

**Writing to Meet Your Match:
Rhetoric, Perceptions, and Self-Presentation for Four Online Daters**

Unlike other forms of match making and dating, internet dating involves producing and consuming a great deal of written text about each other, both asynchronously and synchronously, before meeting face-to-face (f2f). While attractive photographs are undeniably more likely to elicit positive inquiries from members, internet dating is primarily writing-based, whether involving phrasing that is selected from a menu of options written by the service provider or by the members themselves. On the one hand, for members interested in substantive discursive interactions beyond the visual texts, relationship-building depends on clear and vigorous writing. In fact, some internet dating services require members to follow a series of steps involving questionnaires, self-descriptions, and short narratives before proceeding to direct communications with other members. On the other hand, less rhetorically educated or standard English fluent individuals may rely primarily on visual texts to initiate contact with members, insisting on telephone conversation or f2f meeting straight away. In both cases, members are part of the rhetorical and social processes as they navigate through the ever-fluid communications of information exchange, self-representation, compatibility assessment, and relationship building. As daters perceive attraction, compatibility and/or developing intimacy, they move closer to meeting face-to-face, which can happen after hours, days, weeks, or months, depending on the daters' sense of security and goals.

In particular, this essay focuses on individuals' perceptions and self-reporting of how they adapt their identity constructions, writing strategies, and interpersonal dynamics to their various audiences and relationship goals. In this case study of four participants, a range of approaches to internet dating emerge, revealing how members conceive of their priorities, personal values, and dating goals to which they strategize their compositions of mutual self-disclosure. This project has been an opportunity to get "behind the scenes" with four independent and adventurous individuals as they pursue love, sex, and/or companionship with the help of dating services, which provide the online forum for presenting an identity and communications with other singles. Through a twenty-one-prompt questionnaire and a follow up 90-minute interview, I asked four participants (Juliet, Juan, Luke, and Kate—all fictional names) to discuss their processes of electronic communication, expressing commitments to and responsibilities for self-

reflection, self-representation, and interactions with those whom they form relationships online. This essay draws connections between what participants express about their underlying motivations, personal values, relationship goals, communicative strategies, and sense of satisfaction during the rhetorically challenging process, designed to move from online to f2f interaction.

While not intending to make any of the participating four individuals represent a demographic group, I selected the four online daters to form a case study and utilize their articulate preconceptions and self-reflections, varied relationship goals, and extensive internet dating experiences. Certainly, their academic educations enable their competent literacy online and rhetorical sophistication, meaning they exhibit the ability to be purposeful about their use of language in professional as well as social contexts to achieve desired goals. My choosing these participants resulted in excluding those who could not articulate their experiences elaborately, indicating less discursive oriented and/or with less education, factors that impact dating approaches, communications, and relationships, which I've mentioned briefly in the introduction and will address more specifically in discussions about each participant.

By email, I disseminated the following questionnaire and received the responses:

Online Dating: Web Text Writing, E-Communications, and Relationship Initiation

Name: _____ Age: _____ Sex: M/F Education: B, M, Ph.D.

- 1) What made you decide to start using an online dating service?
- 2) How long have you been using an online dating service?
- 3) How many online dating services are you using?
- 4) What have been your goals for using an online dating service—both ideal scenario and minimum expectations?
- 5) What are your feelings and attitudes about the process of online dating?
- 6) What features of your profile did you want to emphasize or complete with the greatest care and why? (pre-selected personality trait choices, photo, stats, narrative, handle and headline)
- 7) How was your profile designed to help you get a response from your ideal match? Strategies? Information? Style?
- 8) What reasoning made you decide to include or exclude a photo of yourself in your profile? Do you think this inclusion or exclusion has helped you initiate communication and relationships with your ideal match type user? Why/why not?
- 9) How would you describe your online dating persona—the personality you project in your profile? In your e-communications with other users? What shows this?
- 10) How do you think your online dating persona is being interpreted by users in general? By ideal match types? What makes you say so?
- 11) What do you think your profile illustrates to others about who you are? How?
- 12) Critique your profile. What are its strengths and weaknesses? What makes you seem attractive or unattractive to others in terms of relationship initiation?
- 13) When responding to a profile, what are your goals?

- 14) When responding to a profile, what strategies do you use?
- 15) Describe what would be a comfortable online dating process of communication and relationship initiation.
- 16) Describe what would be an uncomfortable online dating process of communication and relationship initiation.
- 17) What aspects of writing did you feel you needed to develop to be more effective and more comfortable with online dating?
- 18) What aspects of computer literacy did you feel you needed to develop to be more effective and more comfortable with online dating?
- 19) How successful do you feel you have been with online dating? Please explain.
- 20) How effective do you think online dating services are at helping you meet your ideal matches? Strengths? Weaknesses?
- 21) Are you still dating online? If not, why? If yes, what do you plan to do with and expect from online dating services?

Then, for at least 90 minutes, I interviewed each participant in person to follow up on responses related to presenting their personalities and relationship goals, as those two factors appeared most prominently in the participants' questionnaire responses. In turn, interviews focused on identifying ways that individuals balance self-disclosure with strategies for producing profiles and correspondences designed to elicit responses from targeted members. Then, three years later, I emailed each of them to follow up on their experiences, relationships, discoveries, and self-assessments. However, a limitation of this approach to studying the composing processes of these four individuals is also its strength: participants' self-reporting of personal perspectives and goals. As discussed earlier, self-concepts can be inaccurate, and evaluations are relative to the individual. For example, Luke finds that going out on one date in a week is a "slow week," while Juliet would consider that to be a successful week. Another example, while Juan finds that a member who wants to "hook up" is responding honestly and appropriately, Kate finds such offers to be offensive or too superficial. Finally, Luke generally initiates meeting face to face by the third email exchange, while Juliet delays face to face meetings until she feels comfortable with the person, which could take weeks. However, their distinct goals, styles of interaction, generational dispositions, gender roles, cultural values and perspectives, and comfort zones with strangers reflect the rich diversity that exists across internet dating services and members. In order to learn from this spectrum of daters, I had to hold my own value judgments in check and offer fair, substantive comments and assessments of communication influences, practices, patterns, and effectiveness.

Discussions With the Case Participants

One participant, whom I will call Luke, is a white male, 33-years of age, a technical writer and correspondent journalist from Northeastern Pennsylvania, and just a few courses shy of a bachelor's degree. He has six years of experience with internet dating from social chat rooms and the early inceptions of dating services as they've evolved--Match.Com with the occasional use of Yahoo Personals and Nerve Personals. With casual sexual encounters and short-term relationships in mind, Luke admits to using strategic, selective self-representation profile writing to attract particular types of target members to secure a positive impression and desired response. Since he is not "in it for the long haul", Luke is not concerned about being dishonest, deceptive, or even manipulative to get what he wants.

For Luke, internet dating has enabled him to meet partners for casual encounters and short-term relationships. Since the project started, Luke has changed jobs, moved to another state, makes the "six figures" he had once lied about, and continues to date casually, using internet dating services such as Match.com with more responses to his profile than he can follow up on. After about 10 years of internet dating, Luke reports having met about 287 women, primarily from Match.com, and his profile writing style has evolved to a greater sophistication. When I commented to Luke about his profile narrative being really funny but with subtle, difficult-to-detect sarcasm, he responded:

Which is perfect since it's a fantastic filter. I only get people who Get It--advanced critical thinking skills. With a sincere narrative, I get so much silly crap. But now I get people who are bellychucklers. I get about two or three emails a day.

With the increase in membership, Luke no longer strives for the greatest number of responses, which is overwhelming to manage. In fact, he does not respond to all emails. Instead, he is successfully targeting his profile to a type of woman who shares his sharp, witty sarcasm.

A second participant, whom I'll call Juan, is a 24-year old native Central American gay man who identifies fully with his Latino heritage and citizenship, speaking English as a second language since he immigrated to the United States when he was 6 years of age. Raised in New York City, Juan left his abusive home at the age of 15 and struggled to earn a living, working full-time as he completed his high school education with an honors diploma and a college scholarship. When I asked him about his

relationship goals with internet dating, he said that they “varied from just being able to find a sexually compatible and appealing person, to the potential of finding a partner or at least a good friend. So I am looking for fun, but open to whatever may develop.” Since his relationship goals are mixed, he has different profiles to serve those needs.

Since this case study research began, 3 years have passed. For Juan, internet dating enabled him to meet casual sexual partners and friends. He has been in a long-term relationship for over two years with a man he met through work, but he describes them as having an “open relationship”, which means that each is free to have casual sexual encounters. After they moved to a new large city, Juan had to make new friends, become familiar with the city and its resources, and discover social opportunities. In order to meet casual partners, Juan explains how internet dating is useful:

You have the potential of partner sorting in a much faster rate than by old conventional means. Right away, you can classify what you are looking for, what you expect and what you won't compromise in. Whether this be looks, profession, interest, sexual fetishes, political leaning and culture, with a click of a mouse you can eliminate what would be countless hours of dating and casual conversation in order to get to the right match.

As he explains, internet dating has been instrumental for creating a more efficient and focused search process for meeting his relational goals. Juan still feels overall positive about “the potential for many happy matches to be made over the Internet, be it just a one-night stand or a relationship. But by far, it requires time to use it correctly and patience to avoid giving up due to rejection.” With the “heavy workload” of sorting through profiles, Juan’s experiences of internet dating have taught him that it is a dating forum and tool that require understanding, acculturation, and strategic use in order to achieve relationship success, regardless of the type one is seeking.

The third participant, whom I call Kate, is a 30 year old recent divorcee with ethnic roots in the former Soviet Union with a Ph. D in Rhetoric in the Humanities. With extensive education in visual and information rhetorics, Kate has gone into a related occupation in software and web tech support. Obviously, Kate has very high computer literacy with regard to graphics design and editing and web page construction, which is why she began her memberships with internet dating services: “I really embraced the opportunity to apply my research skills to finding suitable men to date--without the influence of

physical chemistry or alcohol that happens in person at bars or parties. . . . I just wanted to make wiser choices about finding dates and to really think about compatibility.” Kate’s response reflects her desire to use her education in rhetoric and composition to achieve her social goals, taking advantage of the reading and writing components for constructing her persona, expressing what she wants, getting to know a man, and assessing his suitability for a long-term relationship. For Kate, internet dating was a forum for meeting a life partner. About 2 years after joining three internet dating services as an active member, Kate met a man online and has since married him. When I asked Kate what she felt were her secrets to success, she explained in an email:

I think it’s a few things. Perseverance helps--the fact that I was willing to ‘get back on the horse’ after many dates with different people that ended in some disappointment or anger or rejection. I read communications carefully, between the lines, to get a sense of the person, watching for inconsistencies. And I write specifically and attentively for each person and each moment so that I was conveying information deliberately in the way I wanted it to be interpreted by the other person.

While she suggests using caution with any stranger, she recommends internet dating to her single friends as she knows that she wouldn’t have found “her man” if it weren’t for these online services to give her access to these members outside of her professional and social circles.

The last participant, whom I’ll call Juliet, is a retired 62 year old white female, born and raised in Eastern Europe, moved to Southern California when she was in her early twenties, earned a bachelor’s degree in the US, and completed 30 years of graphic design experience in the field. A mother, divorcee, and highly cultured woman, Juliet volunteers at a museum and has a high degree of computer literacy but a lower level of literacy and fluency in English than in her native language. Her overriding need to keep tensions to a minimum shapes her coy tactics for information inquiry, building empathic relationships with men online that maintain conventionally polite interaction with strangers but do not get at those sensitive issues that concern her. In her questionnaire response, she expresses being skeptical about meeting the right person for her but remains hopeful that she may meet her ideal: “an educated, professional man who likes to travel with a long-term partner”.

For Juliet, internet dating could have been a way to meet long-term relationship partners. After a couple of years, Juliet decides that internet dating is not working for her. Why was Juliet unsuccessful?

Although the goals and strategies vary, Juan, Luke, and Kate have had successful experiences with internet dating, meaning that they've accomplished what they set out to do. Since the number of older members is much lower than the younger ones, Juliet has a disadvantage. Related to the age issue, older members hold more attitudes of suspicion than younger ones do toward the new technology of the Internet, attitudes which seem to have been prohibitive to her success at times. For example, Juliet made only a few inconsequential changes to her profile over the three years that she posted an ad online. Contrastively, Kate, who is more rhetorically sophisticated with communication technologies, frequently made substantive changes of clarification, elaboration, and revision of content in response to her experiences as well as solicited feedback from others. Furthermore, Juliet felt stigmatized as an internet dating service member while Kate was more comfortable with it and vocal about her participation, enabling the exchange of ideas that strengthened the focus of her purposeful writing.

In addition, Juliet has a strong cultural identification with her heritage, having come to the U.S. after her formative years. How her upbringing and cultural make-up might have produced an outsider identity is unclear and beyond the scope of this study. However, her especially formal English language training does distinguish her word choice and articulation of feelings, insights, and past experiences from average Americans, even immigrants. Unlike Juan, who can meet countless Latinos, Juliet would be far less likely to meet others who share her cultural perspective, especially in the ways it has evolved with her American adult life experiences. While the ways her peer men online relate to this aspect of her persona is again beyond my knowledge here, but, certainly, nationality impacts identity constructions and relationship formations. For example, Juliet did not initiate contact with men, only responded to their replies to her profile, which related to her social role as a woman needing to wait for men to approach her. In contrast, Kate initiated contact with men routinely—in fact, with the man she ended up marrying. Logically, the more one interacts online, the greater the chances of success. However, Juliet is not comfortable initiating contact, which means she will have fewer opportunities to meet men online and, later, in person. Finally, Juliet is reserved about asking personal questions as well as disclosing personal information with others, which can negatively affect intimacy formation online—appearing too rigid or

indistinguishable as a person. After some attempts at finding suitable dates, Juliet has given up on internet dating to continue with “being in the right place at the right time” types of chance encounters.

Some Conclusions

Three of the four participants found what they were striving for online. For three of them, their strategies were, rhetorically speaking, reasonable choices for their relationship purposes and target audiences within the context of their specific online dating sites; however, for one participant, that was not the case. Indeed, individuals need to develop a rhetorical perspective of themselves to better see themselves as others see them. Also, it's important to recognize how individuals are constructing their identities and discover ways they can fine tune their profiles in order to purposefully communicate with others. Achieving this rhetorical awareness requires inquiry, communication with others, and solicitation of informative feedback. Other significant ingredients are a desire to learn where to locate and effectively use resources and the impetus to apply the strategies in writing internet dating communications, linking relationship and writing goals with appropriate communications. Another factor is degree of activity, meaning the frequency of updating their profiles, writing initiating emails to members' profiles, responding to other members' emails, and being available for f2f meetings. To some degree, the “numbers game” is true. Logically, the more individuals one contacts and interacts with, the more individuals learn about themselves and others while also increasing the change of meeting a match. This point also suggests a certain disposition of openness to the process of communicating with other members that is not restrained by generalized skepticism about all members being dishonest, predatory, or socially dysfunctional. As evident in the reports made by the case study participants, more attempts enable more positive experiences. Further, positive experiences lead to positive attitudes and to greater satisfaction with internet dating in general as well as with specifically personal success (Gibbs, et. al., 2006). The more developed their rhetorical awareness and skills are, the more able they are to facilitate meeting compatible members who satisfy their relationship goals. Among my participants, the most sophisticated rhetoricians have the greatest satisfaction and perceived success with the process. Conversely, the less rhetorically aware and skillful daters feel less successful and less satisfied.