, when presenting their "activities" (e.g., hiking, skiing), some online daters reported selecting activities in which they engage sporadically, but which they would like to pursue if they had more time. This presentation of the ideal, but not actual, self is justifiable by the ambiguity of the online profile, which doesn't specify whether the activities are part of daters' current or past routine, or whether the activities are practiced frequently or not.

Another key criterion in constructing online dating self-presentations is catering to the preferences and values of the audience. What exactly do daters look for in potential partners? It is a widely accepted notion that, in addition to idiosyncratic preferences, people generally look for two characteristics in potential partners: physical attractiveness and social status. According to evolutionary psychology, both these characteristics enhance reproductive fitness (i.e., the ability to pass on our genes to the next generation), which is why we have evolved to favor them. Specifically, youth and physical attractiveness serve as an honest indicator of people's health, good genes, and overall mate quality (e.g., Barber, 1995; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Daly & Wilson, 1995; Gangestad & Thornhill, 1997; Symons, 1979), whereas high social status serves as an indicator of ability to provide and protect (Feingold, 1992; Sprecher, 1989; Trivers, 1985).

While physical attractiveness and social status are generally favored, research shows that men tend to prefer physical attractiveness and youth in potential mates as an indicator of fertility, whereas women tend to prefer social status in potential mates as an indicator of ability to provide and protect (Lance, 1998; Woll & Cozby, 1987). A robust body of research provides support for these claims. For example, when composing newspaper personals, women emphasized their physical attractiveness and body shape (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992; Hirschman, 1987; Jager, 2001) and men spent more time seeking information about women's youth and physical appearance (Lynn & Bolig, 1985); richer men tend to pursue more physically attractive women, while women are more attracted to men with higher status occupations (Hirsch, Hortacsu, & Ariely, 2004); attractive people are considered more desirable dating partners, are more popular with the opposite sex, and are able to attract more desirable partners (Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005; Riggo, Widaman, Tucker, & Salinas, 1991; Singh, 2004). We conclude that online

daters' "desired" impression should include youth and physical attractiveness (particularly for women) and high social status (particularly for men).

As strategic self-presenters, we expect online daters to seek to incorporate these desired images into their self-presentation. But does the medium of communication—in this case, the online dating profile—allow them to do so? As discussed earlier, the online environment constitutes an ideal venue for putting one's best foot forward, because it provides communicators with a great degree of control over their self-presentation, much more so than the face-to-face environment (Walther, 2007). Indeed, online profiles are composed under conditions of (1) asynchronicity, meaning that online daters have as much time as they wish to compose their self-presentations; (2) editability, meaning that daters have the opportunity to revise them until they are fully satisfied with them; and (3) reallocation of cognitive resources, meaning that online daters can dedicate their undivided attention to the creation of flattering profiles (much unlike face-to-face daters, who must attend to the conversation and to environmental distracters while trying to come across as desirable to potential mates). Further, the elements of online dating presentation are either purely textual (i.e., online daters verbally describe themselves) or visual (i.e., online daters post photographs to describe their physical appearance) and as such they are very malleable and subject to control. Recall that these elements can be construed as conventional signals (Donath, 2007), because they are quite inexpensive to produce—daters only need to type out their desired self-presentations, or simply upload older photographs that present a more attractive version of the self—and hence very easy to fake. How do online daters take advantage of these affordances to present their desired image of attractiveness but also honesty?

We have already discussed that, generally speaking, online daters reported a high degree of honesty in all of their profile statements. Let us now take a closer look at the presentation of their physical appearance through (1) verbal self-descriptors of height, weight, and age; and (2) photographs. We focus on physical appearance because it is one of the most important criteria of what daters look for in potential partners (Whitry, 2008) and because it is prominently featured by the online dating profile.

Recall that physical attractiveness is a highly prized asset in the dating world, particularly for women, and that the online environment enables daters to present an optimized version of themselves. As a result, a full 81% of the daters in our sample misrepresented their height, weight, or age. Although frequent, these misrepresentations were small in magnitude: on average, height deviations were about 0.77 inches, with actual height ranging from 3 inches taller to 1.75 inches shorter than profile statements; weight deviations were about 9 lbs, ranging from 35 lbs heavier to 20 lbs lighter than reported in profile; and age deviations were about half a year, with real age ranging from 3 years younger to 9 years older than what was reported in the profile. It can be argued that while these deviations presented a slightly more flattering version of the self, they were small enough not to be de-

rected in face-to-face meetings. Interestingly, the element that was most frequently misrepresented was weight, with about two thirds of the participants presenting inaccurate weight measurements. Compared to height and age, lying about one's weight is more justifiable because (1) one can claim ignorance about one's precise weight, but not about one's age or height; and (2) weight can be adjusted to match profile statements, by either losing or gaining weight, whereas this adjustment is impossible for height or age. Lies about height and weight were also tailored to the preferences of the opposite gender: men lied more about their height, given that women prefer taller men (as an indicator of high status), and women lied more about their weight, given that men prefer thinner women. Importantly, the magnitude of these lies was tailored to online daters' actual need to self-enhance: less attractive daters lied more about these indicators than attractive daters, presumably in an effort to boost their perceived attractiveness. Together, these data suggest that online daters lied strategically in the verbal description of their physical appearance: they deviated from the truth just enough to present a slightly more favorable version of the self without appearing dishonest, they catered to the preferences of their audience, and they compensated for specific shortcomings, such as lack of attractiveness.

The same strategic approach to self-presentation was observed in the depiction of the physical self through photographs. Because physical attractiveness is a more valued characteristic of women than of men, women posted more photographs than men (an average of about four compared to an average of about two), presumably in an attempt to display their physical self, and they also engaged in more photographic self-enhancement. Specifically, women's profile photographs were rated as more attractive than their everyday photographs (taken in the lab), while this was not the case for men. Women's photographs were also perceived as less accurate than men's. A group of coders identified the specific discrepancies between daters' everyday photographs and the photographs they had posted on their profiles. These discrepancies referred to physical characteristics, such as age, hair, skin, or photographic processes, such as retouching or hiring a professional photographer. Results show that (1) women's photographs tended to be retouched or professionally taken more so than men's, (2) women's photographs contained more discrepancies related to physical characteristics, such as age, hairstyle, and skin, than men's photographs, and (3) women's photographs contained, on average, more discrepancies than men's. Also noteworthy is that women posted older photographs (about 17 months) than men (about 6 months), thus displaying younger and potentially more attractive versions of themselves. Given that photography is a subjective and elastic medium that can be easily manipulated, we conclude that women strategically manipulated the presentation of their physical self through photographs such that they cater to men's preferences towards youth and physical attractiveness.

Another important finding regarding the accuracy of photographs is that less attractive daters engaged in more photographic self-enhancement than their more

attractive counterparts, with unattractive women posting the least accurate photographs. Again, this underscores the strategic aspect of self-presentation, where online daters take into account their own strengths and weaknesses and use deception as a resource to create more flattering self-presentations that are tailored to the preferences of their audiences.

Conclusion

This chapter introduces a theoretical framework for online self-presentation that considers both the motivation to engage in image management and the actual construction of this image, given the affordances and limitations of the communication medium. We then apply this theoretical framework to self-presentation in online dating profiles and provide empirical support for it by reviewing several studies on this topic.

Online dating self-presentation is different from face-to-face self-presentation in that it requires the disclosure of a wealth of very private information, but it also gives self-presenters a broad arsenal of tools to control these disclosures. Highly motivated to create favorable impressions, online daters appear to handle this situation by taking advantage of the affordances of the online world to put their best foot forward. Results show that online daters are highly strategic in their self-presentational choices: the profile presents a version of daters' actual self that is slightly improved through small and strategically placed deceptions. These deceptions cater to the specific preferences of potential mates, such as men's preference for thin women and women's preference for tall men, and also are meant to redress daters' shortcomings, such as reduced physical attractiveness.

It can be argued that this kind of highly controlled self-presentation is only possible in computer-mediated environments. For instance, traditional daters only have limited options for enhancing their attractiveness: wearing flattering clothes, having their makeup and hair professionally done, or wearing a nice perfume. They also have to be highly spontaneous in order to make the best impressions during conversation. In the online environment, however, daters have a wide array of tools for boosting their attractiveness: selecting the most flattering photographs out of large repositories of photographs accumulated over the years, hiring professional photographers or retouching their photographs, laboring for days or weeks over their self-descriptions, or even asking for friends' help to compose the most flattering profile.

Because of these increased opportunities for selective self-presentation, the online environment may raise questions about users' behaviors that couldn't be examined in face-to-face environments (see also Walther, Gay, & Hancock, 2005). For instance, when given such liberty to take license with the truth, how do online self-presenters manage their images? We find that online daters do not lie discriminately, simply because they can, but rather that they use deceptions strategically in order to accomplish their face-to-face goals. This is consistent with self-

presentational tactics used in face-to-face environments (see Leary & Kowalski, 1990), where people also use deception cautiously and make an effort to present themselves both positively and accurately. We conclude that, even though the online environment is barely a few decades old, users' behavior in it can be predicted in systematic ways by relational goals and preferences that have been hard-wired through millennia of evolution.

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