SCRIPTS FOR ONLINE DATING: A MODEL AND THEORY OF ONLINE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP INITIATION

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined online dating practices by exploring the process and scripts for online
dating from both sites and site members. The purpose was to uncover how online daters and
sites were responsible for changes from more traditional dating scripts, and to add to Script
Theory and Social Information Processing Theory. Ethnographic content analysis of online
dating sites and in-depth interviews with online daters were conducted to develop a Model for
Online Dating and Online Romantic Initiation Theory. The model presented in this study
demonstrated how scripts in the online dating process were reciprocal and how the different
levels of scripts worked together. This study also added to knowledge of contemporary
courtship and decision-making in terms of love styles, shopping lists, elimination strategies and
how singles relate to others.
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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

In contemporary popular culture, romance is one of the most common themes seen across various media genres. Stories based on dating that include personal narratives demonstrate the intense focus on being part of a romantic relationship. When we examine these personal narratives about love and romance, there seems to be a sustained interest placed on couple-hood (Paasonen, 2007). With the focus on romantic relationships, alternative dating has become more popular as global trends, such as busier work schedules, leave less time for meeting potential partners (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). According to Online Dating Magazine, about 20 million people visit one or more dating websites per month and the online dating industry was projected to have earned $642 million in 2008 (Online Dating Magazine Center, 2008). This amount was up from $40 million in 2001 (Epstein, 2007). In 2008, 15,246 Internet users completed an online survey that revealed 56.2% had logged on to at least one dating site (Lever Grov, Royce, & Gillespie, 2008). This shows online dating has increased in popularity (Rosen Cheever, Cummings, & Felt, 2008) and deserves scholarly attention.

Importance

The idea of meeting a romantic partner through a personal advertisement is not a new one. Personal advertisements in newspapers and magazines have been around for decades. In fact, one study examined personal advertisements in the New York Review of Books starting in 1970 (Hollander, 2004). Hollander (2004) notes it is ironic that people are seeking romantic compatibility in an unromantic way but still “personals are steeped in an age-old romanticism and nurtured by the cultural values of the 60s” (p. 75). These personal advertisements generally follow a script for presenting oneself (Coupland, 2000). With the increased availability and
popularity of the Internet, it is no wonder that the search for romance via personal advertisements has spread there as well.

Online dating can be defined as “a purposeful form of meeting new people through specifically designed Internet sites,” which allows people to post profiles, browse other profiles, and send messages to and communicate with others (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008, p. 149). The focus here is on online interaction that leads to offline contact between two adults in a one-on-one setting. While relationships are only being *initiated* online, both the members and sites themselves continue to refer to the practice as *online dating*. Thus, despite the actual practice of *initiating* relationships online, I will continue to use the shared term of online dating.

Online dating sites are prevalent and members engage in practices of impression management (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006), establishing trust (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006), creating authenticity (Hardey, 2004), strategizing (Kambara, 2005), and dealing with issues of commitment (Rabby, 2007). This is important because these are relational processes that influence intimate relationships. Further, online dating has received increasing interest at academic conferences and has drawn both scholarly and lay audience attention. For instance, there were several papers and panels at the National Communication Association convention about online dating in the past few years and *The New York Times* recently published an article about the perception of online daters in profile pictures (Wortham, 2010). My research will contribute to the dialogue about online dating and inform theory about potential changes in dating norms, which could shed light on major cultural scripts. My focus is on the process of initiating romantic relationships using dating sites starting with the decision to join a site and ending with the first offline meeting.
Online dating sites present users with an interface in which to meet and interact with other online date seekers. In addition, the sites provide guidelines and tips for being a successful dater, including tools like personality and love styles quizzes. By including specific criteria in he or she’s profile-creation checkboxes, users are likely to create expectations for specific qualities in a partner as well. As Fiore and Donath (2004) noted:

The design of social systems influences the beliefs and behavior of their users; the features of a person that Match.com [an online dating site] presents as salient to romance will begin to have some psychological and cultural influence if 40 million Americans view them every month. This influence exerts itself most strongly on the users themselves, but it also spreads into the general population. (p. 1)

The increased popularity of online dating has spawned the birth of companies hoping to capitalize on the popularity and the money-making potential. GeneParnter.com, a Swiss company, claims it can provide dating site members with a perfect match using a sample of DNA for $199 (Mohammad, 2008). The company works with other dating sites, not as a stand-alone site, offering its service as an additional matching tool. Companies have also formed to help serve as advisors for dating, such as personaltrainer.com or datingcoach.ca, to help with creating online profiles and offering practice dates (Marley, 2004). Membership fees for fee-based services range from $25 to $60 per month (CR’s Guide to Online Dating Sites, 2006) and a considerable number of singles look for dates and/or romance online. The online dating world is not limited to 40-somethings as it once was (Valkenburg & Peter, 2005). Newer sites such as Yahoo! Personals and Plentyoffish.com are becoming more popular. Online dating is popular because proximity is not important, the Internet makes it easier to meet similar people, and sites can be accessed frequently (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Further, as summarized by Whitty and
Carr (2006), online dating will continue to increase in popularity because of the increase in the single population, time demands placed on individuals by careers, and singles being more mobile in their jobs.

Online dating frequently leads to committed romantic relationships. Of 6,226 online daters who had posted a profile, 16.4% of heterosexual men and 28.6% of heterosexual women reported either being in a committed relationship or married to someone met through online personals (Lever et al., 2008). Another 14.8% of heterosexual men and 18.2% of heterosexual women reported one or more online dating matches led to a dating relationship lasting longer than four months. Additionally, 20.7% of gay men and 37.8% of lesbian women reported being either married to or in a committed relationship with someone met through online personals (Lever et al., 2008). Thus, online daters are frequently able to develop committed relationships offline.

There are differences between people meeting offline (Merkle & Richardson, 2000) or in other online spaces and online dating sites (McKenna, 2007). The motivation of people to participate in online dating, which is usually to find a partner, the way in which the other person is selected and contacted, the length of time interacting online before talking on the phone or meeting in person, and topics discussed are some ways these types of dating differ (McKenna, 2007). There is limited research on the interplay of romantic relationships and technology and studying online dating will add to this literature gap.

This study also provides insight into who is dating online, how online daters manage identities as online daters, and how they use or do not use the dating advice articles provided to them through the sites. This online dating study also has implications for our knowledge of
contemporary courtship and decision making in terms of love styles, gender roles, decision-making strategies, and how singles are relating to others.

Statement of Problem

Online dating has recently received more scholarly attention, but theoretical studies have been limited (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Some researchers have examined the people who are likely to date online (Valkenburg & Peter, 2005), how individuals manage self-presentation processes in online dating sites (Ellison et al., 2006), the social construction of online dating (Kambara, 2005), reasons for joining online dating sites (Houran, Lange, Renfrew, & Bruckner, 2004), and choosing partners (Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2005). However, less has been done to study the scripts for online dating as they compare to traditional dating scripts and how these scripts are (re)created by the interaction of daters and the sites.

Henry-Waring and Barraket (2008) assert that the convergence of globalization, information and communication technologies, and personal and intimate relationships will potentially change how we communicate and date. As Fiore and Donath (2004) argue, if millions of users are logging on to online dating sites each month, the features of a person the sites make salient will begin to influence users. The process, and therefore the scripts, for online dating differ from traditional dating (Rosen et al., 2008). Because people are first meeting online and then moving their relationships offline, current theories specifically focused on either online or offline relationships are challenged (Ellison et al., 2006). Further, Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) assert that because online dating both creates and reinforces old courtship patterns (such as daters have a list of desirable criteria in a partner but discover them in different ways), more research and better theories are needed for modern dating. Online dating is a valuable site for relational research because
the Internet, where potential daters have an opportunity to express preferences or disqualify candidates with undesirable traits, provides a helpful tallying tool for researchers interested in studying which social characteristics remain important screeners for homogamy in contemporary courtship. (Lever et al., 2008, p. 244)

Perspective on Technology

There are several conceptualizations about how researchers view and approach technology, technological changes, and its effects. As approaches vary, I will explain why some perspectives are unfitting and why the perspective I take is appropriate. The first potential conceptualization is that of technological determinism, which is summarized by Slack and Wise (2005) as the “belief that the technical base of a society is the fundamental condition affecting all patterns of social existence… and technological change is the single most important source of change in society” (p. 43). Essentially this perspective holds technology causes effects and these effects then cause cultural change. If this perspective were taken, online dating could be seen as being introduced by website designers whose design affects users in such a way that they cannot help but change how they relate, and consequently the nature of the way they relate is changed. If so, the way online dating sites were created would cause change in the way individuals relate. However, this perspective does not into consideration take the users’ or social aspects of technology or the cultural predisposition of the online daters.

Slack and Wise (2005) presented alternative ways of viewing causal changes and technology. The first is a mechanistic perspective on causality, which assumes technologies are isolatable and discreet things, technologies are the cause of change in society, technologies are autonomous in origin and action, and culture is made up of autonomous elements (Slack & Wise, 2005). Taking this perspective in the online dating case would assume online dating sites were
introduced from somewhere outside culture. As Slack and Wise (2005) assert, viewing technology as autonomous leads us to believe technology “…does not need culture to do what it does…” and “members of the culture upon which it acts are virtually helpless in the face of this enormous, autonomous force” (p. 104). Again, following these assumptions for online dating would mean online dating sites exist apart from the online daters and users have no choice in their usage. The users of online dating sites engage them in their own ways and the sites are adapted to fit these needs. Therefore this perspective is not appropriate either.

An opposing perspective presented by Slack and Wise (2005) is soft determinism, which implies every technology has an origin in human actions and searches for the “original causal agent in a chain of causality” (original italics, p. 108). Soft determinism still, however, believes the technology has a life of its own. Thus, soft determinists would say online dating sites were created because of an innate need to find a suitable partner and other options were less desirable, but online dating sites still happen to members. While the dating sites were created to assist daters, the sites do not just happen to members. Rather the site member interacts with the technology and their use influences the sites. This perspective is more appropriate than the others, but still does not touch on the reciprocal relationship of the technology and personal use.

The last approach explained is the nonmechanistic perspective of causality. This perspective assumes the following: (a) technology is not autonomous, but is integrally connected to the context within which it is developed and used; (b) culture is made up of connections; and (c) technologies arise within these connections as part of them and as effective within them (Slack & Wise, 2005, p. 109). For online dating, the sites would not exist without the members and the sites are integrally connected with the members. The culture of the online dating community is connected to the sites themselves and the community of daters.
Within this perspective lies an alternate explanation of causality: articulation and assemblage. Articulation and assemblage assume: “that technology is not autonomous, but is integrally connected to the context within which it is developed and used; that culture is made up of such connections; and that technologies arise within these connections as part of them and as effective within them” (Slack & Wise, 2005, p. 112). Culture can be understood as made up of articulations, which are interconnections of elements, connections, and relationships and make some things possible while others are not possible. Assemblages are the “webs” of articulations, much like a context. When following this perspective, the important task then becomes mapping the assemblage (or context) “…within which different uses and effects are both possible and effective” (Slack & Wise, 2005, p. 113).

For online dating, there are assemblages of meanings, documents, and norms. Thus, a cultural assemblage produces a technology (such as an online dating site) and then uses it in “…particular, contingent ways with particular, contingent effects” (p. 113). In the online dating case, sites were created within a particular assemblage for the need of meeting potential partners. Then, the online dating sites are used in particular ways and have particular effects. The online dating process is more a part of the members’ usage, not separate from it. Ergo, the online dating experience is a reciprocal one between the dating sites and the members themselves. Online dating is part of the culture, then, not separate from it and online daters are part of that culture. This means site members play a role in developing the technology, deciding how the technology will be used, and what effects it has on users. This is the perspective taken in this paper because it most accurately explains the connection of online dating sites and their members.
Purpose of Study

Online dating is increasingly popular and expected to continue to increase due to the changes in culture. Online daters are part of the online dating process and as such, the nature of the way people relate is being changed. Traditional scripts for dating may be changing because the ways people meet and self-disclose are different online. Online dating sites, materials provided to users, and the users themselves are creating new scripts for dating - one that emphasizes a proactive approach to dating with a multitude of choices of partners. Thus, the proposed study will examine online dating practices by examining the process and scripts for online dating from both users of the sites and information provided by the sites. The purpose is to uncover how daters and sites are responsible for changes from more traditional dating scripts and to add to Script theory in order to find a more fitting explanation of how individuals romantically relate to one another. If online dating has different scripts from traditional dating, how are members of sites and online dating sites working together to (re)create scripts for dating and how is this process transactional?

Methodological Choices

Both the online dating sites and the members of the site are responsible for the creation, use, and effects of the online dating process. Therefore, it is necessary to explore both sites of research: online dating sites, through the interface and materials provided to users, and the daters themselves in a mixed model design. As Newman, Ridenour, Newman, and Demarco (2003) assert, the research purpose should guide methods choices, and because the research purpose is complex, using a mixed model design is appropriate. By using complementary models, inferences drawn will provide a more holistic view (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003a) of the online dating process and script formation.
Ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1996) of online dating sites will allow for a comprehensive understanding of the online dating site interface and messages being sent to users. It will also allow for examination of cultural scripts being presented to users. Additionally, conducting in-depth (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) interviews with online daters will provide information about the process of online dating, the interaction users have with the interface, and intrapsychic and interpersonal dating scripts. Interviews will also allow for examination of how both the sites and users are responsible for developing a new way of meeting and interacting with potential partners and how dating scripts may be changing. A grounded theory approach will be taken to formulate an appropriate theory of online dating processes (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory methods, according to Charmaz (2006), “consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (p. 2).

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the study. The importance of the study was demonstrated and the statement of problem presented. The nonmechanistic perspective of causality for technology was explained, as well as why I am taking this particular perspective. Lastly, the purpose of the study and methodological choices were illustrated. The next chapter will review pertinent literature for the current study.
CHAPTER 2:
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews pertinent literature related to dating scripts in online dating. The first section explains Social Information Processing Theory and Hyperpersonal Communication, as well as the reason for viewing online dating from a scripting approach in this study. The second section more thoroughly explains Script Theory and how it applies to online dating. The third section reviews past studies of dating scripts to show how cultural and interpersonal scripts interact in the dating process and how traditional dating scripts differ from online dating. The fourth section discusses past studies on dating advice and scripts presented in media to demonstrate how online dating sites provide cultural scripts for dating. The fifth section reviews literature on romantically themed media to explain how online dating site messages can impact site users. The sixth section discusses in detail the processes of online dating including history, background, who is dating online, how a profile is created, how matches are found and profiles are navigated, concerns about deception, and finally making contact with a potential partner. Finally, research questions are posed.

Before beginning, however, I provide a brief overview of the online dating process and general scripts, including the structure of the sites and information needed to create a profile. This information is presented here to provide a context for the remainder of the chapter. Once date seekers decide to join a site, they create a profile. Typically a profile includes a photo or photos in addition to information about the date seeker including age, location, interests, what he or she is seeking in a partner, smoking and drinking habits, education, careers, a user name, and a body description. Figure 1 shows a sample of one of my profiles. Then, date seekers are either paired with other site members or can search the site for potential partners. Figure 2 shows the
search box on Match.com. Date seekers enter desired criteria including sex, age, and geographical location and there are options for advanced searching. Next, date seekers view profiles of potential partners and can initiate communication by sending a message of interest. If sites are fee-based, date seekers must pay before having further contact. Messages are sent through the site, not personal email addresses. Participants can then share personal contact information and move the relationship off the site or offline.

Figure 1. My Profile on Match.com
Social Information Processing Theory and Hyperpersonal Communication

Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) developed by Walther (2008) offered a framework to begin studying online dating. SIPT explains how people get to know one another online without nonverbal cues. Essentially, if people are unable to obtain nonverbal cues, they do so in other ways, such as through writing and language. While cues are available, the rate at which information is exchanged is slower than face-to-face exchanges. Thus, it is possible to develop satisfying relationships online by using the cues available in computer-mediated communication (CM; it just may take longer to happen. SIPT has been used by researchers studying relational communication in discussion groups (Ramirez, Zhang, McGrew, & Lin, 2007), online dating in Japan (Farrer & Gavin, 2009), impression management in online dating (Ellison et al., 2006), and other mediated contexts (e.g., Ramirez, 2007). SIPT is applicable for those relationships developed online; however, online dating sites are used more for meeting
people to form a relationship offline. Regardless, researchers have used SIPT to study online dating previously. While SIPT is useful for explaining how relationships develop online, online daters are only initiating relationships online. Therefore, SIPT explains only part of the online dating process, not how relationships are initiated online and quickly move offline.

Another one of Walther’s (Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001) concepts that provides useful insight into online dating is hyperpersonal communication. Hyperpersonal communication explains how individuals sometimes experience more intimacy when meeting others online than they would in a similar offline relationship. “The hyperpersonal perspective offers an approach to understanding the ways CMC users sometimes experience intimacy, affection, and interpersonal assessments of their partners that exceed those occurring in parallel FTF [face-to-face] activities or alternative CMC contexts” (Walther et al., 2001, p. 5). In some circumstances, Internet users create hyperbolic and idealized conceptualizations of others met online, which leads to knowing more about an online partner because of available information.

The hyperpersonal communication perspective has been used by researchers of online dating studies (e.g., Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006; Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008; Rosen et al., 2008). Because online dating sites present users with a myriad of information in profiles, matches know a great deal about a person before ever meeting them. Hyperpersonal communication helps explain how a great deal of information can be obtained from profiles in online dating sites; however, it does little for explaining how people relate once offline. Further, it does not explain the process of online dating, dating scripts, or how scripts are developed.

Because relationships are initiated online and then taken offline, SIPT and Hyperpersonal Communication only explain parts of the online dating process. Further, theories for traditional dating are not entirely fitting because of the nature of initiation and information known about one
another in advance. Therefore, one theory that can shed light on online dating processes is Script Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). I propose viewing the process of online dating script (re)creation by exploring the connection between the online dating sites and members. To examine this in more depth, the following section explains Script Theory and how it applies to online dating.

Script Theory

Script theory explains processes individuals follow for dating, which informs how online dating sites may influence members’ scripts for dating. Scripts are “a metaphor for conceptualizing the production of behavior within social life” (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, p. 98). Scripts help us make sense of situations and guide our behavior. There are three distinct levels of scripts: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic.

Cultural scripts are instructional guides at the level of collective life that instruct specific roles. Media provide cultural scripts by reinforcing norms or making new ones. One example may be a script for men and women to marry at a certain age. These cultural level scenarios, however, often need adjustment in everyday situations.

Second, interpersonal scripting involves adapting and shaping material from cultural scenarios for content-specific behavior. It also involves balancing personal desires with appropriate expectations (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 1998). While an individual has an idea of what they are “supposed to do” or hypothetically do, this does not mean the scripts are carried out in exactly the same way. This may involve balancing the cultural expectation to get married at a certain age with a desire to wait to marry.

Third, intrapsychic scripts are the internal dialogue and fantasies of the individual or the symbolic reorganization of reality to realize wishes. An example may be a fantasy of the perfect
spouse. Thus, an individual may know he or she is *supposed to* marry at a certain age but has not married because the *perfect partner* has not become available.

These scripts change during an individual’s life cycle (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). For instance, someone may expect to be married by age 25 but once age 25 is reached, his or her priorities have changed and the desire to be married may change.

In the case of online dating, cultural and interpersonal scripts are different from traditional dating (Rosen et al., 2008). A script for courtship of meeting a partner, going on a first date, and courting are no longer accurate. An individual going on a first date with someone from an online dating site already knows certain criteria are a match and so motivations on a first date are not the same as in traditional dating. Thus, the very nature of dating and intimacy is changing (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). The “getting to know you” aspect has been taken over by the filter process of online dating and partners have already learned a great deal about the other. As explained by Hyperpersonal Communication (Walther et al., 2001) individuals are able to learn about others online in more detail than face-to-face. Thus, the self-disclosure process of courtship is different with online dating.

As through mainstream media, online dating sites provide information that can lead to the reinforcement or formation of cultural scripts. For instance, if an online dating site emphasizes the importance of specific features of a person, such as age and lifestyle, the users of that site are likely to believe those features are important (Fiore & Donath, 2004). Sites typically offer personality profile tests for members, and some sites allow users to choose their own matches while others make matches for them (CR’s Guide to Online Dating Sites, 2006). The features salient in this matching process have the potential to influence dating expectations for site members. Further, dating online both changes and reinforces some norms and values for dating
Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) discovered online daters have developed etiquette and norms for communicating, disclosing, etc. Differences have been found between individuals who date online versus traditionally, and the dating process is different for online and offline dating (Rosen et al., 2008). To explore how scripts are formed or recreated by online dating, it is necessary to explore traditional dating scripts.

Traditional Scripts for Dating

Dating can be defined as “the social process by which two people meet, interact, and pair off as a couple” (Turner, 2003, p. 1). Turner (2003) noted dating and sexual behavior have evolved in the United States over time with major developments occurring during the early 1900s, the Roaring Twenties, World War II, the sexual revolution, and the twenty-first century. Turner (2003) also noted the need to identify culture in dating processes, because dating varies greatly by culture, or “everything individuals do or have as members of society” (p. 2). Also, dating behaviors are learned scripts and influenced by a variety of factors. In fact, “Dating and sexual behaviors are influenced by social conditions, cultural norms, and institutional structures,” which include media (Turner, 2003, p.20).

This study focuses on online dating as it occurs in the United States. U.S. researchers have found dating to be a very scripted experience (e.g. Alksnis, Desmarais, & Wood, 1996; Bartoli & Clark, 2006; Laner & Ventrone, 1998, 2000; Rose & Frieze, 1989, 1993). Daters typically know what to expect from a first date and engage in the expected behavior. In fact “it seems that people have quite distinct scripts for what constitutes a bad date, and that men and women differ in the partner behaviors they include in these scripts” (Alksnis et al., 1996, p. 334). Scripts for dating have not changed significantly since the original scripting studies (Morr &
Gale, 2008) and Rose and Frieze (1989) asserted first date scripts have been consistent since the 1960s. These studies, however, have not taken online dating into consideration.

In their seminal study, Rose and Frieze (1989) examined the content and sequence of the behaviors of a first date to determine if they reflected traditional gender roles. Ninety-seven undergraduate students were asked to rank order at least 20 actions that would occur as someone prepared for a first date, went on the date, and ended the date. An action was considered a script if it was listed by more than 25% of participants. Results indicated the male script had 27 actions whereas women had 19 actions. A woman’s first date script included: tell friends and family, groom and dress, be nervous, worry about or change appearance, check appearance, wait for date, welcome date to home, introduce to parents or roommates, leave, confirm plans, get to know date, compliment date, joke/laugh/talk, try to impress date, go to movies/show/party, eat, go home, tell date she had a good time, and kiss goodnight. A man’s first date included: ask for a date, decide what to do, groom and dress, be nervous, worry about or change appearance, prepare car/apartment, check money, go to date’s house, meet parents or roommates, leave, open car door, confirm plans, get to know date, compliment date, joke/laugh/talk, try to impress date, go to movies/show/party, eat, pay, be polite, initiate physical contact, take date home, tell date he had a good time, ask for another date, tell date will be in touch, kiss goodnight, and go home.

Findings indicated traditional gender roles still existed. Women more frequently included in scripts waiting to be asked on a date, being concerned about appearance, rejecting physical contact, and maintaining the conversation (Rose & Frieze, 1989, p. 265). Men were supposed to ask for and plan the date, pick up his date, initiate and pay for date activities, and initiate physical contact. Rose and Frieze (1989) suggested, “Other research might be aimed at identifying popular alternatives to the script presented here or examining subgroup differences
(e.g., age and race) among scripts” (p. 267). Exploring how the date was initiated could be added to the list, such as a date initiated via online dating sites.

Because there may be a difference in participants describing hypothetical versus actual dates, Rose and Frieze (1993) conducted another study to determine how the cognitive scripts for hypothetical first dates compared to actual first dates. This is an example of comparing cultural and interpersonal scripts. One hundred thirty-five undergraduate students were asked to describe 20 actions or events that take place on a first date. Then they were asked to describe in detail what happened on their most recent date. For both hypothetical and actual dates the participants were asked who initiated the action. After coding the results for number of actions in the script, it was determined the hypothetical scripts had fewer actions than actual dates.

These results indicated cognitive scripts do guide behavior and “hypothetical scripts appeared to form a core action sequence that was embellished during actual dates” (Rose & Frieze, 1993, p. 507). In both hypothetical and actual dating situations, men were in a proactive role in initiating the date, controlling the public domain, and starting sexual interaction. Women had a more reactive role focused on private domain, such as concern about appearance, participating in the structure of the date as the man had planned, and responding to sexual advances. Because women wrote their scripts as more male-focused, the study suggests men have more rigid scripts for dating than women (Rose & Frieze, 1993). These findings illustrate how cultural and interpersonal scripts are managed.

Thus, a common theme in the dating scripts is the reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes. Because of increasing egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles, other researchers revisited the dating script studies to determine how these attitudes affected dating scripts. As with previous studies, Laner and Ventrone (1998) had undergraduate students describe 20
actions or events that typically occur on a first date. Results of the study revealed basic scripts for first dates were the same as the sample from 1989. New items for women included buying a new outfit, going to the bathroom to primp, discussing a second date, and talking to friends about the date. There were two new items for both men and women: drinking and deeper conversation. Items from 1989 that were missing from the updated script included being nervous, meeting parents/roommates, leaving the house, confirming plans, and initiating/accepting or rejecting physical contact. Still, results of this study demonstrated the traditional gender roles of being dominate/subordinate and active/passive and indicated “that despite college students’ claims to egalitarian attitudes and beliefs, their dating interactions are most likely to begin (and perhaps to continue) in a clearly nonegalitarian mode” (Laner & Vetrone, 1998, p. 473).

Using the findings from this study, Laner and Vetrone (2000) presented a new group of undergraduate students with a list of first date behaviors. Participants consisted of 206 undergraduates who indicated if behaviors on the list would or would not occur on a date and if one did, whether it would be the man’s or woman’s action. Results indicated a high level of agreement between men and women about who typically does what on a first date and first dates still followed traditional gender roles (Laner & Vetrone, 2000, p. 493). Women were slightly more likely to have egalitarian views than men, but still only 22% of women and 9% of men believed either person could pay for the date.

Laner and Vetrone (2000) compared their findings to guidelines in two dating guides, *Idiot's Guide to Dating* by Kuriansky and *Dating for Dummies* by Browne, which both suggested first dates be seen as a casual time to “get to know one another” (p. 496). However, results of this study indicated dating scripts were much more formal. These advice books tended
to teach or reinforce appropriate dating behaviors of American culture. Furthermore, according to Laner and Ventrone (2000), “even our personal behavior toward one another tends to be programmed” (p. 496). Thus, first dates are highly scripted and very predictable. The authors urged future research to examine dating scripts for other populations and in different circumstances because, “It is important to better understand the process by which people come to know their potential mates because it may contain long-term implications – for breakups, for cohabitation, and for more permanent parings such as marriage” (Laner & Ventrone, 2000, p. 498-9). Thus, exploring how online daters progress through courtship has long-term implications for understanding relationships and the nature of relating to others.

Scripts for first dates may vary depending on a variety of factors. Morr and Monegeau (2004) examined how dating scripts varied depending on the sex of the initiator, consumption of alcohol, and the type of relationship. Two hundred eighteen undergraduate participants were provided with a dating scenario that varied by sex of the initiator (male/female), alcohol consumption (alcohol/no alcohol), type of relationship (friend/acquaintance), and measures of communication expectancy and sexual expectancy. Results indicated men expected more sexual interaction on a first date than women and expectations did not increase when the female initiated the date. However, these results were not confirmed later in Morr and Gale’s (2008) study. As with other studies, undergraduate students were provided with different scenarios and asked to provide a list of actions for a first date. Results were consistent with scripts found in past studies but some interesting additions were found. For instance, men were more likely to expect more sexual activity than kissing, while women were more likely to expect kissing. Interestingly, the person who accepted the date expected more sexual activity (more than kissing) than the person who requested the date, probably since the acceptor already assumed the
requestor was interested. While this was true for both sexes, these scripts were provided by college students, thus age was not taken into consideration. One sex difference the researchers found was that men interpreted the first date in a more sexual way whereas women interpreted it as more romantic or social. It seems that actions leading up to the first date may vary, but the actions on the first date still follow a fairly predictable script (Morr & Gale, 2008).

Even though daters stick to these scripts, they may appreciate some deviation and have different dating preferences. For instance, men in one study indicated they wanted to be less tied to the traditional role of being responsible for date initiation (Schleicher & Gilbert, 2005). Further, Schleicher and Gilbert (2005) asserted, “current dating practices are not adequately characterized by the double standard, as there is currently an emphasis on male sexual integrity, at least with young adult college students…Whether this is a norm is yet to be established” (p. 22). All of these studies, however, focused on heterosexual dating scripts and have been very heterosexist (Rose, 2000). Rose (2000) suggested challenging the dominance of cultural scripts by exploring new narratives that develop more representative theories of relationships. In lesbian relationships, different courtship scripts are followed, such as being friends with a partner first, having freedom from gender roles, heightened intimacy/friendship, and having a rapid development of a relationship (Rose & Zand, 2002); however, there was no mention of whether first date scripts would be similar to other couples.

Kinkenberg and Rose (1994) examined first date scripts for 51 gay men and 44 lesbians by asking participants to describe a hypothetical first date using 20 actions or events and then rate how closely their most recent first date fit this script. The same coding scheme from Rose and Frieze’s 1993 study was used. Gay men’s and lesbians’ hypothetical date scripts had 14 self-initiated events and 11 were the same in both groups. A hypothetical date for gay men
included: discuss plans, groom/dress, prepare (clean apartment, etc.), meet date at pre-arranged location, get to know/evaluate date, talk/laugh/joke, go to movie/show/etc., eat/drink alcohol, drink alcohol/use drugs, initiate physical contact, make-out, make plans for another date, take date home, and go home. Actual dates for gay men included: discussed plans, was nervous, groomed/dressed, went to date’s house/picked up date, met at pre-arranged location, left one location for another, got to know/evaluated date, talked/laughed/joked, talked to friends while on date, went to a movie/show/etc., ate/drank alcohol, drank alcohol/used drugs, initiated physical contact, made-out, had sex, stayed over, made plans for another date, and went home.

For lesbians, the hypothetical date included: discuss plans, tell friends about date, groom/dress, prepare (clean apartment, etc.), meet date at pre-arranged location, leave one location for another, get to know/evaluate date, talk/laugh/joke, go to a movie/show/etc., eat/drink alcohol, initiate physical contact, make plans for another date, kiss/hug goodnight, and go home. The actual first date for lesbians included: discussed plans, was nervous, groomed/dressed, prepared (cleaned apartment, bought flowers, etc.), went to date’s house/picked up date, left, got to know/evaluated date, talked/laughed/joked, went to a movie/show/etc., ate/drank alcohol, positive affect, drank alcohol/used drugs, initiated physical contact, kissed/hugged goodnight, took date home, went home, and evaluated post-date feelings (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994).

The main conceptualization (those cited by at least 50% of participants) of the hypothetical date for both gay men and lesbians consisted of discussed plans, dress, get to know date, talk, go to show, and eat. For males, actual dates included these conceptualizations plus drank alcohol and initiated physical contact. Females added initiated physical contact to the actual script (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994). Interestingly, among these gay and lesbian
participants, neither male nor female hypothetical scripts contained concerns about appearance or intimacy. Actual scripts for men emphasized sexual aspects of the date whereas women had scripts for intimacy and affective actions. However, no other sex differences were found for other actual date characteristics (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994).

Hypothetical and actual date scripts were very congruent and results indicated “Hypothetical dates contained fewer actions and could be seen as a general schema; during actual dates, participants have the freedom to develop specific actions within it” (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994, p. 33). The consistency of hypothetical and actual scripts demonstrates the interaction of cultural and interpersonal dating scripts. While lesbians and gay men did not adhere to specific gender roles, as in the heterosexual scripts, main conceptualizations did not vary greatly from heterosexual first date scripts. In fact “results of the present study provide evidence that cultural and interpersonal scripts for same-sex dating are clearly defined and parallel heterosexual scripts…” at least for this sample (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994, p, 32).

Actual dating scripts and hypothetical dating scripts are very similar, demonstrating the connection between cultural scripts and interpersonal scripts for dating. Because of this connection it is necessary to explore how cultural level dating scripts are developed. One source of cultural scripts is media, including online dating sites. The next section explores what dating advice and scripts are portrayed in media.

Dating Advice and Scripts in Media

One source of cultural scripts for dating is media. Messages about dating scripts and advice are presented to consumers in a variety of media. Online dating sites provide users with an interface to search for other users and a slew of advice for being successful at meeting and dating. While no researchers have examined advice from online dating sites or its effects, some
research has examined the content of dating self-help books and scripts for sexuality and
romance in magazines and television. Paasonen (2007) examined advice books for online
dating from 1996 to 2005, and considers them “…as cultural resources that provide scripts for
narrating and making sense of online encounters and emotional investments” (p. 41). Overall,
studies revealed dating advice in media reinforces gender roles and cultural values, provides
quick fixes or places the burden of relationship fixing on one partner, and explains how scripts
have changed over time (Carpenter, 1998; DeFrancisco & O’Connor, 1995; deSouza & Sherry,
2006; Kim et al., 2007; Paasonen, 2007).

The books studied by Paasonen (2007) reinforced heteronormativity and gender roles,
creating an interesting paradox. For instance, women were told not to be too active or readily
available and men were supposed to take the initiative in leading communication online
(Paasonen, 2007). The interesting paradox was that the books promoted the idea of true love
being found online, but then explained the process to finding true love as rational, calculated, and
rehearsed (Paasonen, 2007).

Online dating advice books frame online dating as trying to find ideal romantic love, but
also following the script and using practices of self-management and social negotiation.
DeFrancisco and O’Connor (1995) thematically analyzed 38 popular self-help dating books to
examine the rhetorical strategies used to reinforce male dominance in heterosexual relationships.
Self-help dating books use stereotypical gender assumptions for both men and women
(DeFrancisco & O’Connor, 1995). Women were stereotyped as having their primary goal in life
be finding and keeping a man. They were also portrayed and encouraged to be manipulative and
accused of being overly emotional or passive. Men were depicted as irresponsible and uncaring
in relationships, guided only by their penises and thinking only about sex, and having problems expressing emotions.

Next, the books assumed women were responsible for relationships and relationship talk. While the authors of the book did recognize that both partners can be responsible for relationship problems, they did not mention that social status or cultural prescriptions could also play a role. These books were “cloaked within the perspective that women and men are merely culturally different…” and “…the strong and recurrent message [is] that women must take responsibility for relationship maintenance” (DeFrancisco & O’Connor, 1995, p. 223). The underlying message of most books was “that women readers ought to be able to correct their problems with the men in their lives; if they cannot, it is their own fault” (DeFrancisco & O’Connor, 1995, p. 225). The authors asserted the books reflect and reinforce dominant cultural values. These values become part of cultural scripts for dating.

Self-help dating books also create the image that relationship problems can be easily repaired by following a set of guidelines. First, the packaging and language style of dating advice books provided readers with a quick and easy read and presented solutions and quick fixes to relationship problems (DeFrancisco & O’Connor, 1995). In fact, relationship problems “are easily categorized, quantified, and oversimplified” (DeFrancisco & O’Connor, 1995, p. 218-9). The books offered simple step-by-step solutions such as “The Six Biggest Mistakes Women Make About Men,” “Men’s Top 20 Sexual Turn-offs,” or provided quizzes that would unlock helpful solutions. The idea was that readers would be able to easily solve their relationship problems on their own. Furthermore, the books tended to use buzz words, psychological jargon, and original phrases to lure in readers. These step-by-step solutions are similar to advice provided to online daters.
Young viewers were also exposed to messages about romantic relationships through television. deSouza and Sherry (2006) analyzed the top ten television shows for 12-17 year-olds for content pertaining to romantic relationships, couple conflict, the causes of conflict, and conflict resolution. Three norms were demonstrated in adolescent television: relationships are easy to maintain, more romantic conflict starts with a female partner’s anger or something the male partner did, and conflict resolution almost always results in a happy ending.

Reinforcement of gender roles also became apparent in another study. To determine cultural norms for dating scripts, Rose and Frieze (1989) surveyed eight guides to adolescent dating from 1957 to 1989. Most of the scripts were highly gender typed with men expected to initiate, plan and pay for the date, and act as sexual initiators. Women were more subordinate and should be alluring, facilitate conversation, and act as sexual gatekeepers (p. 259).

Dating guides provided etiquette for men and women. Proper etiquette for women included behavior such as being on time, being enthusiastic, not engaging in kissing/sex, walking without touching, acting naturally, paying attention, looking good, being adaptable and tolerant, and if “going Dutch” giving him money privately. For men, proper etiquette included not honking the horn, telling the date he enjoyed the evening, being punctual, meeting her parents, opening the car door, walking on the outside, taking initiative, complimenting her appearance, not saying he will call without meaning it, picking up the date, paying for the date, and getting her home on time. Online dating sites provide similar cultural scripts for members of the dating sites.

Kim et al. (2007) examined prime-time television shows viewed by teenagers to illuminate heterosexual scripts embedded within the programming. Heterosexual scripts included the sexual double standard, attraction schemes, commitment, and homophobia. After
analyzing 25 programs, results indicated students who watched these programs were exposed to 15.53 heterosexual script references per hour and heterosexual scripts were depicted mostly by sexuality defining men’s masculinity followed by feminine courtship strategies. Findings indicated television depictions of male and female sexuality and sitcoms contained more scripted messages linked to sexuality (Kim et al., 2007).

Scripts for dating have changed over time in the popular magazine *Seventeen* (Carpenter, 1998). The author completed a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of *Seventeen* magazines from 1974, 1984, and 1994 to determine how women’s scripts for sexuality have changed. Feature articles and advice columns (244 items) were analyzed for content and themes. Findings revealed significant changes in magazine scripts over time. For example, content has recognized female desire, homosexuality, oral sex, masturbation, and young women’s ambivalence about sexuality. In 1974 and 1984 young women were encouraged to curtail their sexual desire and refrain from sexual acts until they were adults or even married. In 1994 sexual desire was portrayed much more positively. Attitudes towards homosexuality were much more accepting in 1994 as opposed to 1974. In terms of sexuality, the most prevalent view toward sexual activity was that it should take place within a relationship.

Interestingly, the magazine also pointed out that love is not always a fairy tale and that there are not always happy endings in relationships. Despite this, however, readers should not give up on finding heterosexual romance. Readers may internalize these scripts and, depending on personal experiences, feel like their beliefs are reinforced or challenged. Carpenter urged future researchers to study the way readers interpret scripts in media and use them in their own lives, and to interview a diverse set of individuals to determine different interpretations and
experiences. In the case of online dating, members may internalize the advice presented in the scripts, and it is important to explore how.

**Online Dating Processes**

A variety of research studies have been conducted about online dating. Many of the large-scale studies were conducted outside the United States and, while there may be cultural differences, their results still offer some insight into online dating. The following section will review these studies and explain the online dating process in more depth. The first subsections discuss the history and background of online dating. Next, online daters themselves will be discussed, including who is dating online and their reasons for doing so. Then, the process of creating a profile, navigating matches, and concerns about deception are explored. Finally, making contact with potential partners is discussed in detail.

*History*

Online dating sites emerged in the 1980s and are increasing in popularity (Whitty & Carr, 2006). In 2001 online dating was a $40 million business and in 2008 it was expected to have made $600 million (Epstein, 2007; Online Dating Magazine Center, 2008). While similar to newspaper personals, online dating sites are much more in-depth and interactive. Users construct profiles often containing pictures or videos, make contact with persons of interest, discern if those persons would also like contact, and then meet face-to-face. As explained earlier, online dating is popular for many reasons: proximity is not important, it is easier to meet similar people, help is not needed from friends, it is easier to frequently access the sites, and the nature of the Internet makes self-disclosure easier (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). There seems to be an innate desire for an intimate relationship and a monogamous long-term intimate relationship seems to be the ideal. Dating online seems logical because it is anonymous and
intimate at the same time and users know other users are also looking for a relationship (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). Further, easy access to the Internet, decreased stigma around online dating, and affordability of sites are encouraging popularity (Ellison et al., 2006).

**Background of Online Dating Sites**

The five largest and best-known sites are AmericanSingles, eHarmony, Match, True, and Yahoo! Personals (CR’s guide to online dating sites, 2006; Epstein, 2007). Matching with potential partners varies by site – some allow users to pick their own matches while others set matches up for users based upon results of compatibility tests (CR’s guide to online dating sites, 2006). Most of the sites allow users to set up profiles and view other profiles for free, but members must pay to communicate with other members. Prices to communicate with others range from $25 a month to $60 a month. A six-month subscription to eHarmony costs $173.70, with the site not allowing individuals below 21-years-of-age and those who are “unmatchable” to join.

One feature of online dating sites is the personality test, which is supposed to help members be matched more effectively. Yahoo! and True offer the tests to members but eHarmony requires users to complete personality profiles before being matched (CR’s guide to online dating sites, 2006). Yahoo’s test is an interactive, multi-media experience aimed to measure elements of personality, love styles, strengths, and life challenges. For instance, after completing a series of interactive questions, the personality and love style report provides a description of an individual’s personality (e.g. “You enjoy being around other people. Time spent with your friends and family energizes and strengthens you”), love style (e.g. “You tend to be pragmatic about your decisions, and romance is anything but practical”), romantic challenges (e.g. “You’re such a social animal you can forget the importance of saving time for just you and
your partner”), and how to find a compatible partner (e.g. “Protectors like you are usually most comfortable with men who are Traditionalists:” Yahoo! Personals Personality & Love Styles Report, 2007). eHarmony, Match, and PerfectMatch claim their matching capabilities are based upon measures of proven compatibility tests but the truth behind these claims has not been corroborated by rigorous tests of validity or reliability (Houran et al., 2004).

**Daters**

According to Valkenburg and Peter (2007), “about 37% of single American Internet users who are looking for a romantic partner have gone to a dating web site” (p. 849). Another study found 56.2% of all Internet users had visited at least one online personal site (Lever et al., 2008). A Pew research study estimated that out of 10 million single Internet users, 74% have used the Internet to try to find a partner (Rosen et al., 2008). While different instruments were used to measure online dating site usage, one thing is apparent: online dating sites are frequently visited by many people.

In 2005, individuals in the first half of their forties were the most active date-seekers online. Online daters in the second half of their forties, however, were more likely to seek more serious relationships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2005). In this sample, heterosexual men were the least likely to look for dates online. These results were based upon 330 participants who completed surveys in the Netherlands, so there may be differences in the United States. However, since 2005 the online dating scene and demographics have certainly expanded and heterosexual men on dating sites have increased. In one study of 8,566 online date seekers, heterosexual men represented the highest number of users followed by heterosexual women (Lever et al., 2008). However, it was gay/lesbian/bisexual users who were most likely to post a profile (Lever et al., 2008). Also, older adults have been participating in online dating and online
romances can and often do develop into long-term relationships (Malta, 2007). In 2007, Valkenburg and Peter found men visited sites more than women and online daters surveyed reported age ranges 30-40 and 40-50 more frequently than younger or older ages. Sites also cater to a variety of lifestyles, such as religious affiliation (e.g., J-Date.com). Some websites offer dating advertisements that are specific to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender users (Gudelunas, 2005).

A common myth about online daters is that they are socially awkward or unable to find a date face-to-face. In one study Scotts, Mottarella, and LaVooy (2006) compared intimacy levels of computer-mediated relationships (“virtual relaters”) and traditional relationships of 546 participants. Sternberg’s intimacy subscale and Rubin’s love scale were used to examine virtual relaters’ online and offline relationships and traditional relaters’ offline relationships. Findings suggested “individuals who struggle with intimacy in their face-to-face relationships may turn to online relating as an alternative” (Scotts et al., 2006, p. 760). Because this study did not focus specifically on dating relationships or those met in online dating sites that led to face-to-face meetings, results cannot be generalized to online daters.

To specifically examine whether online daters were more shy or socially awkward, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) tested two opposing points of view: those who have high dating anxiety will benefit more from online dating sites by compensating for deficits they have face-to-face (social compensation model) and those who already have low dating anxiety and high dating skills will just use the Internet as another place to meet people (rich-get-richer hypothesis). To test these hypotheses, 367 Dutch adult singles completed an online survey to measure their intentions-for-dating and frequency of visiting dating sites. Almost half of the sample had visited an online dating site. Using hierarchical regression, Valkenburg and Peter’s (2007)
results supported the rich-get-richer hypothesis and indicated “online dating seems to be an activity particularly of individuals who are low in dating anxiety” (p. 851). There was no support for the proposition that people using online dating sites make up for deficiencies offline (social compensation model). Intimacy and dating anxiety are different constructs and seem to play different roles in the motivation to relate online.

Reasons for dating online are perhaps the same as those that make online dating so popular: ease of meeting similar people, sites can be accessed more frequently than face-to-face meetings (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), changing household demographics, individuals’ apparent innate desire for forming intimate relationships, and the ability to be anonymous and personal simultaneously (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). Further, Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008) discovered online daters are usually motivated to join online dating sites for more social rather than individual factors. In-depth interviews were conducted with 23 Australian individuals who have dated online and they were asked what prompted them to join an online dating site. The social reasons included: moving for work, needing to build new social networks, feeling isolated because of being a single parent, long work hours prohibiting meeting people face-to-face, recently experiencing being single, and not being in a social network with available partners (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008).

In another study using ethnographic interviews of 11 adults who had been actively dating in the past year, additional motivating factors were discovered (Yurchisin, Wachravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005). The online daters indicated having started dating online because of some type of triggering event such as a move to a new town or a breakup, a desire for personal growth, or a combination of the two (Yurchisin et al., 2005). Finally, individuals may join online dating sites
to learn more about themselves through the development of a serious long-term romantic relationship (Yurchisin et al., 2005).

When 8,566 users of online dating sites were asked in one study what they were really seeking when visiting the sites, responses varied by sex and sexual orientation (Lever et al., 2008). Particularly interesting was everyone, excluding straight men and bisexual men, listed finding friends as one goal of using dating sites and only bisexual men said they were seeking sexual affairs or chat. Then, based on narratives from 781 heterosexual, gay, straight, and bisexual participants, authors determined online dating helped daters screen out partners who may have deal-breaking attributes and to save time (Lever et al., 2008). Online dating also helps expand the pool of available partners, allows users to avoid the bar scene for meeting potential mates, and allows for exploring sexuality (Lever et al., 2008).

Individuals may also feel more liberated online (Whitty & Carr, 2006) or feel more at ease disclosing online. From a study of Australian online daters, Whitty and Carr (2006) summarized motivations for participants using online dating sites: an alternative to the bar scene, to find short-term relationships and hopefully build a long-term one, for fun or sex, because they were shy, there were no other options, and online dating is convenient. Through analysis of field notes from profiles on multiple dating websites, blogs, and dating experiences and 17 interviews with online daters, it was determined that users have different objectives for joining online dating sites (Kambara, 2005). Some may be seeking traditional relationships while others may be dating online for entertainment or to collect as many dates as possible (Kambara, 2005).
Creating a Profile

Online dating sites operate by allowing users to post a profile containing information about hobbies, personality traits, interests, age, physical characteristics, and any other details they find pertinent. Most sites allow posting of photographs, sometimes multiple photographs, and even video. Whitty (2008) conducted 40- to 50-minute structured interviews with 60 adult Australian online daters (mean age = 42.68) to discover how individuals present themselves in cyberspace. The creation of a profile is not a task taken lightly by most serious online daters and profile construction is a dynamic process involving re-writing and adjusting (Whitty, 2008). Individuals often look at others’ profiles for ideas on how to create their own profiles. Further, users attempt to represent themselves as accurately as possible but also take into consideration what others might find attractive when constructing profiles. Based on interview data from 34 online daters collected by Ellison et al. (2006), online daters do not want to be filtered out of others’ searches for minor details, such as being 31-years-old instead of 25-30, so they may change some details to appeal to a broader audience.

Members view construction of profiles as very important, and they spend a considerable amount of time creating them and managing their images (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). In another study conducted by Whitty (2008), 60 online daters revealed the most important aspects when constructing their profile were their photograph, interests/activities they enjoy doing, and the description of their personality. Other features considered important were presenting themselves in a humorous manner, listing occupation, demonstrating intelligence, sounding unique, playing down their beauty, and having a glamour shot. The need to present a good physical image was rated as the most important aspect of profile construction (Whitty, 2008).
Women chose to include a photograph more frequently than men and often chose to include a glamorous shot (Whitty, 2008).

Online daters use a variety of self-presentation strategies to maximize benefits and minimize risks in online dating (Ellison et al., 2006) and to present a favorable first impression (Kambara, 2005). Most of these strategies occur during the profile creation process. These strategies are particularly important in online dating, because there are fewer cues available to potential daters, members have the ability to manipulate who they are online, and there is a need to establish credibility (Ellison et al., 2006). According to Whitty (2007), because online dating is different from other forms of dating and meeting people in other online spaces, “unique skills and strategies are required to successfully sell oneself on an online dating site” (p. 57). Whitty (2007) also asserts if individuals are to successfully establish a relationship from an online dating site, “they need to present a balance between an ‘attractive’ and a ‘real’ self on their online profiles” (p. 57). Online daters often feel conflicted between portraying an accurate self-presentation and a desirable one. Because there is a possibility of a face-to-face meeting, individuals do not want to misrepresent themselves too much (Ellison et al., 2006). Online daters are often forced to find an acceptable balance between their ideal and real selves.

While individuals in relationships and in general want to highlight their positive attributes, online daters have the ability to manipulate those attributes (Ellison et al., 2006). Because daters have potential to meet face-to-face, they do not want to exaggerate their positive attributes too much. Daters in one study indicated only including information in their profiles if they believed their family or friends would also agree; an example could be a good sense of humor (Yurchinsin et al., 2005). Some online daters even have friends or family members read their profiles to make sure they are accurate representations (Whitty, 2008). However, while
individuals do not necessarily exaggerate their positive traits online, there may be an issue of the foggy mirror: a gap between self-perceptions and the assessments made by others (Ellison et al., 2006). While daters were not trying to deceive others, their evaluations of themselves did not match those shared by others. Daters sometimes include aspects of their identities that they do not necessarily possess but that they would be interested in cultivating (Yurchinsin et al., 2005).

Interestingly some misrepresentations in profiles seem to be tolerated, such as presentation of age. Because there are age categories for searches, daters sometimes listed their ages differently to avoid being filtered out of searches, but did not intend on being deceptive for long (Ellison et al., 2006). Some daters admit to misrepresenting themselves online but consider it more an exaggeration than an outright lie (Whitty, 2008). Misrepresentation was not to be malicious, but rather to be seen as more attractive to others. The most common profile misrepresentations admitted by online daters were looks, details about their own relationships/children, age, weight, socioeconomic status, and interests (Whitty, 2008).

Profile creation is also limited to the parameters and the interface of the dating site in general. For instance, the appearance of the profile is uniform with typically only the photograph and content in boxes changing. In Yahoo! Personals in particular, users are asked to agree to a code of conduct before even proceeding to the creation of a profile. The agreement specifies: I am single, will be honest and respectful of other members, will do my best to present the true me in both pictures and words, will not be abusive or post offensive material, will abide by Yahoo! Personals guidelines, and will identify people who break these promises and guidelines (Yahoo! Personals, 2007). After agreeing to the terms, the next step is setting up a profile and providing name, zip code, birthday, (all of the following are check boxes) ethnicity,
description of physical characteristics, lifestyle, education, employment and income, home life, religion, language spoken, personality characteristics, political views, humor, TV habits, etc.

According to Yahoo’s site, “Everyone knows that profiles with photos get way more responses. So put your best face forward, add a photo to your personal profile, and watch the responses pour in. Read these tips to learn how to post the best photo possible.” Photos were subject to removal from the site for not following rules. Guidelines included: show off how you look on an average day, use a current picture, choose a quality photo, smile, post only one photo, no more than two people in a photo, and no nudity is allowed. Users typically provide information about themselves through checkboxes and a written description and share what they are looking for in a match/partner. Sites vary in the interface for this and as mentioned previously, some sites offer tools such as personality and relationship quizzes to offer assistance in matching. Once the profile is complete, Yahoo! (and most other sites) must approve it and the photograph before it will be available to other users. After the profile is approved, members can proceed to the matching and meeting process.

Finding Matches and Navigating Profiles

Once individuals post a profile, the matching process varies according to the dating site. The process of online dating is different from more traditional face-to-face dating (Rosen et al., 2008). To explore thoughts toward online dating and actual dating processes, Rosen et al. (2008) conducted a series of studies of 1,029 adults (11% online daters), 1,379 adults (417 online daters), 1,107 adults (451 online daters), and 759 adults. Traditional dating usually begins with proximate and physical attraction, determining similarities and interests, self-disclosure, and then meeting each other in person weekly to get to know one another (Rosen et al, 2008). However, in the case of online dating, it usually begins with emails exchanged between users and early
self-disclosure. Once the users know enough about each other, they can meet face-to-face (Rosen et al, 2008).

While attraction is still important, the way in which potential partners are filtered out is different online. It is easier to learn about a person and quickly move on without much concern, whereas it is more time- and emotionally- consuming to do the same face-to-face. Further, individuals may have different filters for potential mates met online versus face-to-face. Clearly, this is different from traditional dating scripts. Some sites allow users to choose their own matches while others choose matches for the users (CR’s guide to online dating sites, 2006). eHarmony only allows users to view profiles of users the site has matched them with (CR’s guide to online dating sites, 2006) while others like Yahoo! Personals and Match are more open to viewing profiles of other users. Personal information provided by users can vary in level of privacy with the ability to block one’s profile in searches or blocking of communication from specific users.

Regardless of the mode of matching, the next step is usually viewing profiles of other members or matches. Viewing profiles of others and deciding to contact another member is a complex process. In their Australian online dating study, Whitty and Carr’s (2006) participants indicated they viewed profiles as if they had a shopping list to check what products met what they were looking for in terms of physical attributes, similar interests/values, socioeconomic status, and personality. Once again, in traditional dating circumstances, this information is usually not available in advance. While we may base opinions on available information, such as appearance, online dating provides much more detail. Online daters can also engage in a compensatory model in which certain positive attributes of matches make up for shortcomings in other areas (Kambara, 2005).
Because of the options available in the search functions, such as checkboxes for particular criteria, the dating process can seem like shopping. The function may allow too many or not enough options depending on the search criteria or location searched. Kambara (2005) further noted daters learn how to read profiles to make judgments about them more easily. For instance, if someone had several misspelled words in a profile, it may be interpreted as that person having a lack of education (Ellison et al., 2006). Thus, smaller cues were important such as spelling, the time responses were sent, and the length of time between responses. These results are demonstrative of Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT; Walther, 2008), or using available cues to draw inferences about people met online. For instance, if someone sent an email in the middle of the night, the recipient can make judgments about the lifestyle of the sender and his/her staying up late. If an individual responds very quickly, it may signal interest or desperation. Daters explained they find users who have clichés (e.g. enjoys long walks on the beach) in their profiles to be less real and avoided those users’ profiles (Whitty, 2008).

Whitty and Carr (2006) summarized the aspects online daters were looking for in a partner online. The most attractive qualities were looks, similar interests/values, socioeconomic status (education, intelligence, occupation, income, being professional), and personality. Other aspects looked for in a partner were honesty/being genuine, age, height, proximity, size/weight, and being a non-smoker (Whitty, 2008). Out of 417 online daters surveyed, Rosen et al. (2008) found age and the picture to be by far the most important parts of a profile for online daters looking for a partner (reported by over 60% of respondents). Other important characteristics (32% or less of participants) were weight/body type, smoking/drinking habits, education, employment/income, children, ethnic background, religion, height, and past marriage (Rosen et al., 2008).
As evidenced in these studies, physical appearance is an important part of choosing whom to contact in online dating environments, which is also a factor of attraction in offline environments (Vangelisti, 2002). Online daters may place more importance on physical characteristics, because when meeting someone on a dating site they are presented with a photograph, not just text, and because there are so many choices, individuals can simply move on to more attractive potential partners (Whitty & Carr, 2006). Because the pool of available partners is larger online, individuals filter partners out quickly. As Vangelisti (2002) explained, romantic relationship initiation is constrained by physical (e.g., geographic location) and social contexts. However, for online dating these constraints are less apparent and there are more available potential partners.

The Internet used to be a place where individuals could communicate anonymously or privately and not have to worry about physical appearance. In chat rooms, individuals could get to know one another via text and allow personalities to show before physical characteristics (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). In fact, in 1981 Jedlicka asserted “computers can introduce humanizing influence in personal contacts by minimizing the importance of superficial traits and allowing the expression of personality traits and personal standards of sexual behavior” (p. 375). Obviously this is no longer the case. Individuals who do not meet the searcher’s desired level of attractiveness will not be further explored (McKenna, 2007). In studying the non-traditional online dating site HotOrNot.com, Lee, Loewenstein, Ariely, Hong, and Young (2008) determined “more attractive people tended to prefer potential dates who were more attractive” (p. 675). While individuals with similar levels of attractiveness tended to date each other, most individuals preferred partners who were moderately more attractive than themselves but not significantly more attractive (Lee et al., 2008). Less attractive people place less emphasis on
physical attractiveness of a potential partner and more emphasis on other qualities such as a sense of humor.

Physical proximity still plays a role in online dating, because if individuals hope to meet offline it needs to be logistically possible. Most online dating sites are designed to allow individuals in close geographical areas an opportunity to meet when they otherwise may not (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008). Further, people are still “broadly looking for people from within their own communities of characteristic, interest… [and] geography” (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008, p. 158).

Due to the differences in online dating from traditional dating, there are differences in importance of qualities sought in a potential partner. In a comparison of online and traditional daters, Rosen et al. (2008) determined differences in factors of dating. Online daters rated revealing information about oneself, concerns about communication, personality characteristics, and education as less important than traditional daters. However, online daters rated factors relating to physical appearance and communication style as more important than traditional daters (Rosen et al., 2008). Because users base their opinions of others upon profile pictures and mediated communication, these differences make sense. There are thousands of potential partners available to browse so online daters can add more to their wish lists for a partner and quickly move on when someone does not fit. Offline dating, however, does not have this abundance of potential partners (Whitty, 2008) and so individuals may not be so judgmental.

*Concerns About Deception*

Because individuals can easily manipulate information they present online, deception is a concern. For instance, Epstein (2007) found people tended to lie about their ages on dating sites. Users also tend to lie about their appearance (Whitty & Carr, 2006; Whitty, 2008). Other less
common misrepresentations include details about having children or living with a past romantic partner, weight, socioeconomic status (occupation, being employed, being a professional, income), interests (Whitty & Carr, 2006), personality, age, height, and their intentions for joining the site (looking just for sex, not a relationship; Whitty, 2008). Interestingly, individuals are unforgiving or annoyed when others misrepresent themselves but admit to doing it too (Whitty & Carr, 2006). However, as explained previously, individuals are not necessarily lying outright (Ellison et al., 2006). Their self-perceptions may not match how others view them. To combat concerns about credibility, online daters have developed a set of guidelines they use to assess the credibility of others and incorporate those into their own profiles, such as a woman posting a picture of herself standing instead of sitting because sitting can camouflage a heavier body (Ellison et al., 2006).

Making Contact with a Potential Partner

The goal of online dating is to meet face-to-face, but users must navigate through the profiles and other processes before meeting. McKenna (2007) explained this process effectively: Once a potential partner has passed the physical appearance test and been placed into the larger pool of “possibles” the user then begins to narrow the contact options based on self-provided information about income and occupation, hobbies, previous marital status, and so forth. If all of these factors seem to be “good”, the participant will send off an introductory email and wait to see if he or she, in turn, passes the other person’s “shopping list” of acceptable criteria and is contacted in return. (p. 120)

Online daters tend to view about 11 profiles per session and, once the decision has been made to contact someone, there are two different communication styles: sending a number of emails before moving forward or sending only a few emails and moving the conversation to the phone
(Rosen et al., 2008). Some view online dating as a numbers game in which the more messages of interest they send to someone the increased likelihood they have of getting a response or finding the desired connection (Whitty & Carr, 2006). There are unique ways in which people cyber-flirt including emoticons, acronyms, and screen names (Whitty & Carr, 2006). These include using a ☺ (smiley face), :-{ } (blowing a kiss), 8-P” (goo-goo eye, drooling over you), ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing), *K* (kiss), or an alluring screen name (e.g. Sexybabe23).

People tend to move quickly to meeting face-to-face after making contact online (Whitty & Carr, 2006). Findings from a survey of 759 online daters indicated after emailing someone, at least 40% of recipients responded to the email (Rosen et al., 2008). Of these participants, 51% met in person between one week and one month after initial email contact. In another study 57.4% of participants indicated they met a date within the first week of making contact on a dating site (Whitty, 2008). The reasons for this include: determining if there was physical chemistry, not to waste time, lack of trust in profile content, and wanting to know the “real” person more quickly.

Again there is great importance placed upon the first date. The most common reason reported by 63% of participants for not having a second date after meeting in person was there was no connection or chemistry. Similarly, the top reason (63%) for having a second date was there was good chemistry or they just clicked (Rosen et al., 2008). The initial meeting tends to be a screening out process instead of a romantic occasion (Whitty & Carr, 2006). In fact, the first date is so important that 67.6% of online daters in one study said the first meeting determined whether or not the relationship would progress (Whitty, 2008).

Considering the traditional script for dating, online dating first dates do not fit neatly. The importance of meeting offline demonstrates how online dating is a precursor to dating face-
to-face (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008). Once they meet in person, the Internet becomes obsolete (Whitty & Carr, 2006) as the need to communicate via the site is no longer there. It seems once dating has occurred face-to-face, it more closely mimics traditional dating patterns. As Whitty (2008) asserted “it is fair to say that individuals use online dating sites as a means to identify a potential date and that cyberspace is not, in the main, utilized as a medium to get to know the person” (p. 1715).

Research has shown the transition from online to offline relationship can be successful (Whitty & Carr, 2006). In Rosen et al’s (2008) study, 29% of online daters found serious relationships by using online dating sites. If meeting someone face-to-face does not lead to a serious relationship, the users have the option of returning to the site and searching for someone else.

Thus, from past studies, a few schema or scripts of online dating are apparent. First, a variety of daters date online and date seekers join sites for a variety of reasons. It is generally easier to disclose online, so they construct a version of themselves in their profiles. The profile process utilizes personality tests from the sites and date seekers try to be accurate in their descriptions but some deception is common (and even accepted). Date seekers are limited by the design of the sites and posting photos is essential. Next, daters find and view matches and compare them to a list of desired qualities. Physical appearance in pictures is very important. Matchers are contacted through the site and communication varies by site design. Daters move quickly through mediated channels to meet potential partners face-to-face. Therefore, these are scripts for initiating romantic relationships, not actually dating.
Research Questions

The popularity of online dating merits further attention. Individuals are going to dating sites with the hopes of meeting someone, perhaps even an ideal partner, and the sites provide members with a service. Along with this service comes information on how to be a “successful” online dater and find someone special. What messages are online dating sites sending to members and how might these messages be involved in the (re)creation of scripts for dating in an online setting? Cultural scripts from online dating sites may interact with other level scripts for online daters. Online dating site information may also help daters create expectations/schemas for ideal partners or relationships; however, users may develop their own expectations. Because past research has not specifically examined scripts for online dating, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

RQ1: What is the reciprocal nature of cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts of online dating?

RQ2: What are online dating scripts and where do they originate?

Summary

This chapter reviewed pertinent literature pertaining to studying dating scripts in online dating. First, previous conceptualizations of computer-mediated-communication and why they were not fitting for studying online dating scripts were discussed. Second, Script Theory was explained and offered as an alternative approach to understanding online dating. The third section explained traditional dating scripts and how they may not fit for online dating. The fourth section discussed one source of cultural scripts for dating, media, and the advice and dating scripts in media. The fifth section explained how romantically themed media influence beliefs and attitudes about romantic relationships, which may inform how materials from online
dating sites influence members. The last section discussed online dating processes in detail.

Finally, research questions were posed. The next chapter provides the methods to address these research questions.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This chapter describes the research methods used to address the following research questions: (a) RQ1: What is the reciprocal nature of cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts of online dating? and (b) RQ2: What are online dating scripts and where do they originate? First, I describe the research design. Next, I explain the first strand of the study, ethnographic content analysis. Third, I discuss the second strand of the study, in-depth interviews. Lastly, I cover grounded theory meta-inferences.

Research Design

To address the research questions, I used a mixed model triangulation design. First, I conducted a content analysis of online dating site materials to explore cultural scripts provided to online daters. Second, I conducted interviews with current and past online daters to explore intrapsychic and interpersonal scripts. Finally, I interpreted results of the two analyses and compared to explain how online daters and sites manage the (re)creation of dating scripts.

This type of design, figure 3, was referred to as a multistrand concurrent mixed model design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003a). The design consisted of coordinating research questions that were related to one another: (a) What is the reciprocal nature of cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts of online dating? and (b) What are online dating scripts and where do they originate? Then, data collection for each strand was conducted separately but concurrently. This means that the content analysis and interviews were conducted simultaneously and that the results of the content analysis were not needed before beginning the interviews. Because the results of the content analysis were not used to adjust the data collection in the interviews, both strands were completed concurrently instead of sequentially.
In the first strand of the present study, data analysis and data collection were reflexive, while in the second they were sequential. For example, in the ethnographic content analysis the results of data analysis shaped the types of materials needed for data collection. Therefore, data collection and data analysis of online dating site materials influenced one another. Next, I analyzed data separately and inferences were drawn separately, but these processes were also reflexive in nature. Again, inferences were based on data analysis but the inferences lead me to return to analysis for elaboration and further analyzing. Finally, I drew meta-inferences to address the research questions and draw conclusions using grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006).

The research purpose should guide methods choices, and because the purpose was complex (Newman et al., 2003), using a mixed model allowed for addressing complex purposes where a single model could not. The most commonly cited fundamental principle of mixed methods research is: methods should be mixed so the study has complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003a). In this case, the design was mixed model but the principle still applied. By using differing models that complemented one another, the inferences drawn from them provided a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study and acted as a way of triangulation. Using multiple data sources allowed for various points of view and provided a more holistic picture than a single model (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003b). Thus, using a mixed model design allowed for a more holistic understanding of online dating and addressed the overarching research purpose: what was the reciprocal nature of (re)creation of dating scripts between online dating sites and online daters?
From both strands of the research design, grounded theory methods were used to develop an emergent theory to explain scripts in the online dating process. “Studying a process fosters our efforts to construct theory because you define and conceptualize relationships between
experiences and events. Then you can define the major phases and concentrate on the relationships between them” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 136).

Ethnographic Content Analysis of Dating Sites

The first part of the study addressed how online dating sites influence or shape social definitions and social lives for dating and scripts. An ethnographic content analysis (ECA) was used to examine online dating sites and materials. Ethnographic content analysis is a blend of traditional content analysis and participant observation, which is an approach for how a researcher interacts with documents and materials “…so that specific statements can be placed in the proper context for analysis” (Altheide, 1996, p. 2). A document is “…any symbolic representation that can be recorded or retrieved for analysis” and is studied to understand culture or “…the process and the array of objects, symbols, and meanings that make up social reality shared by members of a society” (Altheide, 1996, p. 2). In this case, the culture was that of online daters and the online dating community and the documents were the websites themselves, messages sent to website members, advice and guidelines provided, and the actual interface of the online dating websites. All of the documents/materials available to online daters via the online dating sites helped me understand the social reality of online dating and the meaning of online dating activities.

ECA was selected as a method to study this specific kind of data and answer the particular research questions of this study because it allowed for immersion in the online dating process to understand both the process and daters (Altheide, 1996). Using an ECA approach, the data existed independent from me but the meaning and significance of the data depended upon my focus. The documents were transformed into data through my analysis and questioning. ECA was also appropriate because it allowed for the consideration of context of documents, or
the social situations surrounding the documents. Because online dating site materials took place within the context of online dating sites, it was important to note how the nature of the context affected their meaning and interpretation. Studying these documents in context helped me understand the process and meaning of social activities (Altheide, 1996), which in this case was online dating. Meanings emerged through constant comparison and investigation of documents over time. Through continual examination of the documents from online dating sites, the meanings, scripts, and themes emerged from repeated analysis.

Essentially, what ECA helped me discover was “how do these influence social definitions and social lives?” (Altheide, 1996, p. 11). Using ECA the concern was not on immediate effects of the messages but rather on (a) the document process, context, and significance, and (b) how the document helped define the situation and clarify meaning for the audience member (Altheide, 1996). Thus, ECA helped me understand how documents shaped the online dating experience and subsequent expectations about dating.

According to Altheide (1996), there are 12 steps in the process of qualitative document analysis (or ECA): topic, ethnographic study/literature, a few documents, draft protocol, examine documents, revise protocol, theoretical sample, collect data, code data, compare items, case studies, and finally report. These are addressed throughout this section.

Ethnographic content analysis differs from more traditional quantitative content analysis (QCA) in several ways, beginning with the research goal (Altheide, 1996). Quantitative content analysis has the primary research goal of verification, while ECA’s goal is discovery or verification. In ECA the research design is reflexive, whereas this is seldom done in QCA. The progression from data collection, analysis, and interpretation in QCA is serial and in ECA it is reflective and circular. QCA uses a random or stratified sample while ECA uses purposive and
theoretical sampling. Unlike QCA, ECA can include narrative in addition to numerical data as well as narrative descriptions and comments. Further, in ECA concepts emerge during research, which is not the case with QCA. Finally, data analysis for ECA can be textual or statistical and presented in tables and text, whereas QCA uses statistics and tables only. As Altheide (1996) explains:

ECA follows a recursive and reflexive movement between concept development-sampling-data, collection-data, coding-data, and analysis. The aim is to be systematic and analytic but not rigid. Categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study, including an orientation toward constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances. (p. 16).

Process

The first step in the ECA process is pursuing a specific problem to be investigated (Altheide, 1996). The problem in the current study was examining messages sent to online daters to explore dating scripts presented. The second step was to become familiar with the process and context of the information and explore possible sources. I joined several online dating sites and was familiar with the interface and process. Furthermore, I received emails with advice, took personality tests, and followed guidelines provided from the sites. All of these were sources of information and documents. The third step was to become familiar with several examples of relevant instances and take note of the format. I reviewed materials from the online dating sites joined to establish familiarity. Originally, I decided a unit of analysis was one article, one set of guidelines, one webpage, one personality test, one section of the profile creation process, or one email sent. As expected, these units changed throughout the process to
include units appropriate to items collected. Because website materials are interactive and not concrete documents, my decision on a unit of analysis was much more complicated, and thus, the unit of analysis was much more fluid. It included each step of the profile creation process, a personality quiz, one page of advice or one section of advice (there were hundreds of articles separated into categories or topics), one block piece of advice or guideline from the dating site (such as one computer screen page or message provided to me), or a set of emails sent to me.

My original plan was to conduct a content analysis of dating advice and materials on websites from a micro-coding approach. However, once the data collection process began, it became evident that (a) interview participants revealed they had not availed any of the advice articles the website provided and (b) the number of articles and the information produced on these sites were unrealistic for micro-coding and had no real value after I discovered the usage was minimal at best. Due to the reflexive and flexible nature of ethnographic content analysis, I decided not to micro-code the dating advice article content. Instead, I chose to examine cultural level scripts from online dating sites by closer examination of the profile creation process, the guidelines/rules that were encouraged or enforced by the dating sites, how communication was allowed through the sites’ interface, and the overall tone of the advice available. Throughout collection and analysis, I determined that this was the way online dating scripts were formed, not through the dating advice articles. More information on the protocol is provided below.

Sample

I gathered and analyzed materials from the dating sites (sites chosen and reasoning discussed below). I used a purposive theoretical sampling strategy (Step 7; Altheide, 1996), because the goal was not to generalize the findings to an entire population (even though it could be accommodated to do so). More specifically, I used a “progressive theoretical sampling”
strategy because it entailed selecting materials based upon emerging understanding of the topic under investigation. Therefore, I selected materials for analysis for conceptually relevant reasons (Altheide, 1996) and I added (or deleted) additional materials as the concepts became more apparent. This type of sampling was also acceptable for developing grounded theory (to be used in the meta-inferences; Charmaz, 2006).

Additionally, because I was uncertain which sites my participants would join, I intended to analyze the content of the most popular sites according to one online source (Online dating sites review, 2009). After conducting the interviews, I came to a different conclusion. My research participants overwhelmingly visited Match.com (10 participants of 15 had used) most frequently, followed closely by eHarmony.com (9 participants). The next most frequently visited site was PlentyofFish.com, a site which I had not previously considered. I also visited the current website of consumer rankings (Top Internet Dating Sites, 2009) to view the most popular dating sites. The site lists number of singles, rankings out of 10 (provided by online surveys of users), consumer reviews summary, and bulleted lists of the benefits of each. The site lists the top five sites as Match.com (20 million users), Chemistry.com (14 million users), PerfectMatch.com (11 million users), Yahoo! Personals (10.5 million users), and eHarmony (nine million users).

I chose specific websites to best represent the experience of the online daters I interviewed and what a typical online dating experience may be like; however, because of the abundance of online dating sites, there was no way to generalize to all of them. I chose the sites to cover the most popular and varied style of dating site (discussed in more detail later). Match.com and eHarmony were the most frequently visited sites by my research participants and were both listed on the top-five list in consumer rankings. Thus, these two sites were a clear
choice for analysis. Both of these websites required users to create a profile and allowed a limited amount of communication with matches prior to becoming a subscribing/paying member. While the specific features of the sites and the questions for profile creation were different, they were generally based upon the same principles. Members chose these sites for their popularity (and probably their advertising campaigns) and chose one based upon price and other factors. Their use of the sites varied according to the interface of the site, but their approach and how they used it were fairly similar. Because of this and the fact that none of the other top five consumer ranked sites were used by members, I made the decision not to analyze any of the similar sites. Their interface and usage was unlikely to produce any real theoretical differences.

However, the third most popular (four participants mentioned) dating site by my participants was PlentyofFish.com (POF). This site did not appear on the top-five consumer ranked sites, but there was still benefit in its analysis. First, it was a free site – this was a key difference between POF and the other sites such as Match or eHarmony. Second, it was interesting that it did not appear on the consumer rankings but does appear popular among my participants. The differences between being a member of a free website versus a paid website may be of importance when describing and analyzing scripts. Therefore, I included POF in my analysis of websites. Thus, the three online dating sites I used for analysis were Match.com, eHarmony.com, and PlentyofFish.com.

I became a member of both Match and eHarmony and did not create a profile immediately. I was inundated with emails from both sites with matches, encouragement to complete my profile, advertisements about pricing, dating advice and tips, and special offers such as free communication weekends. I then went back and completed my profiles for both. I did not need to pay for the sites to obtain information I needed. Because contact was not to be
made with members, I did not need approval from the human subjects review board (Dr. M. Miller, personal communication, December 9, 2008). Information I obtained from the sites was available to any individual who joined the websites and therefore, the materials were not privileged.

Documents I chose for analysis included the interface of the sites themselves, including format of the profile creation process and interactive features such as checkboxes, guidelines, advice articles, tips, and emails sent to members of the sites. For instance, on the main page of Yahoo! Personals was a box titled “Tips for Getting Better Results” (2009), which was considered a document for analysis (Yahoo! was used as a template to begin data analysis; Yahoo was not used in the final analysis, it served as a separate source for preliminary research). Users could click on a link for *Dating Articles*, which took them to a page with dating advice, dating tips, discussion about relationships, and more (Dating Advice on Yahoo, 2009). One available article written by a dating coach was titled “Dating Tips: 5-step Action Plan for Single Women over 35” (Wygant, 2009) which contained step-by-step dating advice and a photograph of a happy couple. Articles like this and those similar were sources of information for document analysis. Additionally, interactive self-quizzes were also available for analysis. According to Altheide (1996), the initial investigation required 15 to 20 cases depending on the materials, but due to the exploratory nature, more were added as the process continued. As the sampling strategy was progressive and the protocol was reflexive, I added cases and collected according to relevance to the topic of investigation.

*Protocol*

Step four (Altheide, 1996) was to list several items or categories (or variables) to guide the data collection process and to draft a protocol or data collection sheet. (See Appendix A for
a copy of the data collection protocol.) I adjusted this protocol according to the
document/message collected and adapted it as more information became available, which was
part of the reflexive nature of ECA (Altheide, 1996). Step five was to test the protocol by
collecting data from several documents and step six was to revise the protocol and select
additional cases to further refine the protocol, which was conducted once data collection began.
Because the analysis no longer centered on micro-coding of dating advice articles, the items on
the data collection protocol changed, as well as how I used the protocol. Instead of taking
individual articles and completing a data protocol sheet, I asked the questions from the protocol
for each unit of analysis (which was each step of the profile creation process, a personality quiz,
one page or section of advice, one block of guidelines, or one email from the site) from the data
collected (explained below), written in the margins, and used for data analysis. Questions that
were irrelevant to each unit of data were not used.

Data Collection

The next step was to collect data using the protocol and keep descriptive examples
(Altheide, 1996). The documents (which consisted of screen shots of the profile creation
process, advice articles, guidelines, and emails from the sites) were collected and coded
according to the protocol sheet. Throughout the analysis I examined data to determine
emergence of themes, or as stated by Altheide (1996), “recurring typical theses that run through
a lot of the reports” (p. 31), refined the protocol, and formed or collapsed categories. I made the
appropriate adjustments and data collection continued until completion. I completed the data
collection. Unlike QCA, ECA did not require multiple coders with inter-coder reliability checks.
Thus, my role in the collection process was reflexive and it influenced how and what documents
were collected.
I completed data collection one website at a time, completing the data collection protocol for each document. I collected relevant documents through the initial sign-up process for the dating site and continued from there. I navigated through each site looking for articles, materials, and other pertinent documents for inclusion in analysis. During the profile creation process, I documented each step along the way in a word processing document by pasting in screen shots and copying and pasting in questions or content. I made notes and research memos during this process to note interesting points or additional information. Thus, the essence of the profile creation process was documented from start to finish.

I also explored the sites for personality tests, membership and pricing information, the matching process, and how communication occurred. Again, I captured screen shots of pages and copied questions/information into a word processing document. For instance, I copied eHarmony’s steps of communication and a sample of what each of the steps entailed. Then, I visited the advice pages and community pages for each of these sites. The amount of information was extensive. Once again I noted the page titles and sections for each of these pages and copied the title and headlines for advice articles to capture the essence of these pages.

The word processor documents served as a description of the websites, the profile creation process, how matches were viewed, how communication was allowed, guidelines or advice provided, how the websites intended for users to use them, and advice provided. The documents offered a description of how online dating site members experienced the process and provide a site of analysis. The data were not in clear-cut units. Some were screen shots of emails sent. Others were lists of communication options or questions appearing in the profile creation process. As a whole, they offered a view of the online dating process and a means of analysis.
These sites are rich with cultured meaning and communication. The eHarmony
document produced 102 pages of notes, screen shots, lists, and descriptions. The Match notes
document produced 99 pages of notes, screen shots, lists, and descriptions. The Plenty of Fish
document produced 30 pages of notes, screen shots, lists, and descriptions. I asked questions
from the protocol sheets for each page (or message if it spanned multiple pages) and noted key
points in the margins. I collected samples “until no new properties emerge[d]” and categories
were saturated with data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 100).

Data Analysis

Altheide’s (1996) next step (nine) was to perform data analysis, which included refining
concepts and data coding and reading notes and data repeatedly and thoroughly. Some
categories guided the study (such as what are cultural scripts), but others emerged through
constant discovery and comparisons (such as emphasis on physical appearance). This step
allowed for tentative findings about “…the overall process, types, and range of material in each
file, which becomes the basis for a report to be cumulatively added to other reports but also as
data for further insights, ideas, and future study” (Altheide, 1996, p. 42). My goal was to
connect meanings of the documents to conceptual and theoretical concerns, which was done
when I interacted with the data (Altheide, 1996).

Step 10 involved comparing and contrasting extremes and key differences within
categories or items, making notes, and writing brief summaries or overviews of data for each
category. My analysis consisted of “extensive reading, sorting, and searching through [my]
materials; comparing and contrasting within categories, coding, and adding key words and
concepts; and then writing mini-summaries of categories” (Altheide, 1996, p. 43). The next step
(11) involved combining brief summaries with examples of typical cases and extremes, using
information from the protocol for illustrations, and noting surprises and curiosities. Then, I created word processing documents for each theme/category and data or notes were placed in the appropriate files. The final step in the process was integrating findings with my interpretations and key concepts (Altheide, 1996). It involved summarizing categories in writing and using illustrative materials as needed, including descriptions and quotations. I presented the findings as a personal narrative of the process and emergent themes from the websites. My analysis from this strand of the study was combined with my interview analysis to develop grounded theory.

In-Depth Interviews with Online Daters

To explore how online daters experience online dating and how interpersonal and cultural scripts interact, I conducted 15 in-depth interviews with online daters. Interviewing fits grounded theory methods particularly well and compliments other methods (Charmaz, 2006), such as ethnographic content analysis. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), in-depth interviews involve the researcher focusing the interview around a narrow range of topics and then exploring those in detail. In this case, the range of topics were the experience/process of online dating, how users interact with dating sites to (re)create dating scripts, and how cultural and interpersonal scripts interact. While there were additional information and demographic questions asked, the majority focused around these concepts. My goal in the interviews was to obtain depth, detail, and richness. To obtain this level of rich data, I had to develop main questions, probes, and follow up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The main questions started off the conversation and covered the desired topic, while probes were my way of obtaining additional information. I listened to the responses from the interviewee for themes and key ideas and then asked follow-up questions to expand on the ideas (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). As in
another study of online daters, qualitative interviews allowed me to probe, ask for clarification, and share a lived experience in a two-way conversation (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008).

Interviews followed an interview guide, which consisted of “…grouping of topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 195). While there may be a preferred order for the questions, they did not have to be asked in that specific order. (See Appendix B for the interview guide, which was adapted from Ellison et al.’s [2006] online dating study.) The interview guide included questions about the process of online dating, materials used from the dating sites, their personal scripts for dating both online and offline, how each negotiated cultural and other scripts in their experiences, their love styles, and views and expectations about dating and their ideal partners.

Participant Recruitment

I solicited participation through network and snowball sampling strategies (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). All participants were over the age of 18. I recruited participants if they were active online daters (visited at least one online dating site at least once per month) or past online daters (not actively dating online but have in the past). Online dating was defined as visiting dating sites for the purpose of meeting face-to-face and potentially dating the partner.

I had a few contacts with known online daters who were asked to participate and contacts referred individuals they knew who were past or present online daters. I collected email addresses for these individuals and I sent an invitation email to them per the Human Subjects Review Board’s approval. In some studies, there are limitations to this strategy; however, my goal of the inquiry was not to extrapolate to the whole population but to explain a concept in detail. Qualitative research, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2002) is focused on the “…social practices and the meanings of people in a specific historical or cultural context…” (p. 122) and
so participants were chosen based upon their membership in the online dating culture. This was theoretical sampling and involved “seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96). Thus, “theoretical sampling pertains only to conceptual, theoretical development; it is not about representing a population or increasing the statistical generalizability of your results” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 100-101). Grounded theory also allows for the negative cases, or those that went against the code, to be explored. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached or “until no new properties emerge[d]” and categories were saturated with data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 100).

I presented potential participants with the choice of a face-to-face (depending on geographic location), phone, or online interview. While conducting interviews online could mean losing valuable non-verbal communication (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005), past studies used similar online interviews and researchers believed they could be less prone to the social desirability issues of face-to-face interviews (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). Once participants agreed via email or phone to participate, I emailed them an electronic copy of the consent form (per HSRB approval) and negotiated a time to conduct the interview. All but one of the participants received an electronic version of the consent form. The face-to-face interviewee received a hard copy of the consent form. I also asked participants to refer other online daters they knew to participate. Once the participants reviewed the consent form, I scheduled and conducted the interviews during the fall of 2009. Participants were provided with a gas card in exchange for their participation. I asked participants for their postal addresses to mail the gas card and assured them the addresses would only be used for this purpose.
Participants

Fifteen participants ranged in age from 24 to 62 with a mean age of 32 and a median age of 29. I interviewed 10 females and five males. Of the 15, eight were members of online dating sites and seven were former site members. Of the seven past online daters, six were either married to or partnered with someone they met through an online dating site. All but one identified as heterosexual with one identifying as lesbian. Because gay/lesbians have been found to have similar dating scripts but have a few differences (e.g. Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994) and gay/lesbians/bisexuals have different reasons for joining dating sites (Lever et al., 2008), I thought it was useful to examine online dating amongst non-heterosexuals as well. While I hoped to elicit more non-heterosexual participation, I believed this participant provided valuable insight into her experiences as an online dater regardless of sexual orientation. Participants represented various regions of the United States and resided in Michigan, Iowa, Wisconsin, South Carolina, Florida, California, or Ohio. Participants chose a pseudonym or allowed me to choose one to guarantee confidentiality.

Participants had experience with seven different online dating sites. Ten were current \(n=4\) or past \(n=6\) members of Match.com, nine were current \(n=2\) or past \(n=7\) members of eHarmony.com, and four were present \(n=2\) or past \(n=2\) members of PlentyofFish.com. Two participants revealed being a past or present member of Yahoo! Personals or ModelMeet.com. One participant was a member of Craigslist Personals and has used AOL Personals in the past. Table 1 presents the summary of study participants.

Shane was a 24-year-old male who identified as heterosexual and Caucasian/Asian. He was a senior analyst for hedge funds in the western United States and was single. He has used online dating sites for about four- to five- years off and on and used a variety of sites including
Plenty of Fish.com, Yahoo! Personals, ModelMeet.com, and eHarmony. He revealed he communicated with about 20 women online and met about 16-18 face-to-face from the sites.

Ashley was a 30-year-old white female who identified as lesbian. She was a professor in the southern United States and partnered with a woman she met through Match.com for almost one year. She was a member of Match.com for three months. She emailed approximately four or five women while using Match.com and met two of them face-to-face.

Rebecca was a 29-year-old white woman who identified as straight. She was an instructor and graduate student in the Midwestern United States. She used online dating sites off and on for nine years and utilized eHarmony, Match.com, AOL personals, and Craigslist. She was currently only using Craigslist for online date seeking. Since being a member of online dating sites she exchanged emails with 50 to 100 men and met about 25 to 35 men face-to-face. She had a long-term relationship with a partner met online.

Steve was a 33-year-old Internet marketer living in the southern United States. He identified as Caucasian/American-Indian and heterosexual. Steve was divorced and single. He used Yahoo! Personals, Match.com, Plenty of Fish.com, and ModelMeet.com to post and view profiles. He was a member of some of the sites off and on for years while others only for a few months. Steve communicated via email with at least 50 to 100 women through the dating sites and met five-to-ten face-to-face.

Jason was a 24-year-old white male living in the Midwestern United States and worked in business insurance sales. He was on a break from dating a woman he met online. Jason was a member of eHarmony and Match for about eight months before suspending his usage because of this relationship. He sent messages to 100-to-120 women and received a response from one third of them. Of these women he met 10 face-to-face.
### Table 1. Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Rel. Status</th>
<th>Time Dated Online</th>
<th>Sites Used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shane</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Asian/White</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>4-5 years</td>
<td>POF, Yahoo, ModelMeet, eHarmony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Partnered 1 year</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Off/on 9 years</td>
<td>eHarmony, Match, AOL, Craigslist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White/American Indian</td>
<td>Single, divorced</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Yahoo, eHarmony, Match, Modelmeet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Dating 1 year</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Off/on 6 years</td>
<td>eHarmony, Match, Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>&lt; month</td>
<td>Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Single, widowed</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>POF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1 month</td>
<td>eHarmony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>eHarmony, Match, POF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Match, eHarmony, Match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>eHarmony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>eHarmony</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jon was a single 32-year-old straight male who identified as Caucasian. He worked as a professor in the Midwestern United States. Jon started using online dating sites about six years ago and has been a member off and on since then. He was recently a member of eHarmony and is currently a member of Match. When a member of eHarmony, he communicated with seven- or eight- women online and met three of them face-to-face. Because his membership with Match was new, he had not met any women yet.

Mary was a 28-year-old straight white woman who was a physical therapist in the Midwestern United States. She married a man she met through Match.com. Mary explained she exchanged emails with about six men prior to meeting her husband through the site. She and her husband communicated through Match less than 24 hours after she created her profile and he was the only man she met face-to-face through the site.

Sheila was a 62-year-old straight, white medical assistant living in the Midwestern United States. She was a widow, has three children and seven grandchildren. Sheila was a member of Plenty of Fish.com for about six months and communicated with about six men through the site. She met one man face-to-face originally met online.

Derek was a 28-year-old straight male living in the Midwestern United States and worked in medical equipment sales. He identified himself as white and single. He was a member of Match.com for four months. At the time of the interview he had been dating a woman he met online for about one week. He exchanged emails with about 40 to 60 women since joining the site and met six or seven women face-to-face.

Amber was a 29-year-old white high school teacher living in the Midwestern United States. She married (no children) a man she met on eHarmony after being a member for one
month. Because she was only a member for one month, Amber exchanged emails with two men and met one face-to-face, whom she ultimately married.

Megan was a 29-year-old white occupational therapist living in the Midwestern United States. She married (no children) a man she met on Match.com. She was a member of the site for two months before meeting her husband. Prior to meeting her husband she went on dates with five men from Match and emailed more than that.

Emily was a 27-year-old white single female who worked in admissions at a large Midwestern university. She was a member of eHarmony, Match.com, and Plenty of Fish.com and had been for the past three months. Emily communicated with about 70 men online through the dating sites (15 on Match, five on eHarmony, and 50 on Plenty of Fish) and only met two men in person, both of whom she met on Match.

Cathy was a 43-year-old professor who identified as straight and white and lived in the Midwestern United States. She was single, never-married, and was newly dating a man she met through Match.com. She was a member of eHarmony for a year, was a member of Match.com for three years and stopped for a relationship initiated through the site, and had most recently been on Match for about a year. She emailed and/or chatted online with 20 to 25 men through the two sites and has met six or seven men face-to-face.

Lindsey was a white 34-year-old administrative assistant living in the Midwestern United States. She was married with one child to a man she met through eHarmony. Lindsey briefly tried Yahoo! Personals before joining eHarmony for four months and meeting her husband. She met just one man face-to-face prior to meeting him.
Lily was a single, white 29-year-old high school teacher living in the Midwestern United States. She was a member of eHarmony for four months, communicated with three men via the site, and met one man face-to-face.

**Procedure**

I conducted fourteen of the interviews via phone calls, one face-to-face, and one through Google Chat online. Phone calls were made at a pre-arranged time using phone numbers interviewees provided. I used the speaker phone feature of a telephone in my office while alone for privacy to interview the participants. I conducted the face-to-face interview at the interviewee’s private office at a pre-arranged time. Both the face-to-face and phone calls were audio recorded using a digital voice recorder and were transcribed verbatim. The transcript of the Google Chat was used as the transcription. Interviews ranged in time from 28 minutes to 75 minutes with an average of 50 minutes per interview. Transcripts resulted in 283 single-spaced, typed pages of interview data (average interview transcript length was 19 pages).

**Data Analysis**

Once interviews were transcribed and all data were in text form, analysis began. For this strand’s analysis, I used grounded theory to construct theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). Taking a grounded theory approach to qualitative data means focusing on “…the development of theory, without any particular commitment to specific kinds of data, lines of research, or theoretical interest” (Strauss, 1987, p. 5). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 3), “…generating grounded theory is a way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses.” The underlying goal of this study was to understand and explain the process of online dating; therefore, couching the analysis in script theory and using grounded theory facilitated the full explanation desired for online dating. Because grounded theory was used for analysis of both
interviews and the meta-inferences, grounded theory and methods will be explained in more detail in the next section.

Grounded Theory, Data Analysis, and Meta-Inferences

Grounded theory methods, according to Charmaz (2006), “consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (p. 2). “In research practice, theorizing means being eclectic, drawing on what works, defining what fits” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 148). In a positivist paradigm, a theory is “a statement of relationship between abstract concepts” and the objective is to explain and predict (Charmaz, 2006, p. 125). However, from a more interpretive paradigm, a theory emphasizes understanding instead of an explanation and assumes emergent and multiple realities (Charmaz, 2006, p. 126). According to Charmaz (2006), “the fundamental contribution of grounded theory methods resides in offering a guide to interpretive theoretical practice not in providing a blue print for theoretical products” (p. 128).

Using this approach, the researcher studies data early and begins to sort, separate and synthesize data through qualitative coding (Charmaz, 2006). In this case, I collected data through interviews and online dating sites and sorted, synthesized, and coded throughout the data collection process. Coding is to “attach labels to segments of data that depict what each segment is about” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). In this study, data were coded for ideas such as profile creation, cultural scripts, or intrapsychic scripts. Using grounded theory served as a way to learn about online dating and develop theories to understand the process and experience of being an online dater. Consistent with other grounded theorists (Charmaz, 2006), I gathered multiple sources of data, both interviews with online daters and content analysis of dating sites, and analyzed it throughout the process. Also consistent with grounded theorists (Charmaz, 2006), I evaluated
how well my original research questions and ideas fit the emerging data I collected through interview and website content and learned that my original conceptualizations needed to be adapted. As Charmaz (2006) suggested, I had to ask myself the following questions: “Have I gathered rich and sufficient data? What’s happening here? What are the basic social processes? What are basic social psychological processes?” (p.18-20). When I could answer all of these questions I stopped collecting data.

The first step in the grounded theory analysis is coding, which entails “categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). These codes shaped the frame of the analysis. In the interviews, themes such as shopping for a date or using criterion to eliminate potential matches emerged. In the website analysis themes such as the importance of physical appearance and choosing appropriate pictures to post became apparent. Through this process I began to define what was happening in the online dating experience and started to play with “what it all means” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). Because codes emerged from the data, it took me in directions I had not anticipated, such as online dating sites creating cultural scripts through their design or the participants’ admission that they never read dating advice. Coding took place in two phases: initial and focused.

In the initial phase of coding, the codes were “provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47-48). Each complete thought or message was coded and put into a computer file to identify the script/themes. I used the constant comparative method to identify themes, which means I constantly compared the new data to previously created codes to find similarities and differences. I also used special “invivo codes” (Charmaz, 2006), which were the participants’ special terms such as continuation of the terms online dating, matches, closing
matches, and winks, which fit into the coding scheme. This process was conducted by reading through the interviews and website notes and writing codes into a word processing document. As new codes emerged, they were compared to the document and either added or updated. I took notes on the terms/phrases that fit into each code. For instance, under the code “creating a profile,” the following phrases were included: maybe use advice from website (follow advice for what to include or not), cheesy advice was ignored or “duh” advice was not elicited, more practical advice was more likely to be followed such as on eHarmony, etc.

Next, focused coding was performed, which was more directed, selective, and conceptual. It was an emergent process, which involved combining some codes and refining them (Charmaz, 2006). In this study, separate word processing documents were created for each of the codes and the appropriate interview quotations or website material notes were copied into the file. Then, more specific coding took place to find subthemes within each of the categories to refine and describe them in more depth.

After these general codes were created, axial coding, or bringing all of the codes together into a meaningful whole, was done. In the case of interpersonal scripts, this was accomplished by fitting the codes into a chronological order and piecing segments together. The next step was theoretical coding, which helped draw relationships between codes (Charmaz, 2006). For instance, the steps in the script were rearranged according to order and how they fit in to the overall online dating experience from an online dater’s point of view.

Throughout the research process, I wrote research memos, which served as informal writings about codes and data that I took throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2006). I used memo writing throughout the data collection and analysis process. Notes were kept in a notebook during interviews with participants to note patterns or ideas to elaborate on with future
interviewees or themes I noticed. During data collection of the websites, I wrote memos alongside the copied images from the websites and included my reflections, ideas, and possible themes. While reading interview transcripts and looking at website content, I kept memos on how the scripts formed and fit together. Memos were also written when looking at the codes and original research questions. I took notes in the form of bulleted lists in word processing documents to record ideas and how the codes/themes fit the research questions. These memos ultimately shaped how I fit all of the pieces of the data analysis together in the scripts to answer research questions.

It was also through this memo writing process that new ideas emerged that contradicted my original thoughts about the influence of online dating sites on members and allowed me to change direction to effectively examine the phenomenon under study. The memos helped shape my ideas through careful reflection on data and my own ideas on data analysis. Each memo allowed me to develop the answers to my research questions more thoughtfully. According to Charmaz (2006), memos hint at ideas and topics that need to be fleshed out and researchers should just do whatever works for them (p. 75, 80).

Once all of the data from both strands of the model were analyzed, I drew meta-inferences to address how online daters and online dating sites managed cultural and interpersonal scripts in the dating process. I compared themes and overlapping concepts from both strands to develop overall findings. Once again the meta-inferences were drawn based on processes in grounded theory (Strauss, 1987). Constant comparisons of themes allowed for developing rich concepts and a theory about the reciprocal nature of online dating scripts between the online dating website and the online daters. The final step in the constant
comparisons process, writing theory, will be done here (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with details providing the major themes for the theory.

To create theory, theoretical sorting was used to compare categories at an abstract level to create theoretical links (Charmaz, 2006). Sorting can occur by writing out ideas or codes on cards and rearranging them. In this case, the pieces were hand written on notes and a diagram was created that showed how the pieces of the puzzle fit together. Because memos and notes had already been edited in a word processing document, the handwriting allowed for pieces of the puzzle to be moved and added based upon the electronic document. This diagram was important for showing how all of the pieces fit together. Diagramming helped “provide a visual representation of data, tease out relationships, and construct analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 117). For instance, I knew the steps in the dating process from my analysis but wanted a visual representation. So I wrote the steps on Post-it notes and rearranged them several times until the steps fit conceptually. I used this diagram and all forms of collected data to create the framework and develop a theory that best fit the online dating process.

Summary

This chapter described the research methods used in the study. I employed a mixed-model design, utilizing both ethnographic content analysis and in-depth interviews because they were appropriate for addressing the research questions. The ethnographic content analysis was completed to analyze online dating sites and documents on online dating sites to illuminate cultural scripts for dating online. The in-depth interviews were conducted with online daters to explore how materials from online dating sites and personal scripts were used to (re) create scripts for dating. Finally, a meta-interference was completed to bring all findings together for further analysis of the research questions and to develop grounded theory.
The next chapter presents the results and discussion for my study. First, I provide my personal narrative from the ethnographic content analysis of dating sites and present scripts from the analysis. Second, I present the model of online dating I developed. Third, I provide a detailed explanation of the steps in the process of online dating.
CHAPTER 4:
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I present the results to the research questions: Where do online dating scripts originate? What is the interactive/reciprocal nature of cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts of online dating? The first section presents my personal narrative of online dating sites and cultural scripts of these sites to answer the first question. The second and third sections answer the question pertaining to the reciprocal nature of cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts. The second section presents a model of online dating based upon both sets of data analysis and explains the model. The third section offers a detailed analysis of the steps in the model to describe the online dating process. First, however, I provide a summary of the results. After analyzing the data from both the websites and interviews, I discovered that the script levels cannot be easily separated as Script Theory suggests. For the sake of analysis, however, I discuss the scripts individually.

The cultural scripts, which reference societal or cultural rules or guidelines (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 1998) for online dating, were reflected in each dating website by the members that use those sites. Cultural scripts included the design of the websites, the dating culture of the sites (e.g., serious versus casual daters), and the interface in which the members interact. The sites created scripts through the profile creation process, matching process, and restriction of communication. Each site had a unique culture (e.g., personality quizzes, how members can initiate conversations), but shared a similar script for how online dating works. Online dating companies created the website interfaces with a variety of features (e.g., forcing users to post a picture before viewing others’ profiles), guidelines (e.g., how to select the best photograph), set up processes (e.g., users must complete a personality questionnaire), and advice (e.g., how to get
more attention from others by posting a picture). These cultural scripts for how to meet a match are explained in the section describing the online dating sites and throughout the rest of the chapter.

Intrapsychic scripts reference a date seekers’ goals (e.g., why they joined an online dating site or sites), expectations (e.g., what they hoped to gain from the sites), and desires for online dating (e.g., to find someone with whom to share casual dates). They included how the participants wanted to relate to others romantically, qualities they were looking for in a partner, expectations and goals for online dating and their first meeting, their image of a successful online dating experience, and their own process for reviewing matches.

Daters started the dating process with goals and expectations that helped them choose a site and navigate through the process. For instance, some online daters were looking for a casual relationship (goal) while others were looking for a more serious one. Each online dater had goals for how to relate to others romantically (e.g., wanting a companion) and what each thought made a successful relationship (e.g., having someone who is honest and shares the same values). These factors influenced their online dating experience. Date seekers were constrained by the design of the websites but used the sites in their own ways to achieve their goals (e.g., to find someone to share a relationship). Sometimes, online date seekers followed the rules of the sites (or had to) and other times they did not.

Interpersonal scripts, or the negotiation of intrapsychic and cultural scripts, were the actual online dating experiences of how a user went through the process to communicate with others and achieve their goals. Interpersonal scripts included the actual process a user experienced as a member of an online dating site and how each used the email/communication from the sites to talk to other members. There were similar behavioral patterns; date seekers chose sites based
upon the perception that the site attracted the type of members they sought. Then, they engaged in a process of eliminating potential matches based upon their list of criteria (intrapsychic script) for a partner. They used the sites to discover these qualities through profiles and communicating online. The decision of who to contact and the actual communication with other online date seekers signified this interpersonal script. It demonstrated the negotiation and reciprocal nature of cultural, intrapsychic, and interpersonal scripts – it was how they got what they wanted (intrapsychic) from the site (cultural) and how they communicated with other online daters (interpersonal). This communication (interpersonal) thus influenced their intrapsychic scripts.

Personal Narrative and Scripts

Dating websites had similar yet unique interfaces that allowed their members to try to find love online. To analyze how dating sites contributed to the co-creation of online dating scripts, I explain each dating site’s process to illustrate how the dating sites contribute to general dating scripts. While the general script for online dating was fairly simple (e.g., join site, create a profile, find matches, communicate with matches, meet offline), the way that online dating sites allowed members to experience dating and the way the online daters used the sites in their own ways made for more complex interaction. I used an ethnographic content analysis, which involved joining the websites and allowing themes to emerge during the process. As it was a reflexive process, I first provide my personal ethnographic narrative of the experience to describe what online dating entails for date seekers. I present my own intrapsychic and interpersonal scripts in detail throughout. Following my personal narrative I provide the themes of cultural scripts that emerged from my content analysis. The summary for eHarmony is explained first, followed by Match, then finally Plenty of Fish. Following the summaries, emergent cultural scripts are discussed.
For clarification, a *match* is another date seeker with whom a site member is paired either using the site’s matching formula or the search criteria entered by the date seeker. The different types of dating websites are explained within the context of the site summaries. I define sites that match members with others and restrict open viewing of profiles as matchmaking sites. I consider sites that allow open browsing or searching through member profiles as search engine sites because they treat profiles as data and allow date seekers to search through the database to find potentially compatible partners.

*eHarmony Summary*

This section explains my experience joining eHarmony. I explain the process chronologically step by step. First, I provide descriptive information about the site. Then, I explain my profile creation process and matching. Lastly, I explain dating advice and research followed by some conclusions.

*About eHarmony*

eHarmony was founded by researcher Dr. Neil Warren who claimed he based the site on research findings that helped him develop his patented Compatibility Matching System™ (About eHarmony, December 2009). eHarmony claimed to be “the first relationship service to use relationship science to develop its compatibility matching and marriage profiles” (About eHarmony, December 2009). The site further said it was committed to not only providing a dating site, but also to conducting research about how to make a successful romantic relationship. It emphasized that the matching system was based upon relationship research literature; its lab conducts research to further understand relational processes. Results from their studies were used to improve matching on the site, submitted for peer-reviewed publication, and shared with the general population (About eHarmony, December 2009).
Visitors to the site can take a tour. The tour begins by explaining how eHarmony was “more personal than personals,” and then said the next step was to “Get Your Personal Profile.” eHarmony then finds “truly compatible singles for YOU,” and it is “FREE to review your matches.” It promised users to “fall in love for all the right reasons.”

I completed the process myself. When I first visited eHarmony, I created an account but did not complete the profile creation process. Because I started their questionnaire but did not complete my profile, I was inundated with emails from eHarmony advertisements urging me to become a paying member. These emails featured a prominent picture of an attractive success story couple who met on eHarmony. They urged me to complete the questionnaire and sign up for membership. The email read “Incredible offer! Just make 3 Easy Payments” with a button to click to take users to the website. Figure 4 shows the screen shot of one of these emails.
Other emails I received were less direct. They offered dating advice sponsored by eHarmony because I had yet to complete the profile process. Advice included tips for dating (e.g., “He Stopped Calling, This Might Be Why…Avoid These Common Mistakes With Men”), how to avoid making dating mistakes (e.g., “THE Questions You Should Never Ask on a First Date!”), and relationship advice such as “How to Fix a Terrible Kisser” (eHarmony email, November 4, 2009). Figure 5 shows the screen shot of one of the advice emails from November 4, 2009.
I received emails several times per week either with dating tips or advertisements to enjoy a free trial offer. Each of the emails presented the process as being easy and the payments were easy as well. Users who subscribed paid just $19.95 per month for three months, which was down from the usual $59.95 per month fee (if purchased month by month instead of in a package). The advertisement emails all contained happy success stories featuring a couple who met on eHarmony. Most of the successful couples in the pictures were white and heterosexual but one of them was African American. The emails also suggested “Finish your questionnaire today so that you can take advantage of this limited-time offer. Once you sign up, you’ll be able to start viewing photos and communicate with your matches!” (eHarmony email, October 18,
The messages played on the importance of viewing photos and communication with matches.

When I first visited the eHarmony homepage, I was presented with a photograph of a happy couple who met on eHarmony and a caption that read “Experience the eHarmony Difference: Now it’s FREE to receive and review your single matches! Each compatible match pre-screened for you across 29 dimensions. Start dating now. Simply register and take the questionnaire to receive your matches!” (eHarmony Home Page, December 2009). The interactive box read “FREE to Review Your Matches” and had areas to fill in name, sex and searching for man/woman, ZIP code, country, email, and how did you hear about us. Once I completed the steps I clicked on “Find My Matches.” Figure 6 shows the homepage of eHarmony.

Figure 6. eHarmony Homepage, December 2009
Creating a Profile and Matching

The first step in becoming a member is to create a profile. Once I started the eHarmony process, I had to complete the lengthy questionnaire that promised to match me with others based on 29 dimensions of compatibility. The questionnaire suggested compatibility was easy to break down into components and the dating site could match me with the right individuals. It was a very comprehensive and time consuming questionnaire. I was prompted to complete sections about religion (Section 2: Personal Characteristics) and how important religion was to me (user’s religion and ideal match’s religion). The next section was titled Personal Beliefs and forced me to select a religious denomination. I also indicated how important it was for a match to share this characteristic. The next section involved several items that included the personality quiz. I was asked to indicate agreement with statements in a Likert-type scale from “not at all” to “very much.” It included items such as: I do things according to a plan, I feel unable to deal with things, I seek adventure, I often carry the conversation to a higher level, I often make others feel good, and I usually stand up for myself (eHarmony Personality Characteristics Quiz, December 2009). The next page Self Descriptions asked me to indicate how much descriptions fit me, such as warm, dominant, aloof, cold, or energetic. There were five pages with descriptive words. In the right margin of each screen during the questionnaire completion process, there was a meter indicating how far along in the process I was, as well as a quotation from successful users, the creator, or just advice in general such as “Try not to over-analyze! Your first impulse is usually the correct answer.”

Once the personality quiz was completed, I was asked lifestyle questions. Again, I was asked to indicate how much I agreed with statements such as I enjoy a good joke, I have a high desire for sexual activity, I tend to think outside the box, it is important for me to be viewed by
others as a successful person, and I care a lot about the physical shape I am in (*Personal Characteristics*). The next section was titled *About Your Feelings* and included a similar format with descriptive words such as happy, hopeful, calm, tired, satisfied, and safe. The quotation on this page read

‘The integrity of eHarmony is very attractive to me. It's the only place where I have found people who actually know what makes a good relationship work, and really care about what kind of matches are being made.’ ~Andy in Fort Worth, TX.

It emphasized the success of eHarmony and how the site knew how to pair partners to make a good relationship.

Each of these sections had to be completed to move on to the next screen. The next step was *Relationship Orientation and Values* and included statements like, I am looking for a long-term relationship that will ultimately lead to marriage, I don’t need to have close friendships to be happy, and being monogamous causes relationships to get boring over time. Again, there were constant messages from past users in the form of quotations. I was then asked to complete *Important Qualities* about a partner. I indicated how important statements were such as my partner’s personal values, my partner’s beliefs, my partner’s kindness, and my partner’s ability to communicate. These items looked at more in-depth qualities about a partner, not just demographic or physical characteristics such as height or income. There were multiple pages of match values. Figure 7 presents one of the pages for indicating important qualities.

More lifestyle questions were asked and I indicated if a statement was true or false such as: I enjoy many different types of recreational activities, I generally want to come out ahead, I don’t care what other people think about me, and my house is often cleaner when I have company coming over (*About Your Personality*). I then rated my interests such as live music,
movies, gadgets, board games, traveling, hunting, politics, and pets (Your Personal Interests).

The next section was *Living Skills* and I indicated how skilled I was at a variety of activities such as socializing, resolving conflict, and making new friends. After responding to questions about *Communication Style*, including I try to resolve the conflict quickly and I am passionate/intense about by position, matching information was provided. Matching information included smoking behavior, drinking behavior, having children in the home, and what an ideal match should have.

Geographic location of a potential match was also asked.

![Section 8: Important Qualities (cont'd)](image)

Figure 7. Important Qualities on eHarmony, December 2009
Finally, my profile creation process was complete. While there were only a few options to type in information, eHarmony did its matching behind the scenes based upon my responses to the lengthy questionnaire. I was prompted to upload a photo and offered additional help in a photo wizard to help format the right picture. I decided not to upload a picture at the time because I did not want to mislead anyone (and thought I was unlikely to get responses without a picture). Paying members were allowed to upload several pictures in an album for other paying members to see. The next screen led me to a subscription page with another picture of a happy attractive couple who met on eHarmony. The page boasted “More Members than ever,” and suggested I check out matches and get a free personality profile. See Figure 8 to see the page viewed to start the matching process.

![Figure 8. Starting the Matching Process on eHarmony](image-url)
eHarmony was a matchmaking site that did not allow me to browse profiles of other members, and it only sent a handful of matches for review at a time. The site wanted date seekers to consider each of the suggested matches personally because they had been matched based upon the results of the completed questionnaire. When I clicked to view my matches, I was presented with a list of users with names, ages, locations, a start communication button and an indicator of communication stages completed (1, 2, 3, 4, open; discussed more later). Figure 9 shows what the list of matches page looked like. eHarmony provided me seven matches, though I could not view their profiles without paying to join the site. This served as a privacy and security feature for members to keep users’ identities hidden from snoopers and forced users to pay to see pictures.

eHarmony had a Guided Communication process and simplistic profiles. When I clicked on the name of one of my matches, communication opened with the match. A profile in eHarmony included occupation, age, height, ethnicity, religion, want kids (yes/no, someday), drinks, smokes, and About Me information and can be seen in Figure 10. As stated above, photos could not be viewed unless I paid. There was a very limited amount of information immediately available – communication needed to take place to gain more information. Unique to eHarmony was the section on the left with Guided Communication steps to show where the match was in the communication process. Because there were only seven matches for me to view, I could start communication, close the match or do nothing. Closing the match deleted him from my matches and said I am not interested. I could even select why I closed the match.
Figure 9. My Matches Page on eHarmony

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member Info</th>
<th>ReplyID</th>
<th>Communication Stage</th>
<th>Next Steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben, 33</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 OPEN</td>
<td>Start Communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>last communication: December 15, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brock, 29</td>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>View Match Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek, 32</td>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>View Match Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jew, 25</td>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>View Match Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff, 35</td>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>View Match Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy, 34</td>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>View Match Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick, 25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Playing off of the idea of deal-breakers or having a list of criteria for potential matches to meet, eHarmony had date seekers create a list of 10 *Must Haves* and 10 *Can’t Stands* to send to potential partners. The instructions explained that Dr. Warren introduced a concept in his book, *How to Know if Someone is Worth Pursuing in Two Dates or Less*, of must haves and can’t stands which was essentially a shopping list of traits they looked for and avoided in a mate. Thus, I was provided with a list of items and instructed to select the 10 most important
qualities/characteristics a mate must have. The same was done for must not haves or “can’t stands” (eHarmony Must Haves Tab, December 2009).

I was provided a list of 50 items from the categories traits, values, family, social living, spirituality, financial, and sexuality and I had to check off 10 my match must have. Examples included Family (e.g., I must have someone who shares my desire to have or adopt a family), Sociability (e.g., I must have a partner who loves to socialize with lots of different people), and Abstinent (e.g., I must have a spouse who has saved himself/herself sexually for marriage).

Figure 11 shows what my Must Haves list looked like when another date seeker viewed it. When viewed the date seeker could compare our lists and see whether further contact should be pursued.

Figure 11. My Must Haves List in eHarmony
Just like the list of Must Haves, I was required to provide a list of my Can’t Stands. Again, when a potential match read these he could see if he possessed these qualities and could make a more informed decision about pursuing me further. Similarly, I could view his lists and use them to make my own decisions about further communication with him. Again there were 50 items divided into categories of traits and values and I was instructed to choose 10. Items included Vanity (e.g., I can’t stand someone who is overly interested in their physical appearance), Lying (e.g., I can’t stand someone who lies to anyone- especially to me), Petty (e.g., I can’t stand someone who focuses on imperfection), Sexually Obsessed (e.g., I can’t stand someone who is sexually obsessive), and Cheap (e.g., I can’t stand someone who is so tightfisted as to be impractical).

I was presented with open text boxes for About Me that were not required to set up the profile, but they were encouraged because “Users who have all their About Me questions answered receive more communication from their matches” (eHarmony About Me tab, December 2009). I could write up to 650 characters to describe my passions, influential people in my life, life skills, important qualities in others, how I spend leisure time, and books I have read. Whereas other dating sites provided open text boxes, theirs was a guided process that asked various questions to provide much more guidance and detail in responses. The site advised me here that

Your Introductory Information is the "first impression" that you make on your matches. Take a moment to review your answers. Did you represent yourself well? Spelling and grammar are important, but above all, the page should reflect your unique perspective and give someone insight into who you are. (eHarmony About Me section, December 2009)
eHarmony provided small pieces of helpful information for creating a profile instead of lengthy articles throughout the process.

Obviously this was a lengthy process to complete all aspects of the profile. Once all of the sections were completed, eHarmony offered me to verify my identification for $5.95, which advertised “RelyID will quickly and easily verify your name, city, and age, so your matches will want to start and continue communicating with you” (eHarmony RelyID, December, 2009). This service promised to guarantee a person was who they claimed to be, offering users peace of mind about whom they were speaking to online.

After completing all of the additional information, my homepage showed my matching preferences, my matches, who had viewed me, and additional tabs. (Figure 12 illustrates my homepage.) I was prompted to join the site officially and pay the membership fees for one of three packages: basic, total connect, or special. Date seekers could purchase one month, three months, six months, or 12 months with the price per month decreasing as more months were purchased. Purchasing a single month cost $59.95, three months cost $39.95 each, six months cost $29.95 each, and 12 months cost $19.95 each. The page urged for a three month commitment to “find that special someone” so I could communicate with more users. It also had another picture of a happy couple who met through eHarmony and stated “The #1 Trusted Online Relationship Service” (eHarmony Membership Page, December 2009). Again, eHarmony played on the idea that it was trustworthy and demonstrated the attractive, successful couples it had matched.
My matches were eager to start the communication process, as one match requested communication almost as soon as I posted my profile (I quickly deactivated my account to avoid this). To request communication was the starting point to meeting a match. Figure 13 shows the steps in the **Guided Communication** process. The **Guided Communication** process started with a request to open communication (from the list of matches eHarmony had provided) and then progressed through the following steps: read his about me, answer his questions, send first questions, read his answers, send must haves and can’t stands, read his must haves and can’t stands, send second questions, read his answers, answer his questions, read Dr. Warren’s message, then start open communication. I could request to **Fast Track** this process which “allows two matched users to proceed directly to open communication, bypassing our guided...”
communication steps. In open communication you can send complete emails within eHarmony’s anonymous communication system” (eHarmony Fast Track, December 2009). A user must request this and have the other person accept to move ahead (note: only one of the participants indicated they used the Fast Track option, likely because it was not the culture of the site).

Figure 14 provides an example of the Five Questions sent for a response from a match. These questions provided my matches information to make decisions about me through a mediated means. It was more interactive than just viewing my profile but I could still remain somewhat distanced from the other person. Each of us sent two sets of questions for the other to answer (if we decided to continue communication). Between these questions was the reading of Must Haves and Can’t Stands of the other person. Again, these provided means for making a decision about the other person without actually openly writing (or talking) to them. At each step of the way, I filtered out matches and closed them depending on responses and lists provided.

The decision making process online was lengthy. The second set of questions involved asking pre-selected open-ended questions such as “Describe an interest you have that you would truly hope your partner could share with you” and “How big is your extended family? What are the holidays like for you and your family?” The recipient wrote in responses for me, which allowed for further decision-making. Because I selected the questions to send, the process showed what was most important to me. I viewed all of my communication with a match in an easy to follow screen showing messages and the stage in the guided communication process.
Figure 13. Guided Communication with Match Sample Page on eHarmony

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sender</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/27/2009 08:33 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/26/2009 06:16 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/25/2009 09:16 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/25/2009 07:30 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/25/2009 07:38 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/25/2009 07:37 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/25/2009 07:37 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/25/2009 07:37 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/25/2009 06:34 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/25/2009 04:36 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>RE: H</td>
<td>10/25/2009 01:11 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td></td>
<td>10/23/2009 08:42 PM PDT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. How important is chemistry to you?</td>
<td>I need to feel that instant &quot;click&quot; within the first couple of dates I need to sense a certain chemistry. I think chemistry can be generated over the long-term with someone I really like. I don't believe chemistry is really important to a successful relationship. Other:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Your idea of a romantic time would be:</td>
<td>a quiet candle-lit restaurant, rollerblading on the beach, cooking dinner together at home, getting dressed up and going to a dance club together. Other:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Which sort of date sounds like the most fun to you?</td>
<td>attend a lecture on a topic that appeals to both of you, go bargain hunting at a local flea market or antique shop, go bowling, visit a local comedy club. Other:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How often do you find yourself laughing?</td>
<td>I crack myself up! I try to laugh all the time and get serious only when it's needed. Most of my time is spent being serious but I like an occasional good laugh. I'm generally a pretty serious person. Other:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Are you a passionate person?</td>
<td>I'm an extremely passionate person, about everything! With a little discussion, I can get passionate about many issues. I have a couple of issues that raise my blood pressure. I have opinions, but I don't consider myself passionate about them. Other:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 14. Example of Five Questions Sent to a Match on eHarmony

If both date seekers decide to continue communicating, we would be presented with a “Message From Dr. Warren about open communication guidelines.” There were seven guidelines and lengthy elaborations for each, including always use your best judgment, be cautious sharing personal information, do your own research, make your first date safe and successful, take your time, always be respectful and kind, and report concerns about a match to eHarmony. The guidelines emphasized being safe (which eHarmony claimed to be), staying
online for longer periods of time, and that the face-to-face meeting was very important (i.e. do not just develop a relationship only online without meeting in person). Obviously they wanted users to continue to pay for their services so staying online longer was advantageous, but they also emphasized the importance of real life experiences. It reiterated the idea that online dating sites provided a space for individuals to meet, they did not take the place of a face-to-face relationship.

eHarmony allowed me to change my settings, view selected matches, and view results of my personality profile. I could change My Settings to allow none, some, or all matches to view my profile. On eHarmony there was no open searching or browsing and so I could only view the choices I was matched with by eHarmony. Matching was based upon the personality profile I completed when I joined and not on a set of certain criteria I inputted (such as must have a bachelor’s degree and be 6’0” tall). I could view my personality profile and share it with matches. Figure 15 shows a sample of my personality profile. After reviewing mine I recorded some of my thoughts about the results, such as some of the descriptions were accurate and some I felt were not accurate. For instance, it suggested I was gullible or out-of-touch and saw things like an artist, which I did not think were accurate representations of my personality. However, some of the other scales such as conscientiousness and extraversion were very accurate. The categories of personality were agreeableness, openness, emotional stability, conscientiousness, and extraversion. While it was interesting to read, I was not sure how often users utilized these for other people (no one I interviewed said it was part of their decision making process). If I wanted even more personal insight, I could pay for an even more in-depth personality assessment that promised to provide me “with an in-depth analysis of 15 critical aspects of your personality” (eHarmony Premium Personality Profile, December 2009).
Introduction to Agreeableness

This section of your profile describes your interactions with other people. The ways we communicate our feelings, beliefs and ideas to others are influenced by our cultural backgrounds, the way we were raised, and sometimes which side of the bed we got up on this morning. Some of us are very mindful of others making decisions we hope will be in their best interests, even if it means sometimes neglecting our own interests. Others of us believe each person should be responsible for themselves, taking deep pride in our own character and independence with a firm belief that others are best served by doing the same. The following describes how you engage with others; illustrating the dimension of your personality that determines your independence or your desire to reach out and touch others in meaningful ways.

You are best described as:

**USUALLY TAKING CARE OF OTHERS**

Words that describe you:

- Understanding
- Unquestioning
- Humane
- Selfless
- Gentle
- Kindhearted
- Gullible
- Indulgent

A General Description of How You Interact with Others

Here's one important truth about you: you have a tender heart. Yes, you know that others need to learn to take care of themselves. Yes, you know they need to accept the consequences of their foolish or bad behavior. And sometimes, even when your instinct is to help them, you will let them fend for themselves and let them suffer the consequences of their choices or circumstances.

But most of the time you are there to help when they need you. If they are in trouble, you offer compassion and go out of your way to be helpful. If they need someone who will listen, you are trustworthy and sympathetic. And you are direct with them; when they need advice or counsel, you offer it in a straightforward, direct manner, without beating around the bush.

You're also smart enough to know that you cannot take good care of others if you fail to take good care of yourself, so you listen to your own wants and needs. If you've run out of sympathetic energy, you spend time restoring yourself. If you've ignored your own pain or frustration, you find a friend who will listen well, or go into your own private healing place and give yourself permission to focus on you.
But before long, you're back at it with your friends, offering a sympathetic ear and compassion on which they learn to trust, also giving straightforward advice and counsel when they ask for it. You do know how to take care of yourself, but your genuine interest is in taking care of others.

**Negative Reactions Others May Have Toward You**

Selfish people might be embarrassed by you. While they're using their time and energy almost exclusively on themselves, they see you giving time to others, and your kindness puts them in a bad light.

Maybe they'll think you're a phony, that you use your altruism to get others indebted to you so they'll then owe you a favor. Or perhaps they'll accuse you, directly or behind your back, of focusing on the needs of others so no one ever focuses on your foibles or your genuine wounds.

All of these are false accusations; yours is a genuine compassion, because you truly have a tender heart. One criticism might be more substantial, though. People might notice when you let things get out of balance and spend so much time responding to others that you neglect your own needs.

Perhaps it's true to some extent that you are more comfortable when the focus is on someone else's needs than when you and your needs are front and center, and this may be a criticism worth paying attention to.

**Positive Responses Others May Have Toward You**

Positive responses to you are likely to outweigh negative responses. For many people, your genuine kindness will be an example of a way to treat others and a way we want others to treat us. They will see in you the traits of compassion and sympathy which they might want to focus on in the development of their own character.

For those people you help you will be the friend they need, there at the right moment to help them when they've stepped into yet another thicket of pain or confusion. They will be grateful for your listening, for your straight talk when they need straight talk more than anything, and for the hand you extend so they can find their way, with your help, out of whatever tangle they've gotten themselves into.

**Figure 15. Sample Dimension of My Personality Profile on eHarmony**

**Advice and Resources**

I had access to several other resources on the website, which participants in this study did not utilize. At the bottom of each page was a link to *eHarmony Labs*, which lead to a page of research. Under the *Current Studies* page, I was informed that eHarmony conducted top-caliber research on the initiation, growth, and maintenance of close relationships. Users could complete online questionnaires to contribute to this research. Some of these studies included a life-balance meter, what makes good sex, and the procrastination quiz. Users who lived in the Los Angeles area could also participate in studies in a lab.
There was also a section titled *Hot Science* that promised “Relationship insights based on research” (eHarmony Hot Science Page, December 2009). These were advice articles based upon empirically conducted research studies that included topics such as how to find a partner, how to fix relationships, and personal/psychological information. Titles included “Sleep, social relationships, and the brain,” “Sex and the Mature Couple,” and “What Makes Bad Communication ‘Stick’ to Marriages?” Additionally, there was a blog (web log) with several different threads to read and make comments such as “Rebounding may be good for the brokenhearted, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder?” and “Where has all the passion gone? An old question with a new answer” (eHarmony Blogs, December 2009).

There was also a list of authors of blogs, categories of topics as well as university links to PhD contributors, *Hot Science* Links, Research links, and psychology societies’ links. Press releases about eHarmony labs were available for viewing and eHarmony focused on creating credibility through research. A section for *Dating Advice* was available for viewing (again, participants in this study indicated they did not utilize these additional tools).

Links to various dating sites specific to participant choices were listed including Black Dating, Senior Dating, and Jewish Dating. Dating advice pages included articles on dating, relationships, ask a dating expert, about you, using eHarmony, and stages of love. There were hundreds and hundred of articles spanning a variety of categories. Sample pages of *Dating Advice* are shown in Figure 16 and Figure 17. Discussion boards were available with moderators to enforce rules. The date planner page was mostly advertisements such as links to purchase flowers, tips for dating in some major cities (such as going to the park in New York City), and entertainment (movie postings). In addition to the dating site itself, there was an over abundance
of information, which was very overwhelming. To be honest, I was not sure of its usefulness, especially considering participants in my study did not utilize features such as these.

Figure 16. Sample from Dating Advice Page on eHarmony
In summary, eHarmony was an online matchmaking service, meaning it did the matching for the users. It did not allow open browsing of profiles or searching, I could only view provided matches and was required to pay the membership fee to communicate. In many cases, it was more limiting than other sites because it withheld profiles, pictures of others without payment, and communication was more restricted. However, with the limitations I was provided with a sense of privacy and safety. Because communication was guided, decisions could be made about matches without much investment in the other person. Personal information (phone numbers, email addresses) was not shared and communication took place through the site until the guided communication was complete. eHarmony used pictures of attractive successful couples to demonstrate credibility and advertised the validity of its matching system. It also enticed me to
see others with whom the site had matched me. Additionally, in several places on the site and during the profile creation process I was reminded that eHarmony was safe and trustworthy. Because of the expense of the site and the discretion, it provided a unique culture to users and drew users who were looking for those qualities in a site.

**Match Summary**

This section describes Match.com and my experience being a member of the site chronologically. First, I provide background information. Second, my profile creation and matching processes are explained. Lastly, I discuss advice provided by the site and offer my conclusions.

**About Match.com**

Match.com claimed to have pioneered online dating and boasted easy searching for millions of members. The website claimed it continued to redefine “the way single men and single women meet, flirt, date and fall in love, proving time and again that you can make love happen through online dating and that lasting relationships are possible” (Match.com, December 2009). Their information page emphasized that members were in control and the site was versatile. I was promised access to hundreds of thousands of singles in the area who have posted ads on the website including those with various religions and ethnicities (Match.com, December 2009). The site emphasized a large singles community with 20,000 singles joining everyday. The site stated

Match.com members form a diverse, global community of singles who share common goals - to meet other singles, find dates, form romantic relationships and meet life partners. Young and old alike, gay and straight, from everywhere around the world,
singles come to Match.com to flirt, meet, date, have fun, fall in love and to form meaningful, loving relationships. (Match.com, December 2009)

It emphasized free dating searches, viewing of matches, and winking to the millions of matches online. The word free was bolded and mentioned in several places. Then, the next step in meeting someone was paying for the site. The brand advertised having a large pool of members, being able to search and post a profile for free, describing what was sought in a match, and having a relatively inexpensive membership fee. Non-paying members could send free “winks” but to communicate further with other members required payment.

When I first visited Match, the homepage featured a photo of an attractive member and a username. It also immediately presented me with a search box to enter user sex, looking for man/woman between certain ages near a certain ZIP code. The homepage highlighted the search function and showed the attractiveness of members. Figure 18 shows Match’s homepage as it appeared in December 2009.
Creating a Profile and Matching

The next steps were creating a profile and matching. After creating an account and signing in, I was directed to my homepage, which listed new messages, matches, and a search box; however, I had to create a profile to get started. Figure 19 shows what my homepage looked like.
looked like after completing the process. Immediately after creating an account, I was presented with a search box and options, such as searching for mutual matches. I was instructed to upload photos and informed that adding photos garnered more attention. When I clicked on the search page, the site mimicked a search engine and I could search for only users who had photos, mutual matches, or a key word such as “adventurous” (Match Search Page, December 2009). The variety of search items emphasized the site as a search engine over matchmaking, meaning I had more control over finding potential matches. Figure 20 shows the search page.

Search results were viewable as a thumbnail picture and username in a list with 16 people per page. However, to view a profile I had to create my own profile. Thus, while the account creation, searching, and viewing of matches were free, to obtain any information beyond a small photo and a username, I had to create a profile. In fact, when I clicked on a thumbnail to see more information, the message appeared: “BayParkRD sparked your interest – that's great! Check out his/her profile, but first, take a minute to fill out yours so others like BayParkRD can find you” (Match Search Page, December 2009). Thus, I began creating my profile.

I was presented with an offer to help create my profile called Profile Pro, which promised to save me time and make my profile more clever sounding and appealing for $39.99. The sample service provided said it transformed statements such as

What do I have to lose? I am someone that is driven and knows what I want; I just have not found it yet. I love my job most days. I love to hang out with friends, and value my family very much. I enjoy a good work out and sweating. I would rather be hot then cold any day of the week

into “So I’m putting out the beacon. Yes, I’m single. Yes, I’m looking. Yes, I’m happy. I am someone that is driven and knows that she wants; I just have not found it (or him yet)…”
(Profile Pro Sample, December 2009). Figure 21 shows a sample of the Profile Pro. This service provided practical help to users.

Figure 19. My Homepage on Match
I opted to create my own profile, which consisted of describing my appearance, interests, lifestyle, background, values, get to know me, about my date, and in my own words. Match tried
to encourage me to complete my profile by enticing me with “men want to meet you!” messages. The first step in creating a profile was to indicate what brought me to the site, current relationship status, gender [sex], looking for men/women, age, and location. Again, I indicated I only wanted to see matches who had photos, which demonstrated the emphasis on appearance. I was asked where I grew up, my astrological sign, and to describe my appearance including body type, height, and hair and eye color. For body type I chose from slender, about average, athletic and toned, heavyset, a few extra pounds, stocky, big and beautiful, curvy, full-figured, or no answer.

Next, I indicated what sports, activities, and exercise I enjoyed as well as what I did in my spare time and favorite places. I was asked what activities I hoped to share with a partner such as exploring new areas, cooking, video games, playing sports, and wine tasting. I was asked to complete information about my income, different pets I had or liked, exercise habits, smoking and drinking habits, and whether or not I had or want children. Additional questions asked about values, ethnicity, faith, languages spoken, education level, political views (one must be indicated), birth order, charities I like, comedians I like, what I would do if I received a bonus at work, and places I would like to vacation.

I moved on to describing what I was looking for in a match. I then completed a section about his appearance preferences, including height, eye and hair color, and body preference. On His Appearance page I indicated if body type was a must have or nice to have. His Values section included ethnicity, religion, education, languages, and whether these were must have or nice to have. The section for His Lifestyle asked what kind of job he should have (“no preference” was an option), salary range, smoking habits, alcohol consumption, marital status, wanting or having kids and how important all of these were in a match.
The *in my own words* section provided free space to fill in a short description about who I am and what I am looking for and a dating headline. I was provided with a sample if I wanted to see one. Figure 22 shows a sample provided. Match said “Along with a great photo, your personal description is an essential part of your profile. To help you get started, here are some things you can write about:” and listed personality, values, interests and lifestyle, fun facts, and relationships questions as prompts. Again Match stressed the importance of photos and provided advice or pointers on how to create a profile.

![Sample Profile Content Provided by Match, December 2009.](image)

Once the profile creation process was completed, the profile had to be approved by the Customer Care team. Since I had not yet posted a picture, I was informed that “Profiles with a photo are 15 times more likely to be viewed” (Match Profile Confirmation page, December 2009). I was also informed of Match’s advice center. Match provided advice to users on how to
select the proper photos, and it was rather detailed. The help page stated “this photo is how other members of the Match.com community get to know you. So make a great impression with these tips:” and then listed dos and don’ts for primary photos (which is the main picture on a profile). Dos included making it a photo of just you, smiling, and using a recent photo. Don’ts included wearing sunglasses or a hat, using dark or blurry photos, or submitting red-eye shots. Again, there was a lot of emphasis on selecting proper photos and appearance. Figure 23 presents the primary photo advice page.

Match required me to post a photo and have it approved to be active on the site and look at matches. Before posting a picture, other members could request that I post one. So I had to upload a photo. Even after uploading a photo, communication with other members was very
limited. While I could view profiles, I could only send winks (the initial contact that is essentially like winking at someone to show interest) and nothing else.

In addition to its open browsing and search features, Match provided *Daily 5* matched both on the site and via email. An optional Singled Out service provided hand selected matches but required additional payment. If I set my profile to be private, I was not permitted to see the *Daily 5* matches. The *Daily 5* list contained five profiles of individuals who were a match but these were not always new matches each time. Because I appeared in other date seekers’ *Daily 5*, matches, or searches, there was a *Who’s Viewed Me* tab to show the thumbnail profile of other date seekers who opened my profile. When viewing a profile of a match, there was a list of items to show 20 ways you match, which included age, height, drinking, job, want kids, and liked pets. Figure 24 shows the sample of 20 ways you match.

Decisions about Matches began immediately. *Daily 5* and match emails provided a thumbnail picture as well as usernames, ages, and locations for the matches, and I could decide to review those profiles further or simply ignore the message. A sample of one of these emails is in Figure 25. Once I viewed a profile, I made the decision of whether or not to make contact. If I decided to make contact, the choices of initial contact were email, wink, or get number (for paying members).
Figure 24. Sample of 20 Ways We Match on Match.com, December 2009

Figure 25. Sample of a Match Email, November 2009 (faces have been blocked)
Communication through Match was much more date seeker focused. For instance, if I winked at another member, it was similar to winking in person – showing interest. This was one option for initial contact. Another option was to send an email through the website email system. There was a message center and email service where messages were sent so personal email addresses were not shared. I had to purposefully disclose my email address or phone number. A wink was free but sending a message required payment. Once messages were sent there was no interference from Match.

Advice and Conclusions

Match offered dating advice through its online magazine titled Happen. A screen shot from Happen is in Figure 26. The page boasted expert columnists, some with PhDs and others were advice columnists. The About Happen (December, 2009) page stated the following:

Welcome to Happen, the weekly magazine from Match.com that’s devoted to enhancing your love life. We’re here with tips and advice to help you date better and make your relationships more satisfying – and to help you through the inevitable ups and downs of romance. Enjoy this issue, and let us know what topics you’d like us to tackle in the future.

The homepage of Happen (seen in Figure 27) showed a variety of articles and pictures that promised to provide instructions to make love happen. The variety of articles demonstrated the diversity of Match.com members and the company’s acceptance of a variety of daters. Categories of dating advice included: Advice (First-Date Tips, Love Online, Dating Advice, Sex Talk, and Relationships) and Trends (Lifestyle, Love Science, Surveys & Lists, Celebs & Others). There were hundreds of articles, posts from site visitors, and advice columns. Articles catered to a variety of daters including gay and lesbian, single parents, divorced daters, and
daters over 40. Table 2 provides the categories of Advice with sample titles and headlines and Table 3 provides the categories and sample titles for Trends articles. While there were hundreds of articles and advice columnists, the site did not claim to conduct relationship research or have teams of scholars developing the work for the writing.

Figure 26. About Happen on Match, December 2009
Figure 27. Happen Dating Advice Homepage on Match, December 2009.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Advice Categories and Sample Article Titles and Headlines on Match.com</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Date Tips</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Art of Conversation</em> - It’s more than just small talk: Good conversationalists are likely to find greater success in love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Great First Date – Now What?</em> - Had a terrific time together after meeting online? Here’s how to keep the momentum going…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Love Online</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Get Off On The Write Foot</em> - Your profile essay can be a daunting task – or the best way to make a great first impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Why I Liked His Profile</em> - What kind of profile really grabs a woman’s attention? Find out here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>From Online to Real World</em> - Here’s how to take a promising email exchange into a successful offline relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dating Advice</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Having a Lot of So-So Dates?</em> - A best-selling author on how to tell whether lukewarm dates can ever lead to true love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Can You Be More Than Just Friends?</em> - Here’s some advice on making the transition from friends to lovers work for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Think Your Love Life Stinks?</em> - then turn your luck around by stopping destructive dating behaviors and learning positive ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex Talk</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Is Your Date A Player?</em> - Wondering what your new sweetie’s motives are? 9 clues that your date is only interested in sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ready for a Sleepover Date?</em> - So you’re single again and considering an overnight date with a new sweetie. Heed this wise advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Truth About Sex After 50</em> - The straight facts on what people’s love lives are like at this age. Plus, some helpful pointers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Advice</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>How to Indulge Each Others’ Hobbies</em> - Shared interests can help you grow as a couple. No interest in your sweetie’s hobby? Get your own!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Do Fights Help A Relationship?</em> - One writer wonders whether some sparring can benefit a couple…see if you agree with what he says!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, Match was considered a search engine site offering a database of singles’ profiles that could be searched to find an appropriate match. Match focused on showing attractive single members and the sheer number of members. Once I paid for Match’s service, there was no limit to the number or type of searches through the singles database. Further, I contacted whomever I wanted unlike matchmaker sites (note: if other users have privacy settings, communication with those individuals may be limited). Messages could be sent immediately upon viewing a profile and Match did not lead me through any type of guided or restricted communication process. While Match allowed non-paying users to create a profile and view full profiles of other members, a wink was the most communication that took place. Thus,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Trends Categories and Sample Topics on Match.com</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lifestyle Tips</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>How to Get to Know a Shy Guy</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Hanukkah Love Lessons</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Love Science</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Help Charm the Male Mind</em></td>
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<td><em>Dating Rules to Ditch</em></td>
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<td><strong>Surveys and Lists</strong></td>
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<td><em>Biggest Dating Moments of 2006</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Great Outdoor Dates</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Gossip about Celebrity Couples</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dating After Divorce</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Divorced? Where to meet women</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gay and Lesbian Dating</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Meeting the (Gay) In-laws</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Single Parents</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>How I Told My Kid I Was Dating</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dating Over 40</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Meeting Your Date’s Adult Kids</em></td>
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</table>
I could see the abundance of members but not communicate with them unless I paid a membership fee.

Plenty of Fish Summary

A summary of my experience with Plentyoffish.com (POF) is explained in this section. First, I provide basic information about the site. Next, I discuss profile creation and communicating with other members. Finally, I present my conclusions.

About Plenty of Fish

Plenty of Fish (POF) was a free dating site and boasted “We are the dating site your friends talk about” (Plenty of Fish Homepage, December 2009). The site claimed their members go on over 18,000,000 dates with other users each year, emphasizing the popularity and vast membership. The site also claimed to have a chemistry/relationship needs test that was on par with the more expensive dating sites and matched date seekers on personalities that lead to long lasting stable relationships. It stated:

Discover Your Relationship Needs. We will tell you what you need in a relationship, where you screwed up (without knowing it) in past relationships and a customized action plan to make your next relationship successful. We will also give you 33 topics to discuss that are important for long term success. (Plenty of Fish Homepage, December 2009)

The homepage said it was free and date seekers should Register Now! Figure 28 shows the homepage for Plenty of Fish. POF allowed site visitors to create an account quickly and easily. It featured a picture of a man and woman together but it did not say if it was a success story.
Profile Creation and Communication

The first steps were to create a profile and communicate with members. Once I created an account, I was taken immediately to a page that claimed “Complete this form and you are ready to meet millions!” This played on their professed popularity, large amount of members and how easy it was to get started. The instructions for the form were very informal and stated:

More dates result from plentyoffish than all other dating sites combined so make the first impression count! I know it is a pain to fill out forms like this but its [sic] well worth it and you will thank us your whole life! (December, 2009)

The first step of the profile creation process included geographic location, having/wanting children, appearance (height, hair color, body type), drug, smoking, and alcohol habits; religion, and income (drop down boxes). It also included education, profession, headline, and interests
(short text boxes). I was asked to complete a mandatory description. The website claimed this description was the first impression (note: technically their photo was) and “If you want to be successful and not waste your time do this.” The instructions warned me for safety reasons not to include my name, phone number, or address. Suggestions for my description included talking about hobbies, goals/aspirations, what made me unique, and my taste in music (December, 2009). An optional box was provided to answer the question “Describe what you would do for a first date. The longer your description, the more likely it is you will get responses” (December, 2009).

Unique to this site was an option to have my profile picture be rated (yes or no) on attractiveness. This was reminiscent of the website Hotornot.com in which users posted pictures, other users rated them on attractiveness on a scale of one to 10, and they had the option of contacting others. Figure 29 shows an example of a rating page for a photo. Thus, on Plenty of Fish, posting a photo was very important. In fact, in bold and large print type, the site stated “Uploading a photo is absolutely critical for success.” Their guidelines included “Upload Nudity and you will be Deleted and Banned. All pictures MUST contain a CLEARLY visible head shot” (December, 2009). There was no waiting period for profile approval but I had to enter a profession and descriptions that had to be longer than one sentence.
It took me a while but after digging through the site I was able to find advice for profile creation; it was not offered when I was actually creating my profile. The site provided tips for posting photos during the process but not profile creation assistance. The tips included: take the time to think about your profile, make sure you include a photo, create a profile with plenty of information about yourself, and think up some creative first date ideas. It concluded with “If you follow these steps you should have no problem finding dates on this Free Dating Site and you won't need to join other dating sites and have to pay $20+/month” (How to create a successful profile, December 2009). Figures 30 and 31 show all of their advice.
How to create a successful profile!

Do you want to get maximum exposure & responses from other plentyoffish.com singles? Read below for important profile tips!

1. Take the time to think about your profile. If your profile is short, sparse, and impersonal it is likely that other members will ignore any messages that you send them. When members receive messages, they usually check out the sender’s profile, and if it is satisfactory, they’ll take the sender’s message seriously otherwise it is deleted without even being read.

2. Make sure you include a photo. Profiles that have pictures are viewed ten times more than profiles that are bare. The more people that see your profile, the more chances you have of finding your match!

3. Create a profile description with plenty of information about yourself. The more you write in your profile, the more other members will be able to identify with you and will want to contact you! Include information about what you like, what you dislike, your passions, your fears, your personal beliefs, and your personality traits. This is your chance to shine and really show people what type of person you are!

4. Think up some creative first date ideas. Your first date ideas will reveal much about your personality – whether you’re sporty, romantic, adventurous, sensual, easygoing, or sensitive!

Figure 30. Plenty of Fish Profile Advice, December 2009

Figure 31. Plenty of Fish Profile Creation Advice, December 2009
There was not much investment in creating a profile or paying for a membership. What was very interesting, however, was who did the gate keeping. When I went to the rating tab on the website I looked at the profile photos submitted by other users to either be approved or declined (and provided a reason). The users decided if a profile picture was appropriate or not before it was posted based upon three criteria: (a) no nudity allowed, (b) no cartoons allowed, and (c) no images with too much white space/need cropping. Figure 32 is an example of one of the photo ratings pages.

Once I uploaded my photo, I completed the *Relationship Chemistry Predictor*, which was an informally worded personality quiz. The site introduced the quiz in this way:

My name is Markus and I created Plentyoffish so that online dating would finally be free for everyone. One of the things major paid sites had that Plentyoffish didn’t have was compatibility testing which they could charge $60+ a month for. I wanted to offer this
feature as well for free, so I contacted the designers of these tests and forked over 10’s [sic] of thousands. The result is you have pretty much the same test as paid sites, except its completely free! No $60/month membership here! Once you take this test your relationship Chemistry Test result will appear on your test result and we can match you with others based on compatibility. (December, 2009)

This was the quiz used by the site to match members with other date seekers. The quiz consisted of 48 statements in which I could disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, or agree. There was no option for neutral. Items included I get nervous easily, my own thoughts and feelings scare me sometimes, I am a very productive person, I can resist temptations easily, my religion is very important to me, I would love to spend a holiday backpacking through another country, I love to have excitement in my life, and I rarely get angry. The results of this Chemistry Predictor measured five broad relationship variables including self-confidence, family orientation, self-control, openness, and easygoingness. However, the site warned in bold:

IMPORTANT: Before reading your profile, remember that the report is based on generalizations from research on an international validation sample. Some feedback may not apply to your case. For instance, we know that overall those scoring “moderate or high” on Family Orientation tend to either want children soon or are open to the idea in the future. However, this generalization may not be accurate for all moderate and high scorers. Use these results for self-awareness and self-reflection...and hopefully as a conversation piece with other Plenty of Fish members! (December, 2009)

Despite this warning, the site claimed the measure captured five key ingredients to determine if two people had the right psychological chemistry. Then, the site said to take the results light-heartedly.
Once I completed the quiz, I was presented with a welcome screen from the creator of Plenty of Fish (see Figure 33 for the welcome page). The welcome message bashed big companies and emphasized the number of Plenty of Fish members and free membership. The message was competitive but worded informally. For instance, the creator said he created the site because he “was tired of seeing faceless corporations prey on people looking for love” and then explained “Over a million people use this site per day and I don’t type very fast so please don’t get mad if it takes a while to respond to your inquiries” (December 2009).

Six tips were offered, which included upload a picture, use advanced search features to search based on height or ethnicity, etc., block people from messaging, look at “who’s viewed me” and check out matches. By emphasizing uploading a picture and searches based on physical characteristics, it really demonstrated a focus on physical appearance.

I was also informed I could upgrade my profile which simply meant I must pass a test to measure my ability to form and maintain relationships. This test had 25 statements in which I indicated agree completely, agree, disagree, or disagree completely. Items included white lies, like faking orgasms are perfectly normal in maintaining a relationship; when I’m in a relationship, I can be critical of my partner; I have a completely different persona when I’m online than when I’m with my family and friends; and my relationships tend to get really intense very quickly. Since I passed this test, my “chances of finding someone increases 230%” and other members knew I was serious. Because of this I would also “get far higher quality emails” (December, 2009). While several claims like this were made throughout the profile creation process, I was not informed where the statistics or data for these claims derived. Thus, it gave me the impression the claims were not valid.
Hello there and welcome!

My name is Markus and I created plentyoffish.com because I was tired of seeing faceless corporations prey on people looking for love. Plentyoffish.com is the world’s largest free dating site and its run by only a handful of people. Recently we have added a new serious member section. The only way you can become a serious member is to pass a psychology test that measures your integrity, sincerity and your ability to form relationships. If you believe you qualify you can take the test here.

This site is my pet project and runs far differently than a paid site.

1. If you are a jerk, are mean to other users, upload nude images, do not fill out your profile correctly etc you will be deleted and banned.

2. Over a million people use this site per day and I don’t type very fast so please don’t get mad if it takes a while to respond to your inquiries 😊

3. Cut and paste messages are blocked, be original.

4. Paid sites go out of business if you find what you are looking for quickly. This is because they have to be able to pay for all that mass advertising on TV. For a free site like this to get big we have to give you exactly what you are looking for so we get big word of mouth going.

Tips...

1. If you upload a picture of yourself you tend to get 10 times the number of responses.

2. If you message people without pictures they are more likely to respond to you.

3. Use the advanced search to search for users based on height, ethnicity etc.

4. Use the mail settings to block groups of people you aren’t interested in from messaging you.

5. Use the who has viewed me feature to check out who has been looking at your profile.

6. Make sure to check out your matches.

I hope you like my site as I’ve worked hard to make it a place where you can meet quality people without paying an arm and a leg for it. I only hope you have as much fun using this site as I had building it.

“UPGRADE” button
If you want to upgrade your profile you must first pass a test that measures your ability to form and maintain relationships.
Because Plenty of Fish more closely resembled a search engine site and it did not monitor its members, the date seekers had to be more active. Site members could adjust their mail settings for a first contact. First contact on Plenty of Fish could be a personal message through the website messaging system without restriction, unless I blocked some members from initiating contact. However, once contact is initiated, the blocking no longer applies. These features provided me with some privacy in terms of who I wanted to contact me. I could choose what sex, country of origin, style of first message, age, and geographic distance of other users who could contact me. There were also options to block users who were looking for a certain type of relationship (e.g., hang out, long-term, intimate encounter) or who used drugs, smoked or were married. These restrictions showed the lack of regulation by the website and the culture of the site and its members. I added privacy settings and there was an option for whenever a user messaged me, their pictures were embedded within the body of the message. Again, the focus was on physical appearance.

My matches page listed an entire page of thumbnail photos and nothing else – no name, age, location, or basic information. I had to click on a thumbnail to view one of the other, which would disclose my interest and availability for contact. Figure 34 shows my matches page. I was not sure what my matches were actually based upon because there was no point at which I entered what I sought. I assumed it was based upon the results of my completed chemistry predictor.
I received messages from rather quickly. Within the first 20 minutes of creating my profile (before I made it private) I received four messages. I could see who viewed my profile and they could see when I viewed theirs. Once I viewed a profile, the other could then contact me. For instance, I had an 84% match with someone but all I could see on my matches page was the user was online now and that we were an 84% match. I clicked on the profile. The profile showed none of the qualities or characteristics I looked for in a match, so I was surprised that I was so matched. Most of the messages I received from other site members were filled with text messaging language, slang, and no punctuation. I noted during data collection that “this is like a meat market – what is this, the bar site?” (December, 2009, notes p. 19).

My profile contained a prominent photo and a box to instantly send a picture. Figure 35 shows what my Plenty of Fish profile looked like. It included basic information such as education, job, marital status, wanting children, drug use, having a car, where I live, my
astrological sign, age, ethnicity, body type, and religion. There was also an advertisement on my profile sponsored by Google. Unique to Plenty of Fish was a testimony section on my profile, which allowed other users to post comments about me for everyone else to see. Again, it was the members serving as reviewers by making either positive or negative comments or asking questions. The unique features demonstrated how the culture of the site was reinforced by the website design and how users’ behaviors were influenced by the site features.

![My Plenty of Fish Profile, December 2009.](image)

Another persistent cultural feature was how the website predominantly focused on appearance. When a list of matches appeared, the only information I could base my opinion on were the percentage we matched and appearance in the thumbnail photo. Additionally, there was a banner of thumbnail photos across every page. At the top of the pages there was a tab for *Date Night* which allowed users to join a list to go on a date this Friday night. Essentially, users were
paired with other users in the area who signed up for the same list. Another tab was for Forums, which was a discussion board for advice, but there were no articles as on the other websites. Figure 36 shows what the forums page looked like. Forums included relationship issues, single parents, dating over 30, ask a guy, ask a girl, and broken hearts. Some of the threads were playing hard to get or uninterested, relationship problems…help, and your [sic] SO addicted to dating sites. Once again, other daters were providing advice, not the website itself.

There were a few success stories and testimonies from couples who met on Plenty of Fish but it was very limited. Anyone could submit a picture and short testimony so there was no fact checking or proofing of photos or statements. I could have submitted my picture for attractiveness rating or rated photos of others on a scale of one to 10. I could even view the top 500 hottest members. Figure 32 showed what one of the ranking pages looked like.

Figure 36. Plenty of Fish Forum Pages, December 2009.
There was much less privacy on this site. I could contact someone instantly and I had to change my settings to avoid being contacted by everyone. Thankfully other users could only send me messages through the site and not to my actual email address. Because the site was free and had little in terms of a filter, I was happy my personal contact information was not available to just anyone who joined the site. Undesirable or even dangerous site members could not contact me except through the site, which allowed me to keep a distance. This site was almost entirely focused on browsing pictures. I had to click a picture to view a profile and it was much less formal. The matching system was inconsistent at best and there was no place to fill in criteria. Plenty of Fish was much more user-centered and almost no emphasis was placed upon the site. The site just provided a way to see other users, make selections, and contact them.

**Web Themes and Scripts**

This section describes the themes and scripts from my ethnographic content analysis and personal narrative. Overall, the dating sites offered a similar script for how to date online but provided different cultures and strategies for engaging in the process. Each site had its own unique culture, community of online date seekers, and ways for users to complete each step of the process. While there was some overlap, each site offered its own strategy for matching, process for communicating, fees, and culture of daters (culture will be discussed more below). In addition to the basic script, additional cultural scripts from dating sites included emphasis on physical appearance and restriction of communication.

**General Script**

The general script for online dating generally involved creating a profile, reviewing matches, communicating with matches online, and then meeting in person. For instance, eHarmony’s homepage advertised “4 Easy Steps to Find the Right Match:” (a) complete
relationship questionnaire and get free personality profile, (b) review your selected highly compatible matches free, (c) pick the plan that works best for you when you’re ready to communicate, and (d) get to know your matches at your own pace and start dating (eHarmony Homepage, December 2009). Figure 37 shows the screen shot from the homepage. On Match.com, the How Online Dating Works page (see Figure 38 for screen shot) explained, (a) it’s okay to look and to look around the site at the members, (b) create a profile to let others know you are out there and ready to meet the right one, and (c) start communicating by winking, emailing, and enjoying what Match has to offer by subscribing. Plenty of Fish took a user-centered approach (it is a free site) and assumed its visitors knew the process. Its homepage simply said (a) our members go on over 18 million dates with other users per year, (b) after taking our chemistry test we match you with personalities that lead to long lasting stable relationships that fulfill emotional needs, (c) discover relationship needs and see 33 topics to discuss that are important for successful relationships, and (d) sign up now, it’s free! (Plenty of Fish Homepage, December 2009). Figure 39 shows the homepage steps for signing up for the site. These steps showed the basic cultural script presented by dating sites on how to date online.
4 Easy Steps to Find the Right Match...

1. Complete our Relationship Questionnaire and get your FREE Personality Profile.
2. Review your selected, highly-compatible matches FREE!
3. Pick the plan that best suits you when you're ready to communicate.
4. Get to know your matches at your own pace, and start dating!

2% of U.S. Marriages Can't Be Wrong

eHarmony is different than other online dating websites and services, and we believe our success speaks for itself. On average, 236 eHarmony members marry every day; that accounts for 2% of U.S. marriages.* At eHarmony, we believe you deserve to find love – true love that comes with a lasting relationship. Because of this, we are committed to assisting singles everywhere in their search to find love and romantic fulfillment.

*2007 survey for eHarmony by Harris Interactive®

Figure 37. eHarmony’s 4 Easy Steps to Find the Right Match, December 2009
Figure 38. Match How It Works, About Online Dating, December 2009.
Brand/Culture of the Site

Each website had its own dating culture and members of those sites emulated those cultures. Whether sites actively sought certain types of people or certain types of people selected sites based on other factors, each website had its own unique culture or brand. The sites played up this brand to gain more members and thus, perpetuated the culture of its members. As a result, the websites created a different culture and experience for the daters using them. This was one way cultural level scripts influenced interpersonal scripts.

Daters identified the culture of the sites, selected one(s) to join, and used these sites accordingly. Date seekers could choose a search engine or matchmaker site and then choose a
site with desirable members. For instance, eHarmony was an example of a matchmaking site that was much more site-focused and offered the date seekers less control. Match and Plenty of Fish were examples of search engine sites, but Match offered a hint of matchmaking. The culture of the site often depicted the site members and so date seekers made the decision whether to join a site and become part of that culture. The culture of the websites is described in the next subsections about search engine and matchmaker sites. These cultural scripts are described below followed by how each site brands itself and reinforces its culture.

**Search engine sites.** A search engine site provided a database of available partners and users could search or browse through the database depending on search criteria entered. In search engine sites, importance was placed upon the number or amount of data available and large numbers of site members to search and sift. Thus, both Match and Plenty of Fish advertised and focused on the number of members. Search engine sites were more user-centered and the date seeker did more of the work, but they also allowed for more individual control.

With this control, however, came the work of sifting through communication from other date seekers and making more decisions. In a search engine site anyone could contact a date seeker, whether or not they met any sort of specific criteria. While some sites allowed users to set filters on who could contact them (i.e. no one who is married), for the most part users could view profiles and contact whomever. Therefore, with the control of finding matches also came the flood of potentially unattractive site members to filter. On Match or POF, a date seeker may log onto the site to find 40 new winks or 20 new messages and 50 people who have viewed their profile. There was much less privacy but more variety in whom they could contact. For example, while eHarmony (matchmaker) may provide a member with seven possible partners for
consideration, there was an infinite number available to search engine site members such as Match or POF.

*Matchmaking sites.* Matchmaking sites, like eHarmony, match members with others based upon results of a personality quiz. Date seekers were permitted to only view the profiles of other members with whom eHarmony had matched them. There was no option to search or browse for other members. The eHarmony members communicated with selected matches and managed communication with only those members. There were more guided steps of communication, but they were more manageable for the user. Search engine sites did not have these restrictions.

There was much more privacy on a matchmaking site because profiles cannot be searched, but there were also restrictions on communication and far less control for date seekers. Daters could only choose from those matches provided from the site. There was more quality control meaning only those matches with desirable characteristics may initiate contact. However, if the date seeker did not find one of the possible matches suitable, he/she had to wait for the site to provide new ones. Date seekers who were new to online dating or not very comfortable with the idea may prefer a matchmaking site because of the privacy (not just anyone can view profiles and only paying members can see photos) and discretion. Further, it was much more manageable to communicate with only a few members at a time versus an infinite number on a search engine site. Date seekers who were more experienced or comfortable with online dating or who just wanted more control in their selection would probably be more comfortable on a search engine site.

*Branding.* Each website branded itself and, purposefully or not, presented information on its site that perpetuated the culture. Members used this information to make decisions about
joining the sites, remaining a member, or how to use the site. For instance, eHarmony was a matchmaking site and so its advertisements and the website featured pictures of successful couples who met on eHarmony and quotations from past site users. Messages from the site emphasized safety and privacy. The guided communication process, keeping photos hidden from non-paying site users, and not allowing open searching or profiles perpetuated these messages. There were also privacy settings to prevent certain people from viewing one’s profile. The messages on their homepage and advice pages also focused on using proven matching methods created by researchers with PhDs. Therefore, if users wanted more privacy, selectivity, and proven matching, eHarmony would be the appropriate brand.

Match and Plenty of Fish, on the other hand, were search engine sites which allowed users to search and browse profiles of other site members by entering various search criteria. Their brand was a wide selection of members to search from and their popularity. Therefore, their advertisements and website were focused on pictures of attractive members and advertising the number of members it had. Match also accepted more diverse members, including gay and divorced daters.

POF was a free for all, literally. The members were the gate keepers on the site and the informal language of the site made it seem more like a social networking site (like Facebook or MySpace) than a dating site. It was a grass-roots site boasting a large number of members and free price tag. Because the members decided what pictures were appropriate and anyone could join for free, it was much less exclusive and obviously there was little in terms of filtering members. While it played on the idea of matching by having a chemistry quiz, users could search through the member database based on a variety of criteria such as height or ethnicity. Also, users could indicate they were looking for an intimate encounter (read: sexual encounter)
or a short term rather than a long term relationship. The guidelines for posting photos included no nudity which indicated that has been a concern.

Visitors of the website could ascertain the culture or the site rather quickly when either browsing or creating an account. Date seekers then decided to join based upon his/her goals for online dating. eHarmony was more “serious” while POF was more casual. eHarmony limited matches while Match gave users more control and POF gave users total control. eHarmony limited contact from others while Match and POF did not. Depending on online daters’ preference or personality, they could choose a site(s) that best fit(s) their needs or comfort level.

**Importance on Appearance/Photos**

Online dating sites as a whole placed a great deal of importance on physical appearance and photos, some to a further extent than others. The importance placed on appearance was another cultural level script. This importance on appearance also carried over to the interpersonal level when date seekers meet face-to-face for the first time. Therefore, posting a photo or several photos was essential for success in online dating.

Each site manifested this importance in varying ways and in some cases overlapping ways. For instance, all of the sites advised users to post photos because they would get more attention than members without photos. For instance, eHarmony’s photo upload page read “Did you know that users with photos generally have a much higher level of success on eHarmony than those without photos?” (December, 2009). Plenty of Fish stated in bold, large type font “Uploading a photo is absolutely critical for success…All pictures MUST contain a CLEARLY visible head shot” and on the welcome screen it stated “If you upload a picture of yourself you tend to get 10 times the number of responses” (December, 2009). Match.com’s photo upload page simply stated “More Photos = More Success” and another page said “Profiles with a photo
are 15 times more likely to be viewed” (December, 2009). In all of the sites these photos had to be approved either by the site or other members before being posted.

All of the websites offered advice for posting photos ranging from rules, such as no nudity (Plenty of Fish), to pages analyzing what makes a good photo. Match offered a link beneath the photo upload button for getting help choosing the right photo. As shown in Figure 23, the Dos and Don’ts were offered for selecting photos to include in profiles. Dos included smiling, having it be up close, and recent. Don’ts included wearing sunglasses or hats or blurry photos. The advice page also claimed “this photo is how other members of the Match.com community get to know you” (December, 2009). eHarmony offered an optional photo wizard to help with uploading pictures.

The sites used photos in varying ways as a means of gate keeping and restricting communication. For instance, on eHarmony, posting a photo was optional even though it was suggested they be posted. Thus, a profile and process can be completed without ever posting one. The site also advertised that users could view matches without paying for a membership. However, the users could only view a match’s name, age, location, and some brief information. Photos of matches were only visible if a site user paid to become a member. Because most online daters wanted to see photos, eHarmony enticed users with brief information but said they must pay to see pictures. On Match, site members had to post a picture to view matches or run any searches. The site offered visitors to search and see who was on the site but then restricted searching and viewing profiles. Therefore, to become an active, even if non-paying, site member, a picture had to be posted. On POF a photo was not required but very strongly encouraged and it seemed the culture of the site required posting a picture. Perhaps this was also because when individuals appeared in searches, the only information provided was a thumbnail
picture. If there was no picture, the person did not really exist and so one had to be posted (even if the site technically permitted creating a profile without one).

POF, in particular, emphasized the importance of appearance by only showing thumbnail pictures about matches without clicking to see profiles. Additionally, users could participate in having their photos submitted for ranking in how hot (or not) they were. Thumbnail pictures of site members were featured on every page. Further, one of the options for receiving messages from users was to have their photos embedded within the body of the email. Importance on photos was not limited to POF, however. eHarmony allowed users to nudge their matches to post a photo if one was not available. On Match, the search box allowed for date seekers to only view results of members who had photos.

*Limiting Communication*

The last cultural level script of dating sites was the limitations of communication with other members. Each site had its own way to restrict communication but varied in terms of how much restriction was the decision of the website or the user. On sites that were fee-based, most communication could not take place prior to paying. Thus, viewing a profile and initial contact can be done for free but sending messages required payments. Matchmaking sites (eHarmony) focused on guided and restricted communication between members and focused more on the online part of dating. Because they had a guided sequential process, it kept members online longer and thereby filtered individuals online versus face-to-face. The message from site creators also reinforced this message. Even though the relationship was initiated online for the purpose of moving offline, matchmaking sites like eHarmony wanted members to filter their matches (and use the site longer) before moving offline. Search engine sites like Match offered winks and messaging online which put more filtering burden on the individual user. The user
then decided how quickly to move through online communication before meeting offline. Search engine social network sites like POF allowed instant online messaging where users could share personal email addresses or phone numbers instantly. Thus, offline contact could be made very easily. These features addressed the culture of the site and comfort level with using online dating services. For instance, someone who was uncomfortable or hesitant about online dating may prefer to use a matchmaking site because filtering site members was cumbersome and much more filtering was done online. Offline meetings were more reserved for members who had passed several rounds of screening online. POF did not offer this level of online screening.

**Summary**

This section presented my personal narrative of joining dating sites. I discussed my experience as a member of eHarmony, Match, and Plenty of Fish to analyze each sites’ culture and my own intrapsychic scripts. Then I presented cultural scripts of the sites including branding, importance on appearance/photos, and limiting communication. The next section presents a model of online dating.

**Model of Online Dating**

Through the analysis of online dating websites and interviews with past and current online daters, I developed a model explaining the process of online dating. It is presented in Figure 40. The model describes the process of online dating and the reciprocal nature of cultural, intrapsychic, and interpersonal scripts used by date seekers to navigate through the online dating experience. Because cultural, intrapsychic, and interpersonal scripts were overlapping, the model represents how they were intertwined in each step. I summarize the model here and then expand in much more detail throughout the chapter. Before providing the summary, I provide a brief explanation of the design of the model.
Figure 40. Model for Online Dating

Design

It is first necessary to explain the design of the model. The model moves from top to bottom, left to right. The boxes on the left were intrapsychic and cultural processes that occurred prior to interpersonal contact and decision making. Matching and decision making were central to the process and were thus emphasized in the model. Boxes on the right were more interpersonal processes. Love styles were presented at the top in a dashed box because they were intrapsychic scripts that influenced the experience of online dating throughout and not
technically a step in the process. Solid lines with arrows showed movement from one step to another. If there were arrows on both ends, it meant this process was cyclical. The dotted box around stop contact (h) was not a step per se but rather a place holder to show the decision not to advance contact with someone and the movement back to matching (step f). Dotted-lined arrows represented that decisions were being made before moving to the next. The next step in the process only occurred after a constant decision making process to do so.

**Summary of Model**

Now that the style of the model has been explained, I provide a summary explanation of the model. Again, I expound upon the model throughout this chapter. I first explain the steps leading to matching. Next, I explain how individuals are matched with other date seekers, followed by how decisions are made whether to contact others. Then, I discuss how initial communication online is achieved, how mutual matches are established, and mediated communication. Finally, I illustrate how the move is made offline and the decision whether to return to matching or stop dating online for the time being.

First, steps leading up to being matched with other online date seekers is explained. At the top of the model was the dotted box (a) **Love Styles**, which represented the ways date seekers tended to relate to others romantically. These were intrapsychic scripts that played a role throughout the dating and decision making processes. Thus, the smaller-dotted lines showed they were contributing to the next steps in the model. After analyzing interviews with online daters, I discovered that date seekers had a mix of three love styles: pragma (practical), eros (passion and emphasis on chemistry), and storge (looking for a compatible companion). Date seekers usually explained they did not have simply one way they related to other romantically but rather that they had a mix of styles or “wanted it all.” The next step in the model was the (b)
Decision to Join an online dating site. Interviewees explained there was a lack of partners offline, their acquaintances had success dating online, they wanted to find a partner or date, and that it was more efficient than initiating dates offline. The decision to join a site was related to (c) Goals for Online Dating. Individuals used sites for their own purposes whether that was for a serious partner, casual dates or fun. These goals, among other factors, contributed to (d) Choosing a Dating Site.

Date seekers chose a site based upon the perceived members of the site, the culture and features of the site (including cost), their goals for online dating and how they perceived the site to achieve those goals. Daters may join more than one site. Because each site contains some members unique to that site, some daters joined multiple sites to create an even larger pool of available partners. This relationship showed the reciprocity of intrapsychic scripts (goals for online dating) and cultural scripts (culture of the site). For instance, if a date seeker had the goals of meeting new partners for casual dating, they would choose a website tailored to others like them.

Date seekers also perceived sites to have a culture of members and chose a site that matched their own needs for a partner. For instance, eHarmony was perceived to contain date seekers looking for a more serious relationship and because it was expensive and time consuming, more casual daters were less likely to be members. Plenty of Fish, however, was free and did not require much in terms of time or energy investment and so daters were perceived to be less serious. Furthermore, because websites had different features or ways of matching users, the features of the site were of importance when deciding. For example, eHarmony matched members and provided only a handful of people with whom members may communicate. It was much more private and required less effort on behalf of the date seeker to
filter through numerous potential matches. However, sites like Match provided much more freedom in terms of who may be contacted which put the burden of finding a suitable match more on the date seeker. It also allowed more control for the user.

Cost was also important with dating sites ranging from free to about $60 per month. While eHarmony’s site may be more attractive, the steep price tag may not be and users could choose another site or sites.

Once the site(s) were chosen, members must create an account, create a profile (e), decide whether or not to pay to become a member, and were matched with other date seekers (f). First, date seekers must create a profile and describe what or who they were looking for in terms of a partner (e). Individuals created a sample of self to present to other users in their profiles, but this was restricted by the design of the website. This process also demonstrated how intrapsychic scripts (e.g., wanting to describe oneself in a profile) was restricted by cultural scripts (e.g., users must follow the sites’ formats). For instance, each site had a different process ranging from responses to items based upon a scale (e.g., agree to disagree), checkboxes (e.g., activities users would like to share with a partner) or open text boxes (e.g., tell us about yourself). The sites also provided guidelines and advice for members but it was not always followed or elicited. Daters did not identify themselves as needing dating advice and felt it was for other daters who needed the help. For instance, common sense advice (such as “post a clear picture”) seemed to be ignored but more practical advice (such as wording statements in a particular way) might be followed. Users typically navigated the site and learned how to date online without eliciting additional website advice. Many of the advice articles were perceived to be for others or just common sense.
The next step was **Matching** (f) or being provided with potentially compatible partners through a list or searching feature. The matching process was highly dependent on the design of the website and it was also central in the online dating process. There were different types of matching that I classified as matchmaker or search engine.

Matchmaking sites paired users with other site members based upon a set of criteria determined during the profile creation process and users could only contact these specific date seekers. For example, sites such as eHarmony provided members with a handful of selected matches for consideration (such as seven) and members could only communicate with those selected.

Another type of site I named was a search engine site. A search engine site provided users with a database of available potentials (in the thousands) and while it did provide some matchmaking, members could enter search criteria into a search box and filter through the database to find potential matches.

Matchmaking sites were much more private, did the work for site members in terms of finding compatible matches, and because communication may only happen amongst these matches, there was less junk mail or being contacted by undesirable members. However, users had little control in this process and if they were displeased with the handful of matches, they had to wait for a new handful to be provided. A search engine site gave more control to the user to find what they sought but it may be time consuming or overwhelming because contact may occur from dozens (or hundreds) of other daters at once. Filtering of initial contact was left mostly up to the date seekers themselves. Thus, date seekers who preferred more privacy and simplicity would benefit from a matchmaking site, whereas individuals who preferred more control and variety would benefit from a search engine site. Regardless, individuals had a
shopping list of items or characteristics they looked for in a match and aimed to find as many of those characteristics in a potential match as possible. From the list or search results of potential matches, date seekers were constantly making judgments and decisions about the other daters. Therefore, this process was intertwined with making decisions about matches (g). Matching demonstrated how ideas about ideal partners (intrapsychic), the way partners were matched through sites (cultural), and making decisions about other daters (interpersonal) were reciprocal.

Once a list of potential matches or results of a search was available, Decisions about Matches (g) were made. The decision making process, however, did not stop here; it was also central to the online dating experience. Essentially every step after initial matching was based upon decisions to continue or discontinue contact. To make decisions, date seekers examined their shopping list of desired qualities in a partner and engaged in a process of elimination. It was not a positive process in that an individual gained points by possessing certain qualities. It was more about finding reasons to eliminate them from further contact. I used the metaphor of Guess Who? after the Milton Bradley board guessing game in which pictures of people were flipped down because they did not meet certain criteria. Profiles online were passed over because they did not meet certain criteria on the shopping list or possessed a deal breaking quality. This process is explained in much more detail throughout later sections. Shopping lists contained criteria for matches to meet and if they were not met, profiles were flipped down in Guess Who? style. Shopping lists may contain items such as matches must not have children, be of a certain age and within a particular geographic location, have particular physical attributes, or have a college education. If potential matches passed the Guess Who? elimination, the contact can move to the next step in the process (g). If the matches were flipped down, contact is stopped and the process returned to the matching (f) step. Again, decisions were being made
from this step forward as to whether to continue contact. Decision making was also an interaction of intrapsychic scripts (e.g., shopping list for a desirable partner), cultural scripts (e.g., the sites provide matches or a means to view profiles), and interpersonal scripts (e.g., review a profile or make contact).

Initial contact with matches (i) could take place before and/or after the decisions about matches (g) step. To clarify, a date seeker may be contacted by a potential match with whom he/she has not already made a decision. For example, if Tracey sends Pat a message and Pat has not yet seen Tracey’s profile in searches or match lists, the decision making process would begin here. However, if Tracey had seen Pat and has already made the decision to contact, initial contact was initiated by Tracey. Then, Pat had to engage in making a decision on whether to reciprocate contact. That being said, initial contact could be made by either party. Initial contact was restricted by the design of the website. On matchmaking sites the first contact was starting communication with someone and moving through a series of guided online communication. On search engine sites, either a wink or a message was sent to potential matches. Initial contact was used to determine if there was a mutual interest in communicating further, meaning both parties passed each other’s Guess Who? elimination for now. If both parties passed the tests, this established a mutual match (j). A mutual match meant both date seekers wanted to advance their communication.

Advanced communication took place in the next step of engaging in Mediated Communication (k). Online communication could be sending each other questions, messages through the sites’ messaging system, emails via personal email addresses, instant messages, or friending each other on social networking sites like Facebook. Again, communication was limited by the websites (to be discussed further later). For instance, eHarmony followed a series
of guided communication before date seekers could openly send messages while Plenty of Fish allowed messaging to one another immediately. Comfort level with online dating, length of time on dating sites, and connection felt with the other person influenced how quickly these steps were advanced. Depending on level of interest and additional rounds of elimination, the match could move to phone calls and text messages or skip right to meeting offline (l).

The next step in the model was **Meeting Face-to-Face** (l). The step included discussing moving the relationship offline and meeting in person, as well as discussing when/where/how to meet. The initiation took place online or over the phone. Safety with meeting someone offline seemed to be a concern for the women but many admitted they did not always meet in public places. However, the location to meet was usually one in which both parties felt comfortable. If parties felt a closer connection they chose a more intimate setting for the first meeting while if an offline meeting was suggested quickly, a more casual/public first meeting was likely. The first meeting (interpersonal script) was influenced by the cultural script for online dating of meeting in a public place. During the first face-to-face meeting, decisions were being made on whether to continue contact based upon physical connection/attraction, similarities in interests or values, having a good conversation, and otherwise not violating social norms. If the decision to continue offline contact was made by both parties, (m) **it stayed offline** and the match **no longer used the dating site** (n).

Once the relationship moved offline, the dating site became obsolete for that couple. As with all relationships, decisions were made about whether to continue or stop contact. If the initial offline meeting was unsuccessful, individuals chose to return to choosing a site (d), matching (f) or stop online dating. The decision to stop dating online was made based upon original goals for online dating (such as casual dating goals or looking for a serious relationship).
and the new offline relationship. If the decision was made to continue an offline relationship, the issue about removing one’s profile from dating sites became an issue for some. Others found the need to create a story for how they met to tell people who were not accepting of online dating. Thus, removal of one’s profile because an offline relationship was developed, or deciding not to continue online dating because goals were not fulfilled, resulted in the end of this model (n).

The next section discusses in further detail the steps in this model. Each step is identified as cultural, intrapsychic, or interpersonal. Categories and support for each step are provided.

The Reciprocal Nature of Online Dating Scripts

The reciprocal nature of online dating scripts was evident throughout the analysis of website content and the interface as well as users’ accounts of their experiences. In this section, the scripts/model will be explained in detail by script level.

*Relating to Others Romantically – Intrapsychic Script*

Participants were clear about what they wanted in a relationship and how they tended to relate to others romantically. The majority of participants said they wanted a combination of factors or wanted it all: romance, friendship, and compatibility. To analyze how participants related to others romantically, I used Lee’s (1977) types of love: eros, ludus, storge, pragma, mania, and agape. Eros is the love of beauty, sexuality, physical attractiveness, and passion. Ludus is the love of entertainment, excitement and game playing. Storge love is peaceful and slow, lacking passion and intensity, and focused on establishing companionable relationships for the purpose of a long-term commitment. Pragma is practical and traditional love, which focuses on compatibility (e.g., education, career, age) of partners. Mania is love best characterized as emotionally intense, manic, obsessive, jealous, and has extreme highs and lows. Agape is a gentle selfless love that expects nothing in return from the love object. The three styles of love
described by this group of online daters included (a) eros (attraction/chemistry/passion), (b) pragma (a partner/companion who is compatible and shares their beliefs), and (c) storge (a good friend). However, participants wanted a combination of these styles, not just one. These ideas about love influenced their online dating experience through what they looked for in a partner (e.g., someone who would be there for them) and how they made decisions about matches (e.g., look for someone attractive).

Attraction, Chemistry, Passion (Eros)

One of the factors in the combination was eros, or the need to be passionately attracted to a partner. All of the participants emphasized, however, that this was not enough to sustain a relationship and that it was only part of their needs in a romantic relationship. They needed to be in a successful relationship. Thus, it is included as one style of love the participants endorsed. For instance, Emily said “I place a great emphasis on attraction and chemistry, meaning the ability to carry on an interesting conversation and wanting to be physically intimate” (p. 10). Derek explained “…I would think you have to be friends because you have to like the same interests and get along, but then there also has to be an attraction or passion towards each other…” (p. 13). Mary also explained the need to have multiple styles in a relationship when she said

…I think that you have to have passion and you have to have like that physical attraction, but I don’t think that’s the most important thing and I think that you need to be able to relate to each other on a level… (p. 13).

Jon shared this idea and said “I think that you need a physical side of the relationship and you need an emotional side of the relationship” (p. 18). While not the only factor in a relationship, Jason also said chemistry was important, “…obviously passion is important and you want to be
physically attracted to somebody, but more than that, you want somebody who complements your styles and most importantly, often is able to put up with you” (p. 18). Cathy felt the same way. She said,

I am one of those people where I need to feel, it’s not all about the hot, you know, the hot romance and the sex and what goes on in the bedroom. I mean certainly that is a part of it… [but]… I need much more than that. (Cathy, p. 21)

Overall, even when participants said they needed romance, attraction, and passion in a relationship, those were not all they needed for a relationship to survive.

Compatible Partner/Companion (Pragma)

As equally important to attraction and passion was the need for a compatible partner and companion in a romantic relationship. In a relationship, participants wanted to relate to one another on a daily basis, have things in common, have complementary strengths and weaknesses, and share similar beliefs. For instance, Mary said,

I think that you need to be able to relate to each other on a level where, like on a daily basis …you want to be in the same house with that person and you want to eat dinner at the table together and you want to do your laundry together just because you enjoy being around somebody …you have things in common and you can communicate with each other and you enjoy being around each other. I think that’s just as big of … a part of as the passion is. (p. 13)

Others said that the partners needed to complement one another. Jason said

… I tend to see a relationship as very much a partnership and equality. You know, obviously passion is important and you want to be physically attracted to somebody, but more than that, you want somebody who complements your styles and most importantly,
often is able to put up with you…. you may have a lot of quirks that you may not think you have and a lot of shortcomings that you may not think you have and you try to find somebody who best complements those. Somebody maybe who is organized and you aren’t, or is good at managing money if you’re not, or likes to cook if you don’t, or something like that. (p. 18)

Sharing beliefs and morals such as how to raise children, being career oriented, being able to accept someone for who they were, and wanting to be around each other were important. For example, Lindsey said

I think for me personally it’s [the relationship] you know beliefs and morals. [If] we’re not on the same page there I don’t think it would have worked with my husband… I think that all comes down to beliefs… I mean even like with kids, do we spank them, do we not spank them? That all depends on what you believe or how you grew up….I think it’s mostly on I guess that ability if our beliefs are compatible. (p. 12)

Sharing values such as being career focused and liking to spend time with one another were important. Shane said

If their schedule or their lifestyle is, I would never want to be with someone who has the same schedule, lifestyle as me. But to have something similar, if they work a lot or you know, are very much into their career or whatnot… [and] you’re looking forward to someone to hang out with and you’re both looking for that, you’re both looking for someone who you can just spend that time together and just get along and it’s not even talking just sitting there together is just really nice. (p. 22-23)

Some participants especially realized that having a companion was about giving and taking and being compatible with someone. A few of the participants who were previously
married demonstrated an understanding of needing to accept one another and finding ways to work through imperfections and problems. Sheila explained

I think being together with somebody is a give and take thing… I couldn’t expect it to totally be about me, I couldn’t expect someone to always like to do what I wanted to do and I wouldn’t expect them to do you know to be the opposite of that either, you know it’s a give and take thing. I guess being my age you realize that everybody is different, there’s always going to be something about someone that you don’t like, but there’s going to be things about you that they don’t like either. And it’s whether you can get over those things and move past them and you know make that relationship work. (p. 16-17)

Steve also believed relationships involved both give and take. He noted

… having been divorced, I realized that no relationship is ever a 50/50 split…sometimes one person is going to give more than the other. I think that people’s communication methods, whether it be in arguing or expressing their emotions about certain issues is going to be different and that’s okay. (p. 18)

Compatibility and flexibility were necessary to make the relationship work. Because both of these participants had been married they had strong beliefs about what they needed in a relationship based upon past relationships.

Friendship (Storge)

In addition to chemistry, passion, and compatibility, having a partner who was a friend was important in a romantic relationship. Participants said being part of each other’s networks (i.e. family, friends, and coworkers), getting along and sharing interests, being able to share
everything, and trusting them to be honest and supportive were necessary in a relationship. For instance, Emily explained a relationship needed chemistry, support, and friendship.

I think a relationship should be fun and supportive. At some point, it will involve more than just the two of you, whether it is meeting family/friends/coworkers or enjoying activities together. I place a great emphasis on attraction and chemistry, meaning the ability to carry on an interesting conversation and wanting to be physically intimate. But the difference between a relationship and a hook up is sharing your life with each other and finding ways to make your life work together. Friendship needs to be a strong component as well. (Emily, p. 10)

Derek also explained a relationship needed to fulfill several needs including friendship and passion. He noted

I actually think a relationship should be a combination …I would think you have to be friends because you have to like the same interests and get along, but then there also has to be an attraction or passion towards each other….it’s definitely a combination. (Derek, p. 13)

Further, Amber explained this combination by saying

… for me what was very important that they are my best friend. I can tell them anything and trust them with anything I say, and wanting to have that person to you know be there for you when you really need someone’s shoulder to cry on or someone just to talk to. So you know I think that best friend is important and like I said the romance there. I think the whole package needs to be there, it’s not just one over the other I think it’s a combination of [passion, compatibility, and friendship]. (p. 11)
Participants really emphasized that a relationship was a combination of elements such as friendship and romance. They frequently described an ideal relationship as being multifaceted. For example, Ashley said

I would say I’m definitely more of a friendship compassion person…. I guess the, the language that works best for me is kind of friendship and compatibility, like the thing that [my partner] did well and acknowledged throughout was like …there was certainly attraction and interest and that sort of thing, but she was very good at playing the buddy role as well to kind of keep from scaring me off. So we kind of had that both ness and I think that that was more effective for me than just passion or just a romantic relationship, but being able to also play that friendship role. (p. 14-15)

Having a companion to be supportive and a friend to be there were very important. Shane explained he needed a deep friendship and support in a partner, and noted

for me what I’m looking for is a friend who I can, you know you come home and you hang out with them or even just talk to them on the phone and you can do that and just spend the weekend together. Someone who you bond with and you can solve… someone who you can have a friendship with … who you can look to for advice and guidance… someone who can be critical of you or who’s very rational and can see through things. And break things down. To me, I mean what I’m looking for is someone who’s empathetic, you know someone who’s nice and someone who’s you know caring and all those things. (p. 22-23)

Other participants agreed that a relationship needed to be a partnership not just a physical connection. While physical aspects were important, partners needed to be companions. Cathy wanted someone to share her life with in all ways. She was
looking for in terms of a relationship, somebody who is truly going to be a companion and life friend, not just a bed buddy. And so I’m looking for someone who will share, that I can share life with, and all aspects of life at very much an emotional level of connection. (Cathy, p. 21)

For these participants, having a combination of friendship, passion/chemistry, and compatibility were necessary in a romantic relationship. These factors coincided with Lee’s (1977/1988) Styles of Love eros, pragma, and storge. Because these were part of an intrapsychic script they were carried over into the online dating process. For example, these scripts influenced how online date seekers described their matches, their decision making process on contacting matches (i.e. their criteria for evaluating), how they selected a website to join, and how they communicated with potential partners online (e.g. ask more about values versus interests). In this group of online daters, three styles of love were most prominent and they were not manifested individually, but combined with one another.

**Decision to Join Site – Intrapsychic Scripts**

Other intrapsychic scripts involved the date seekers’ reasons for joining an online dating site and whether or not they were looking for a serious relationship or a casual one. While a few participants said they joined an online dating site “out of curiosity’s sake” (Jon, p. 1) or “Just to see what was out there” (Sheila, p. 1), most participants had a clear reason (or reasons) for joining the sites. These reasons included a lack of potential partners offline, personal reasons, an acquaintance or friend met a partner online, and efficiency.

**Lack of Potential Partners Offline.**

One of the most commonly cited reasons for joining a dating site was a lack of potential partners in the physical world. There were a variety of reasons why a lack of partners existed:
no educated desirable potentials, lived in a small town without many options, dating from a smaller pool (LGBTQ) or having no way to be exposed to potential partners.

Many of the participants revealed they were tired of the bar scene and did not know how to meet someone in person. For instance, Mary explained how several factors influenced her decision to date online when saying

I had been considering it [online dating] just from like seeing all the commercials and things… I work with all girls, and don’t really want, didn’t really want to meet again in the bar scene, so I was like well how else am I going to meet a guy? (p. 2)

Derek also explained he felt he was not being exposed to potential partners at work and said the bar was not an appealing way to meet women. He noted “I’m getting to the point where the bar scene is not my scene to you know meet people” (Derek, p. 1). Steve explained online dating “allowed me to find people outside of the bar who weren’t inebriated” (p. 1). Jason said the once he graduated college it was more difficult to come in contact with potential partners. When asked why he joined an online dating site he explained

I wasn’t on a college campus anymore, didn’t have necessarily the same flexibility in my time... And even with the flexibility in time that I had during college, I couldn’t find anyone that I thought was you know a real solid person that I wanted to date anyway through conventional means of going to the bars or just meeting people by happenstance.

(Jason, p. 7)

Lily echoed their sentiments and also noted that once someone was older than college-aged, the availability of potential partners and opportunities for meeting them were limited. She explained “I’m getting to the age where you are limited where you can meet people, it’s not so much in
college or in a social bar environment so I tried it [online dating]” (Lily, p. 1). Lindsey agreed and stated

… I was getting older and I was just tired of meeting random people at the bar. After a while I didn’t go to the bars anymore because it was just, I was working, I was going to school and I just didn’t have time, you know? (p. 1)

Interestingly, many of the participants revealed they did not frequent bars or did not want to meet someone in a bar, suggesting this was one common way couples met or were perceived to meet. Additionally, participants found it acceptable to meet a partner in a bar when in college or when they were younger but once they got older (meaning out of college) it was no longer acceptable.

Available partners may also be hard to find offline because individuals were not willing to settle for just anyone. Furthermore, living in a small community posed problems for date seekers because there was a limited number of singles. For instance, Cathy explained that she has an advanced degree and was looking for someone else who was educated but lived in a small town which made that difficult. Living in a small town made it virtually impossible to find other professionals on my schedule who have similar kinds of educational interests and backgrounds and experiences to go out with… I would love to meet someone. I just don’t know how else to go about it, so I’m online with the hope that maybe someday I’ll finally meet somebody. (Cathy, p. 2-3)

Emily stated

I started using them [online dating sites] right before I moved to a new city for graduate school. I had really wanted to try them, but didn't want to do it in a small town where I felt I already knew everyone. (p. 2)

Amber also said that living in a family community made it “hard to meet singles” (Amber, p. 2).
Interestingly living in a small town also prevented some from joining an online dating site. Some of the participants were apprehensive about identifying themselves as an online dater to non-online daters. Rebecca explained that because she was a teacher, she felt uncomfortable about posting her picture on a dating website in fear of a student seeing it. Even though they wanted to meet someone to date and were joining a site, there was a lingering fear about the stigma of being seen by an acquaintance on a dating site. It was acceptable to be seen by strangers but having an acquaintance see them was uncomfortable for some.

Other participants were pulling from an even smaller pool of available partners and found online dating as the only option to meet someone suitable. Ashley recently moved to the southern United States and identified as lesbian and noted the gay scene was not very visible where she lived. She explained her reason for joining an online dating site:

…with it being [the south] and me being a lesbian, it’s not exactly like that’s real visible. And so I was ready to date and that was really the only way that I saw of finding…an eligible pool of interested women. (Ashley, p. 1)

Personal Reasons

Other participants revealed they had a difficult time meeting people in person because of concerns about their appearance or because they were shy. Rebecca explained that because she was overweight she worried about approaching people in person because she was not sure if they were interested in dating her. Jon explained he was shy and did not feel comfortable walking up to a “random person” and asking them out (p. 1). For these participants, the online environment provided a means of face saving or assistance in communicating with potential partners.
Acquaintances or Friends Found Partners Online

Having a friend or acquaintance who met a partner online helped convince several of the participants to join a dating site themselves. When an individual knew someone who had luck meeting a partner online, they were tempted to try it themselves. It made participants think they could also find a partner online and made online dating more acceptable. Mary explained she was encouraged to join by a coworker who met her spouse online. She said,

I was contemplating doing it [dating online] and one of my coworkers had actually met her boyfriend at the time, who is now her husband, also on Match.com, and so she kind of prodded me and encouraged me to sign up and so I did. (Mary, p. 2)

Jason said he knew “… a coworker of mine who found her husband through Match… And so I decided to give it a try” (Jason, p. 1). Megan said a friend had met her husband online and thus felt online dating had potential (p. 1). Thus, knowing someone who had met a partner online either eased some of the stigma about online dating or made the participants realize it was possible to develop a meaningful relationship with someone met via an online dating site.

Efficiency or Screening Mechanism

Online dating saved daters time by allowing them to see a pool of potential partners who were presumably single and also looking for a date. The sites allowed them to filter out individuals whom they were not interested in simply by searching for certain features or reading someone’s profile. Online dating allowed date seekers to avoid the same conversation repeatedly with potential partners (e.g., how old are you? what do you do for a living?), learn about someone quickly, and it was easier to determine if there was a mutual interest. For instance, Steve explained online dating sites allowed him to weed women out and save time. He noted when online dating
...I don’t have to go up and talk to 50 people in a bar or wherever and have the [same] conversation about what do you do for a living, how old are you, do you have kids, are you divorced? I can set preferences and ...weed people out. (p. 8)

Shane said the dating sites made it much more efficient to find someone to date. He said I’m pretty busy and for me, I mean I think even if I wasn’t busy [I would date online]...There’s enough information...in you know a person’s profile there tends to be enough information presented in you know in a one page that gives you a fairly reasonable idea of a person as well as their picture so you can tell if you know they’re attractive or if you have some sort of connection with them. And it just, it’s a very efficient way to get a feel for that, and then when you reach out to them, or vice versa, you know by the effect of them responding, the probability of that developing is a lot higher versus going on a date or you know going to a bar and trying to meet people or trying to meet people around...first off you get the filter factor, you get to see all these people in a very short period of time and [contact] who you’re interested in. And then if there is a response back on either end, you know them responding to me or me responding to them, you already know in a minute or you know whenever you get the email or notice that the person is interested in you. And so it’s just, it’s a huge time saver in terms of trying to find someone you may have a connection with. (Shane, p. 2)

Goals for Joining Dating Site & Successful Online Dating Experiences—Intrapsychic Scripts

Participants revealed three different goals for joining online dating sites ranging from few expectations to looking for the one: (a) fun (e.g., very casual, set goals low, looking for a fun date), (b) casual (e.g., looking for a casual partnership now and maybe a relationship later), and (c) serious (e.g., someone who is compatible and maybe a long term relationship).
Some of the participants said they did not set their goals very high for online dating in terms of finding a long term partner. They also said they were looking for a casual dating relationship, just someone to go out with on dates. Sheila, a 62-year-old widower, explained “My goals for online dating were just to meet a guy that was fun to go out with that was you know about my age and liked the same things that I wanted to do” (p. 2). Her goals for the sites were not to find a partner, but rather someone with whom to spend time. Lily, on the other hand, is 29 and single and when asked what her goals were for dating online responded “I don’t really have any, I would say it was if it works it works, if not oh well” (p. 1). Both Sheila and Lily have been using dating sites for less than six months and have yet to meet someone with whom they connected.

For a few of the participants who had low expectations, their online dating experience turned into a serious partnership or marriage. Mary explained, “Honestly I was just looking to like find somebody, go on a few dates, like see what it even held, I didn’t have high expectations for it” (Mary, p 2). She met her husband through the website. Ashley was also only looking for someone to go out on dates with and met her longtime partner through the site. Even though they went into the online dating experience with low expectations for meeting a partner, both of these women found relationships. Because they were only looking for fun, it influenced how they communicated with potential partners (interpersonal script).

A few participants explained they would be interested in dating someone from a dating site now and maybe having a relationship with them later. Joining the site and meeting potential partners was a way to explore what they wanted as a means of self-discovery. Jason joined a
dating site to explore whether or not he wanted a relationship and then met a long-term girlfriend online. He explained

I think at the time of my joining the site, I wasn’t really sure whether I wanted to potentially get married down the road or if that was the right thing for me, you know having kids and what have you and having a family. So I kind of wanted to explore that part of me, you know to see through meeting people if that was something that I really saw for my future. And you know in the shorter term of things, just to find somebody to be with and somebody to share my experience with …So I think I was looking for a little more stability, I would say. And add something to my daily grind that would make me a little happier. (Jason, p. 2)

He was looking for online dating sites to provide him with some self-reflection in terms of what he wanted in a relationship and whether or not wanted a long-term relationship in the future. Thus, he looked to the sites to provide him some clarity in his relationship expectations.

Rebecca, who was single but met a past partner online, was hoping to find a partner now and perhaps get married later. She said “Well I hope to find a potential partner, you know someday to get married. My partner that I was with most recently, we were together for six years. And we met [online]” (Rebecca, p. 3). They both seemed as though they may not be ready for a long-term relationship right now but would not be opposed to one in the future. Shane was a single 24-year-old and said he was not explicitly looking for a wife but it could possibly lead to marriage. He said he was looking for “someone who I get along with and seeing it develop into a long term relationship and possibly marriage. But I don’t go in with the intent of getting married” (Shane, p. 3). He went on to say “I’m hoping for something tangible and a good relationship and someone who you enjoy being with all those things, and my [thought is] just let
it develop and see what happens” (Shane, p. 3). While he was not opposed to a long-term relationship forming, he did not set out to find that initially.

*Serious*

Most of the participants reported they were looking for someone with whom they were compatible and maybe a relationship that was long-term. Derek explained his goal for joining a site was “Pretty much find my match… you know to find somebody that I could… have a relationship with… hopefully… long term” (Derek, p. 2). He was looking for a partner online. Steve, a single divorcee, said “My goal is actually to find someone to actually start a relationship with and actually hopefully get married again at some point” (Steve, p. 2). Amber explained that while she was not necessarily expecting to find her husband (as she did); she was hoping to find someone with which she was compatible. She explained it [goal for joining site] wasn’t to necessarily find someone who I was going to marry, I think it was just find someone that I was compatible with… so it was just a way to meet somebody more like me you know, something different, but I wasn’t set out to find my spouse, that wasn’t the reason why I chose that one [eHarmony]. (Amber, p. 2)

Megan, who met her husband on Match.com, also said Really I just wanted to find you know somebody to date, I was tired of you know being single you know and looking to see where it went, like not necessarily looking for a husband, but just looking for like a relationship. (Megan, p. 2)

Participants had different ideas about what a successful online dating experience would be like and while only one mentioned it, the ultimate goal for some was not to be on a dating site anymore. Depending on a date seeker’s reasons for joining a dating site, the ultimate goal may be to continue to meet people online or move a relationship offline and stop using the site
altogether. For instance, Derek said “A successful experience from a dating site would be ultimately to not use that dating site anymore and have… a relationship with that person and hopefully down the road get married” (p. 8).

Choosing a Site - Intrapsychic/Interpersonal Scripts

Participants were asked why they decided to join a dating site and if they could compare the different sites they had used. Through this, the theme of choosing a site emerged. While not directly asked, several of the participants offered their reasons for choosing a particular dating website (there were many available). From their responses, three categories emerged: perceived members on each of the sites, features offered by each site, and cost of the service.

Perceived Members

For each of the sites, participants had an impression of what kind of people were members and chose a site with members they found most desirable. Because each site had its own culture, participants determined what the members would be like before joining a site. In some cases, they browsed through profiles to ascertain if there were desirable members prior to joining. Participants were aware of demographic differences of sites and members. As Steve stated “I think there is definitely a different demographic among each of the sites” (p. 1) and Emily (p. 1) said “I used all of them for the same area (but at different times) and found different people were on each site.” Thus, the date seekers decided what their own goals were for online dating and relationships and chose a site based upon those goals. For instance, if someone was looking for a more serious relationship, he/she would join a site perceived to have other members looking for a serious relationship. Similarly, other sites were perceived to contain individuals who were looking for less serious relationships. People on eHarmony were perceived to be the most serious daters. Jason explained
eHarmony I think is tailored more towards people who are looking to be very serious and settle down and probably more for an older crowd even. In fact, I found that the demographics of eHarmony to be more older and more well established people I would say. (Jason, p. 2)

Lindsey joined eHarmony and said she was “looking for the one” (p. 2). Because eHarmony has a long profile creation process and members had to complete a time-consuming and lengthy personality profile, participants believed other members of the site had to be serious about finding a partner as well. Lindsey explained because eHarmony’s personality profile was lengthy, she knew anyone putting in the effort must also be looking for a more serious relationship. She stated

the personality profile that you go through it almost takes you an hour to do, so you know you know they’re taking this seriously and I knew some guy was filling this out too for an hour, seriously looking for somebody too. (Lindsey, p. 2)

Also, because eHarmony was more expensive ($120 for three months), it was likely to attract more than people seeking casual encounters. Lily (p. 4) said eHarmony

…was the one that I heard was the most reputable and not just people out for a booty call and just a one night stand, it was, it’s pretty costly so I think too if someone is going to pay that kind of money they really are trying to find somebody, not just get a piece of you know what.

Thus, the amount of effort and cost it took to become a website member was taken into consideration when determining what kind of people were on each of the sites. Steve explained that Yahoo and Plenty of Fish did not require much of an investment (monetarily or effort) to join and thus were seen as having less serious members.
Match.com was presented as almost a step down from eHarmony because it was cheaper and did not have the complex matching system, yet many of the participants were members. It was also seen as containing less serious daters. For example, Jason said he thought Match.com was designed for more casual daters. He noted,

I would say Match is probably more tailored for casual daters. People who may not necessarily be looking for somebody to marry, but perhaps somebody to date in the short term. Or even to a lesser extent, just to meet people in their area. (Jason, p. 1)

However, several of the participants said they had used Match and that there were more people on this site than eHarmony. Having more members to choose from was desirable. For example, Cathy said “there were so few available [men] to me on eHarmony that when I switched to Match all of the sudden I actually got a chance to go out with the people” (p. 2). Even if it was perceived as a step down from eHarmony, many of the participants utilized Match.com’s services and did not feel they were missing out because the site had a larger pool of available partners. As Cathy explained

it takes a lot longer to fill out the profile and background information on eHarmony than it does on Match, it goes into I think greater depth. But it hasn’t made any difference in terms of my ability to meet people; I haven’t found that one is better than the other. (p. 3).

Not everyone thought Match was for more casual daters but thought that more filtering of matches was needed. Steve explained Match had a balance between a large pool of members and a lower membership fee. He noted

Match.com seems to me have the, kind of like the best of both worlds, there’s enough people on there that I can search through and weed people out and still have a decent
amount of people to potentially be interested in because of the, it’s a mid-level entry price… (Steve, p. 2)

Besides eHarmony and Match, participants were also members of other websites which were perceived to be for less serious daters. In fact, several felt that some of the other sites were meat markets or third rate. For instance, Yahoo! Personals was mentioned by participants to be of a lesser quality. In fact, Steve (p. 2) said

Yahoo to me is kind of like, and I hate to say it, it’s more of a third rate way to go. It doesn’t seem to have nearly the amount of people… it’s pretty basic and they’re reporting people can get weekly reports or daily reports and they almost never come back with results that match my criteria.

Lindsey also said Yahoo Personals did not have the type of men she sought, explaining

I did go to the Yahoo personals, those just seemed kind of, I don’t know what the word is, weird. I started reading some of them and you know this guy puts out there Italian stallion looking for Italian princess and I’m like oh boy. Those aren’t the kind of people I want to meet; it’s the kind of person I would meet at the bar. (p. 2)

Therefore, participants avoided websites perceived to have only undesirable members and participants tended to stay away from less known sites. For instance, Amber explained “I ended up going through eHarmony which sounds kind of the safest out of all of them, because I heard some of the other ones were more like meat markets, just putting pictures up and looking at people’s pictures” (p. 2). Thus, an individual could choose to go to a site because it was a meat market but the participants in this study were not looking for that environment and avoided them. The participants I interviewed were not using online dating sites for casual sexual encounters or
superficially. Thus, this study presents online daters as always looking for relationships on large, popular dating sites, which is not always the case.

While eHarmony and Match (and even Yahoo) were popular sites and not tailored to specific preferences, other websites were (e.g., J-date is for Jewish matching). While participants in this study mentioned some of the more general (and popular) dating sites, one website that was mentioned by a few of the participants was ModelMeet.com. The site was supposedly for men of a higher socioeconomic status and women who were of model quality physically. Steve explained the site advertised having attractive women and wealthy men but that was not always true of members. He noted

In the case of ModelMeet, actually on the female side when they log in, it’s like millionaire gentlemen or something like that, so its setting the expectation that the man suspects I’m going to meet women of a higher look or of a model standard. And from the female perspective, they think they’re going to start meeting guys who are more of the higher financial stature, maybe more professional. (p. 1)

I asked “is that true?” He responded “No, not at all.” I said “So you’re not a millionaire?” and he said “Not at all. And most of them are not model quality” (Steve, p. 2). Thus, even for sites supposedly tailored to certain interests, members did not always follow the “rules.” In other situations, participants were limited to the dating sites they could join because of their sexual orientation. For instance, Ashley was lesbian and some of the sites did not match gay members. Ashley explained she tried joining eHarmony which (at the time) was not gay-friendly and so she joined Match. She said

…I had looked on eHarmony but that was when they were still anti-gay, they didn’t have like their sister site that they do now for the gay people, so yes, Match was the only one I
used, but I looked to see if eHarmony had come up with the gay site at that point, because I was already well aware of eHarmony’s stance on hooking up gay people which was negative at that point. (p. 2)

She went on to say that Match was the best choice because it was gay-friendly and since it was a large site, would produce a larger pool of potential matches. She said

I went with Match because it was, well like I said, one, there wasn’t a huge number of options, two, it is probably, I don’t know if it’s the biggest, you probably know, but one of the bigger dating sites anyway, and so I figured it would give me the biggest of a small pool to draw from, since you know, again, like I said, lack of visibility of the LGBT community in this area. (Ashley, p. 5)

Members of the sites differ depending on geographic location. Shane (age 24) moved from New York to Los Angeles and noticed a difference in the type of women on eHarmony. He said in New York, a lot of women dated online and he met high quality women who were not expecting to get married right away. In Los Angeles, however, he felt there were fewer high quality women on the sites and/or they had the expectation to get married immediately. Shane explained

For eHarmony, I noticed a massive difference per city. So in New York, I enjoyed it, it was very, you can get a lot of people who I felt were really high caliber, you get a lot of people who are really interesting, have done a lot of things, had good personalities…I guess for my age bracket, they’re not looking to get married, they’re looking for something and you know hopefully it develops into a serious relationship, but that’s as far as the thought goes. And the difference also being that in New York it’s very common for people to use dating websites or dating services… in New York it was a way
to meet people and you tended to get higher quality people who were a little more serious. In New York. In LA, it matches like the commercials where people are getting married off it. And from what I hear from friends that that’s how it is in other cities outside of New York that it matches, you know it’s supposed to be solely for like finding your husband and wife or very, very serious, which I don’t have an interest in at the moment. (Shane, p. 2-3)

*Site Features*

While individuals did not always say they joined a specific site for the features, once they joined one or more site(s), they were able to compare the features and decide which they liked best. The two site features mentioned by participants were the communication process (how easy and in what fashion members could communicate with other site members) and the matching process (how members were matched with other people or how users could search profiles and view them). Date seekers were then able to decide what sites they wanted to remain a member of and could cancel other memberships.

In terms of communication, Emily explained sites differ in how easy it is to communicate with other members and said, “…all of them [dating sites] have different features…eHarmony makes you go through a lot of hoops before you can even send an email, but plentyoffish allows chatting instantly…with match, you can email through the site” (Emily, p.2). eHarmony also really restricted communication with other site members and it was very expensive (Rebecca).

The matching process, which included how the site paired members with others and whether or not users could browse other profiles, was different among the sites. Jason compared Match and eHarmony by explaining eHarmony matched members for them while Match was more flexible and allowed searching. He explained,
eHarmony doesn’t really let you do any of the deciding, they tabulate your profile based on their questions and they find people who they think you are a match to, whereas Match.com allows you to not only have them show you what they came up with in terms of who they think matches, but it also lets you search their database based on whatever criterion you decide. So it was a little more flexibility if you don’t think that Match is finding you the right people you can kind of look on your own. (Jason, p. 2)

Additionally, Jon said eHarmony did match members for them but the same could be done independently on Match. He explained

I think eHarmony’s strength is the fact that it is, it does tailor your matches to your actual likes and dislikes a bit more, I mean I do think they do a decent job with that. But you can do exactly the same thing with Match if you actually just read the profiles. (Jon, p. 2)

Cathy switched from eHarmony to Match because Match was less expensive and had more members, but she thought eHarmony had a good matching system. She explained

eHarmony is more in depth, I mean they really, they do make a more concerted effort to match you on a variety of different features, so it takes a lot longer to fill out the profile and background information on eHarmony than it does on Match, it goes into I think greater depth. But it hasn’t made any difference in terms of my ability to meet people; I haven’t found that one is better than the other. (Cathy, p. 2-3)

Participants liked the idea of eHarmony’s personality test and matching system, but most of them said they had not had luck with it. It did tailor matches but that could be done by the members themselves, and it was more expensive than the other sites. With eHarmony’s high visibility on television commercials and a website that boasted PhD advisors and a proven matching system, it makes sense that many of the participants mentioned it. However, despite
the alleged “proven” matching system, many of the participants did not like being limited in viewing matches, their limited pool of partners, and especially the price tag. Interestingly, many of them mentioned eHarmony as being their first choice but either did not join or left it because they were not having the success they hoped for or because it was very costly.

Cost of Membership

As mentioned briefly above, the cost of membership for a site was taken into consideration before joining and for remaining a member of a site. Even though more expensive sites like eHarmony were viewed positively, the expense caused some date seekers to switch to a more affordable one (such as Match). Also, participants believed paying for a site would ensure other members were more serious about dating and not just looking for casual relationships.

Steve compared several of the sites and said

Match.com seems to me have the, kind of like the best of both worlds, there’s enough people on there that I can search through and weed people out and still have a decent amount of people to potentially be interested in because of the, it’s a mid-level entry price, like $60 or something, $64 for three months on a very base level, which isn’t too bad. (p. 1-2)

While this influenced Steve’s decision to join Match, others switched to Match after being members of eHarmony because of the cost involved in eHarmony. Jon liked the services offered in eHarmony in terms of matching, but switched to Match because of the lower price tag. When I asked Jon why he switched to eHarmony, he said “Cost was a big one…. eHarmony is $50 a month…Match is about half, basically” (p. 2). Cathy also switched from eHarmony to Match. She said “Match is less expensive monthly and so that became a factor when you do this over the long haul. But, the other thing is because it is less expensive, it has more users…” (Cathy, p. 2).
Again, as stated above, eHarmony may have been the initial site chosen but the benefits of the site did not outweigh the costs. While eHarmony’s matching process may be more in-depth, users thought they could find more members elsewhere, do some of the filtering of matches themselves, and save some money in the process.

Creating a Profile and Describing an Ideal Match – Intrapsychic/Cultural

Creating a profile on an online dating site was a complex process. While past studies (i.e. Whitty, 2008) have explored the process of identity negation in the profile creation processes, I was more concerned with the interaction between the users and the websites. This included how the website design forced certain processes, how the website allowed users to describe their ideal matches, guidelines and advice from the websites, and essentially how the date seekers interacted with the website to create a profile and describe a match. Not all of the guidelines and protocols of the website were followed while others were unavoidable (i.e. users must complete certain sections of the profile questionnaire to post it). Ashley said creating a profile was complex because she had to balance being open and still maintaining some privacy. She noted,

…The profile part is hard, like what do I want to put out there, what am I willing to put out there and I want to be, have a profile that’s engaging and honest, but at the same time, like I, you know obviously at this point, random strangers don’t need to know all of my business. So the, how do I make myself sound both interesting, honest and maintain my privacy? And I found that that took some work. (Ashley, p. 4)

Creating a profile was a detailed, step-by-step process. Sheila (p. 4-5) provided a step-by-step example of creating a profile:

the first experience I had…was going through and filling out… my own profile and everything and putting down… where you live, whether you’re a smoker or non-smoker,
if you’re religious. They want to know your height and your age … a body type. And then after… I put pictures of myself on there. And they ask about your marital status … what you kind of profession you’re into, if you’ve got you know education… They want to know about your kids, if you have kids, do you want kids, do you have a car. Then they have a whole section about interests. And then it, like what I like to do, and then they have a section called about me, and it just tells you, you know I kind of had to describe myself. Then it also has a section on if you met someone what your first date, what you’d like to have for a first date. And you have a thing that you fill out that you’re looking for a man between the ages of [whatever to whatever]… once I went through that whole process and we got that all up and running, then you’re considered a member, [there’s no charge for this website, it’s a totally free one]. And then … you can take a mileage and like you wouldn’t want to meet anybody over like I put down I didn’t want to meet anybody over 75 miles away. And so then I went on to start checking the things out when I was logged on.

While Sheila’s example provided an overview of the profile creation process, it was much more complex. Online daters engaged in a process of creating a self or providing a sampling of themselves online, working within the design of the website, and following some guidelines while ignoring other advice.

Creating a Self or a Sampling of a Self

Individuals had strategies for their profile in terms of what they should include, what they should exclude, and why. Most of the participants wanted to be sure they were honest and open, but they did not want to risk disclosing too much. They presented themselves accurately so they could attract people interested in their qualities, but they did not want to put everything about
themselves in their profile. They wanted some privacy and to maintain some mysteriousness. In some situations, however, they may not be entirely honest. For instance, Rebecca mentioned she used to enjoy working out but no longer did, though she did not remove the content from her profile. Her profile did change over time, however when it came to the kind of person she wanted to portray herself as. For example, she explained she now wants to attract someone with an education and so she included that in her profile. She said

...when I was younger, I tried to make myself sound really fun and exciting, but now I try to make it pretty clear that I’m an academic person. Like my ad on Match.com, the tagline is intellectual seeks same, which you know is different than things that I’ve put in the past. So I try to put in there that I like to watch French films and like on Match.com you can put the last book you’ve read and so I try to put up something, you know, not lying, you know but I want to make it clear that that’s kind of the person that I am.

(Rebecca, p. 6)

She also wanted her personality to show. For instance, she said she wanted men to see her sense of humor and so she included content to portray her humorous side. She explained

I wanted to like really get across that I’m a funny person... there was a question that what’s something that people don’t know about you... And I put on there that I’m afraid of animatronics devices, because they scare me to death, I’m so scared of them. (p. 7)

Participants were selective in what they included in profiles in terms of content and amount of information. As in Rebecca’s case, some participants wanted to present themselves in a certain way and chose not to include some information. Mary explained that she did not want to be perceived as being a husband-hunter. She said
…I kind of thought about that what I wanted to get out of it… I didn’t go on there with
the intent of like to find a husband or anything, I didn’t want to come across that way, I
really just wanted to like find a way to meet people of the opposite sex. And so I chose, I
know I chose not to fill everything out… (Mary, p. 4)

Thus, completing every section of the profile or using extra features was perceived to show *too*
much interest in finding a spouse and was viewed negatively. Steve was hesitant to list his
career (senior analyst of hedge funds) because of the impression it might give to women reading
his profile (that he makes a decent salary and they may be after his income).

Being selective when creating a profile was a strategy to attract potential partners while
remaining a little mysterious. It allowed them to save information to share once they met a
match. Mary also did not want to reveal everything (e.g., favorite places to visit or plans for the
future) about herself in her profile so easily. She said

…I chose not to fill everything out, because some of them I just didn’t think were things
that I needed to publicly post, like it was something I would share with somebody if we
got to know each other, but I didn’t really feel the need to blab my whole life story to
anyone and everyone who wanted to look. That’s kind of me. (Mary, p. 4)

She explained that the profile should be a sample of her personality to attract potential matches
to contact her. She noted

…I didn’t fill in everything that they offered, I gave what I considered to be a sampling
of myself and if that was enough to entice someone to want to talk to me, then you know
we could spend some time getting to know each other better I think that’s part of, that’s
part of dating someone is learning those things, I don’t think that you need to put
everything out there up front, because that kind of takes away from some of the
excitement of like meeting somebody new and discovering things about each other. Like I wanted to put enough out there that someone would get you know an idea of who I am but you know not everything. (Mary, p. 5)

Ashley also shared Mary’s ideas of putting enough information into a profile to sound engaging and interesting without revealing everything to the strangers who would be viewing the profile.

Date seekers did not keep information private only to be mysterious. Sometimes they did not share everything on their profile to protect themselves either physically or emotionally. Cathy was concerned about safety. When discussing what she included in her profile she said “I just try not to give so much information that I would make myself particularly at risk, you know in terms of personal safety” (p. 4). Shane summarized his struggle with creating a profile because he wanted to attract women without letting himself be vulnerable. He said “…it’s always challenging…you want the funny and interesting and then all the things but also not giving away too much information, at least from my perspective…I’m guarded about just giving away information…I don’t like to be vulnerable” (Shane, p. 8).

Participants also used comparison strategies for deciding what to include in their profiles. Mary explained that she looked at others’ profiles before creating her own and looked at other people her age to see what she should include. She also said “I had some of my friend proofread it [profile] and to see if it sounded like me and made sure that it didn’t sound stupid before I posted it out there” (Mary, p. 3). Steve (p. 5) also had his friends check his profile before submitting it. He said “…I have…most of my female friends to read my profile. And see if there’s anything on there that you know oh you shouldn’t say that, that sounds you know stalkerish or makes you sound like whatever…” Sometimes he was more creative in testing out what worked and what did not in terms of garnering attention in his profiles.
I’ll basically use the same profile on all the sites, but I’ll tweak it on one site to see if I start getting more hits or you know winks or whatever during a certain time period. And if it seems to garner more attention then I’ll take that same tact and move it to the next site and see if it helps. (Steve, p. 5)

Several participants mentioned taking information from profiles on social networking sites such as Facebook and adapting the information for their dating profile.

Not many of the participants mentioned their strategies for choosing pictures to include in their profiles, even though pictures were important when deciding on matches. Shane was one of the few participants who did mention his thought process for choosing a picture. Because he had met a woman in person who had not represented herself accurately in pictures online, he did not want to do the same thing. He explained

In terms of pictures… I’m looking for something that’s honest, like I’m not looking for a model shot of myself, because that would piss me off if I have something on the other end like that. I’ve actually had an experience where you know a really fairly attractive girl at least from the picture and I go on this, and I go to meet her somewhere and she’s [not nearly as attractive]... its false advertising. Yeah I just walked away, I looked at her and turned around and got back on the subway… So I’m always thinking of that, like why would you, I mean they’re going to meet you, so I don’t understand why you would lie about that. But I’m looking for something that I think reasonably represents me well, obviously I want to look good in it… I want to put a mix of you know body shots, not, I don’t mean like standing there like in my swim trunks… you want to show how your body looks. (Shane, p. 9-10)
Shane went on to offer some other strategies for selecting a picture such as posting a picture without other people in it so there was no confusion when viewing it. He said when selecting pictures,

> Obviously avoiding things with ex girlfriends or in my opinion things with multiple guys in a shot. You know it’s kind of weird, like who are you in the actual five people?...if you do a picture with a kid, I mean you’ve got to make sure that there’s a caption like this is my nephew or like my son. You know you’ve got to be pretty clear about that. (Shane, p. 10)

He put a lot of thought into selecting the right picture(s) to post on his profile, and it was fascinating how little others even mentioned it. Of those who did mention selecting photos, Steve (p. 8) said he had some of his friends tell him which of his pictures from his Facebook page were the best and used those in his dating profiles. Derek explained he chose pictures that were an accurate representation of what he looked like because he did not want to disappoint anyone when they met face-to-face. Interestingly, the female participants did not mention selecting pictures.

*Design of the Website*

The way a dating website was designed influenced what date seekers included in profiles and how it was displayed. A user made selections from checkboxes (e.g., activities I’d like to share with a partner, education desired, drinking habits) or drop down boxes (e.g., age range, geographic location, hair color) in some instances or included a certain amount of text in an open response box (e.g., at least 250 characters about what do people not know about you that you wish they would). For instance, Rebecca explained “A lot of them [dating sites] have some…pretty set [checklists], like want kids, yes, no, unsure, you know, so they’re not open
ended… there are quite a few categories like that, drinking, smoking, religion, children, divorced, single, widowed, married…” (p. 5).

Each website had its own design. eHarmony asked members to indicate agreement to a series of statements such as I do things according to a plan or I seek adventure. Match had more checkboxes about desirable traits in a partner (e.g., education) and a free space to write about what they were seeking. As Rebecca explained, eHarmony lead members through specific questions while Match provided more opportunity to write in a response. She noted,

…eHarmony is really different from Match.com, like eHarmony leads you through very explicit questions. Like to answer. But on Match.com it might say what are your interests and like what are you looking for I guess, you know it’s more of a question in a text box… You know you have a lot more options like that whereas on eHarmony there’s a lot of like check this box, yes or no or short answers to pretty specific sort of questions… (Rebecca, p. 6)

Mary also recalled the design of Match explaining there were checklists and members could indicate how important each quality was. She said

…they also had I remember like a checklist that…you filled it out about yourself like education, you know do you want kids, all that stuff…there were probably like 24 questions of that and then I remember rating how important that was to you, so if having kids was important you could rate that as higher so that when they were looking at your matches they tried to find people who like, who rated them similarly. (Mary, p. 3)

Shane explained that some sites have better features than others such as accurate personality profile quizzes. He explained
I think that sites like Yahoo I think they sort of suck at the personality traits… As I fill out my profile on Yahoo, those personality trait filters… I need to check, there’s like ten boxes….you have to click, you know ways to describe yourself, but I think that they’re overly simplistic and they’re mostly saying you know what I mean like couch potato or stuff like that. And I don’t really think they give like a good feel for the person…It’s too generic…[on] eHarmony…there’s some of them where you have to check… three things that describe you the best, three characteristics describe you the best and they have a drop down list…I’m not sure why, I mean I haven’t really studied it, but the statements that you can choose from just seem a little easier to you know stamp on yourself, you know, so it’s just a little easier to declare like yes that describes me well. I don’t know why maybe it’s the way they have it written, but they did a better job with it. (p. 5)

For instance, Match required users to create a profile in order to view others’ profiles. Also, Match required users to post a picture to be active on the site. eHarmony required users to complete a lengthy personality profile before becoming an active member. For instance, Emily explained “well I definitely used the quiz on eHarmony - it was mandatory to set up a profile and they only allow you to see people who match your quiz” (p. 5). Thus, the websites restricted communication or access to other members until a profile had been completed or a photo had been uploaded. Ashley (p. 5), for example, explained

…I remember I didn’t have a complete profile and they weren’t letting me look at things, so I had to, it’s kind of like a forced pool in that regard, which I think is probably pretty clever from a marketing standpoint.
Lily (p. 5) also explained that on eHarmony “You have to be a paying member to see pictures or anyone to see your picture.” By restricting access to pictures, the website was playing on the importance of physical appearance. Most members wanted to see a picture and thus had to pay to see others’. While it was seen as protecting one’s own privacy, they had to shell out the payment to see if a match was a physical match as well.

Participants completed the requirements for the website in order to achieve their goals (view matches or communicate) but did not do much more than that. Because each website had a different design, participants completed what was required on each site and did not take it much further. Users did what they thought they needed to do to achieve their goals and did not believe completing every section of a profile increased chances of reaching their goals. Further, daters did not want to appear overly eager (or desperate) to other date seekers by having an overly-filled profile. Emily (p. 5) illustrated this when said “at the time I used Match, it had some checkboxes but mostly blank space to answer the questions. eHarmony has its famous long quiz. I believe POF has a quiz as well, but I didn't use it.” She completed what was necessary for each site but did not do more.

Guidelines and Advice from the Dating Sites

Many of the participants either could not recall specific guidelines or chose not to follow them in terms of what to put in their profile. When asked what rules Match provided in terms of profile creation, Derek simply stated “There weren’t really any rules” (p. 4) and Steve said “I never read the dating advice at all” (p. 5). Participants explained a lot of the advice was common sense (e.g., post a photo that shows your face) and not really needed. This also applied to the emails and advice articles provided from the sites – they were mostly unutilized. However, more general advice was followed in some instances. For instance, when asked how she utilized
advice and tools from the sites, Rebecca said most of the advice was very obvious and unnecessary, and said

I’ve not really used those a whole lot, you know, most of the things I’ve seen are sort of advice as far as pictures. And to me it’s pretty self evident, like it should be a face shot of you, you know not with other people in it…have someone take a good picture of you, you know. (p. 7)

Other basic advice was followed, such as not including personal contact information (such as phone numbers) in a profile or to be open and honest. Mary said she heeded the advice about not sharing contact information and being honest, and said

…I remember a lot of them saying what not to put in there, which was like don’t put any personal information that could like reveal you if you don’t want to be revealed, that kind of stuff. And I do remember following that, because I was honestly a little hesitant about how this whole thing was going to work. And it just, it said to you know answer the questions honestly and be yourself, which was my whole thing because if you aren’t being honest on that then you’re not, obviously not going to meet somebody’s that’s matched to you. (Mary, p. 3)

Lindsey’s statements agreed with Mary. The websites suggested being honest and most participants said they followed it so they would be matched with people who fit them better. Lindsey explained she was honest so she could be matched with men who sought her qualities. She did not want to misrepresent herself and attract the wrong man. She said

…the say fill out the personality profile as honestly as you can, because if you’re lying or making stuff up, you’re going to get that person that is not really for you. You know because they’re going to match you with people like that. So I filled out the thing as
honestly as I could because you know I had to be true to myself and why would I want somebody that oh I’m going to say this, even though I don’t believe it and get matched with some kind of person who actually believes it. (Lindsey, p. 5)

The users selected the advice they felt was relevant to them or useful somehow. Other advice was considered only for people who did not know how to date or write. The guidelines for “being honest and open” and “post a picture to get more results” were followed because they were very general and did not imply the site users were incompetent daters. Ashley recalled some of the advice she was offered in saying “In the actual boxes that they gave you to fill out, like the typed information, not the stuff that was closed ended, I remember them saying be detailed, like the more detailed you are, the better off you’ll be” (p. 3). She continued “…and I’m pretty sure that there was something on there about take time to make sure that what you wrote is what you want up there and that it’s proofread” (Ashley, p. 4). This kind of advice was somewhat helpful. Cathy recalled the dating sites instructed members to be honest, open, and post pictures and she followed the advice. The sites …tell you to be forthright and honest as one of their suggestions for putting together your profile, to provide detail so that somebody can have a more accurate clear cut picture of who you are. Most of the sites, well the two that I’ve used, tell you and strongly recommend that you post a picture as an opportunity, because they argue that many people won’t even look at your profile if there isn’t a photo and actually there’s some truth to that, because I don’t often look at them if they don’t have photos either. So there’s a big push to put up your photo. (Cathy, p. 4)

Emily also recalled being instructed to “be honest and avoid general answers. Each site had different prompts” (p. 4).
Sample profiles, examples of what to include in open text boxes, and looking at other members’ profile were useful to participants. While it was not “advice,” practical examples provided an idea about what to include in profiles and helped them learn the culture of the site. For instance, Ashley said she did look at some samples before completing her profile. She said

In regards to how I figured out what I wanted to say, I think they gave you a little example up at the top when they gave you the open ended box, they said like it might look something like this and I’m pretty sure they gave me a little like three sentence blurb you know that was very generic. And so I think I used that as well as you know what I, stuff I felt comfortable talking about, regarding myself. (Ashley, p. 5)

Others looked at profiles of other members to determine what to put in their profile. Megan (p. 3) said “I don’t remember if there were guidelines exactly, I can’t remember if I found examples on their website or on another website, but I definitely looked up examples online before I put mine on there.” She went on to say (p. 4) “I think for me just seeing other ones, like reading real ones was more helpful than anything… well I guess they’re you know showing good profiles, not like just me searching and looking at people’s but their examples of profiles.” Shane explained that straightforward, practical advice was followed while the “cheesy” advice was ignored. He noted

… on eHarmony I followed the advice because it was fairly straightforward, you know people tend to read this this way, so make sure you know you think about that as you write this information by yourself, that was the kind of advice they give and I followed it. Other websites I don’t mean to single out Yahoo but other websites were definitely more cheesy, like you know you have to put an introduction into your profile, so every time
In terms of other advice, he said he did not follow it.

There was a difference between using examples or basic profile creation guidelines and seeking additional information in the form of dating advice or success stories. While some of the initial profile creation advice might be useful or at least taken into consideration, additional guidance was usually not sought and was ignored when it was provided via emails or on the site. Additional advice included articles with titles like “He stopped calling, this might be why…avoid these common mistakes with men” and “Great first date – now what?” (eHarmony email & Match.com’s Happen). For instance, Ashley was asked how she used advice from the sites’ success stories or dating tips and she said she did not use them, saying

I didn’t, I don’t think I ever even clicked on those. I understand that that’s part of what my $50 gets me or whatever it was…but I didn’t, I just kind of went with my own thing once I understood what the process was. And left it alone from there. I mean certainly I looked at other people’s profiles and other people looked at mine but I didn’t bother using their little extra stuff. (p. 5)

Ashley’s reaction was pretty typical in terms of doing her own thing and not necessarily following all of the advice or seeking additional tips. When asked if she used additional advice or success stories from Match, she said “Not really. Not really, I just kind of did my own thing” (p. 4). Emily agreed. When asked how useful the dating tips and advice were, she said “they were not helpful to me…I didn't really need a whole article to tell me to post a recent picture that showed my face” (p. 5).
Daters explained the advice was not presenting new information and so it was disregarded. Cathy found little use in the additional dating advice or success stories. In fact she found them

Very hokey…They’re common sense. You know, yes, you’re right, if I get online and all I do is surf around and I don’t ever email and I don’t ever return a wink and I don’t ever talk to anybody, yeah I’m probably not going to meet somebody. So telling me that I should do those things is goofy, you know to me because it’s like that’s common sense. Telling me that I need to be honest, and I need to not lie about who I am in my profile to me is common sense… (Cathy, p. 6).

In fact, Cathy presented an interesting assessment of the dating sites’ success stories, advice, and emails with advice to members. She believed the tips were a way for the sites to poke members and keep them engaged in the dating process, and said

…their suggestions are more to keep you focused on the fact that you’re a member and you’re supposed to be using the service and trying, and staying involved and it’s more to keep you involved than it is to really make a difference in whether or not you’re going to meet somebody and be successful in meeting someone. It’s more to keep you engaged. (Cathy, p. 6)

Thus, while the websites provided a slew of dating advice and success stories, most users did not even look at them. Then, when site members were emailed stories, perhaps it was simply a new way to poke users to stay involved and engaged in the website (and to maintain membership). For example, Cathy explained,

…you get these emails that show up and there’s a tidbit here or there and it’s just meant to keep your head in the game, but not necessarily, I don’t know that they actually
genuinely expect that you know this is going to be some great psychological revelation that’s going to somehow make your love life a huge success. But it does keep you engaged in the process. (Cathy, p. 6-7)

Derek shared similar ideas. He explained the websites forced users to communicate with their matches by completing the profile, posting pictures, and requiring communication in order to get their guarantee of finding someone special. He explained that Match said users need to post so many pictures of yourself and fill out the entire form. I mean it’s not really strict requirements but I think the main thing is, they’re kind of forcing you to go out and you know actually contact these people, not just…saying you’re interested and getting you know winking at them…[having] some sort of conversation, you’re forced to have a conversation with them. (Derek, p. 2-3).

Describing Your Match

The next step when creating an account was describing one’s match or desirable characteristics in a partner. A match was a person who had the qualities a user was interested in or who could be a potential partner. Matches were those individuals who possessed certain desired characteristics or qualities. Each website had a different interface for describing an ideal match or what users were seeking. In most cases, users could indicate the geographic area, usually within a selected number of miles from their location (e.g., within 25 miles of area code 43402), the sex, and age range (e.g., ages 25-38) of their ideal match. The sites varied in intensity of this process or simply matched users based upon personality quizzes (more on the matching process later). Some websites had checkboxes of characteristics a user could check for what they were looking for in a potential partner while others were embedded within a longer quiz. For instance, Rebecca explained “eHarmony is really different from Match.com, like
eHarmony leads you through very explicit questions. Like to answer. But on Match.com it might say what are your interests and like what are you looking for I guess, you know it’s more of a question in a text box” (p. 6). Cathy explained on Match

…I can check that if what I’m interested in in a date, what, you know my date needs to be, X amount of height, needs to be within this age group, needs to speak this language, needs to, and so they give me checkboxes. eHarmony does a little bit about that in terms of preference, but they do it in a personality profile in a quiz format. (p 5)

Also, on Match, Mary explained

there were probably like 24 questions of that and then I remember rating how important that was to you, so if having kids was important you could rate that as higher so that when they were looking at your matches they tried to find people who like, who rated them similarly. (p. 3)

While the matching process varied by site, there were some similarities such as geography, height, race, religion, smoking habits and physical characteristics. Shane (p. 5) explained

… in terms of the match, or you know what are you looking for, describing the match… the things that I’ve noticed that are common among all [dating sites] are obviously geography. Then from there, there’s usually height, race, religion, how they describe themselves physically…somewhat larger, they had different words for it…athletic or skinny, stuff like that. You can filter by that….as well as smoking, that’s actually, every site I’ve been on has a smoking one. Yeah, I thought that was interesting, yeah, every single one has a smoking one that I can remember. And then personality traits…
Not only were there differences in terms of design of the site in describing a match (such as checkboxes or quizzes), some felt the sites based matching on different dimensions. eHarmony was believed (and advertised) matching members on 29 dimensions of compatibility based upon responses to the personality profile while Match used demographic information like age, education, and geography. Plenty of Fish did not appear to have a clear system.

Participants were aware of the differences on each site. For example, Jason (p. 4) explained

…eHarmony focuses less on specific criteria in a mate and more on your values and ideals, and they kind of put together what they think is the criteria that would fit it. You know they’ll ask…about how do you feel about religion or how do you feel about monogamy or that sort of thing, kind of big picture core value questions, whereas Match focused, at least the first part of it,…on you know how tall is somebody that you would want to be with, you know what color hair would they have, color eyes, you know body type, that sort of thing…I would say Match initially asks you for a lot more superficial type criteria, whereas eHarmony kind of focuses more on core values. And Match definitely incorporates some of that later on, you know things like what your living situation is and you know whether or not you want kids, you know kind of the biggies that are either going to be like a yes or no type question. But I think eHarmony’s questions were much more qualitative. (p. 4)

Match.com was perceived to use more checkboxes or quantitative data to match users (e.g., smoking habits, hair color, and education). Users indicated how important these qualities were to have in a partner. Ashley (p. 4) explained that Match had both closed-ended and open-ended questions that a user filled out first for themselves and then what they wanted their ideal partner to have. The users indicated how important a particular quality was in another person.
For instance, if dating a non-smoker was very important while hair color was not, the website could match the member with others based on smoking habits, not hair color. Ashley (p. 4) said …And so when I filled mine out [ideal matches], I filled out like here’s you know what I’m most attracted to, but truthfully like most of this stuff doesn’t matter, but it matters to me very much your education level which is what I said.

In her case she still had to complete information about what she found attractive in a match but she was most concerned with education, not hair color or body type. Each user selected the characteristics they found most important. In terms of website guidance, as Steve explained most daters were aware of what they wanted and said “…I think in this day and age, most people get what they’re looking for, so the directions don’t need to be too detailed” for explaining how to describe a match (p. 5).

*The Matching Process – Interpersonal*

The next step in online dating was being matched with other members. Matching referred to the process of pairing users with others with whom they match romantically on certain characteristics or qualities. A match referred to a person with whom someone shared similarities or who had the desired characteristics. A match could be one-way or mutual. A one-way match was someone who possessed a user’s desired qualities or met certain criteria while a mutual match meant both parties met the others’ criteria. Regardless of the set up of the website, each dating site had a system to both present and view matches. The matching process was divided into these categories: how matching works, sites as search engines, sites as matchmakers, and *using* the site. Depending on the website, it could be used as a matchmaking service to select other members with whom one was compatible or as a search engine to find potential partners based on selected criteria. Websites provided matches via email and through
How Matching Works

The way matches were determined, how matches were presented to site members, and how members viewed other site members varied by website. Some websites matched members and provided a limited amount of profiles of matches to be viewed. Others allowed for searching or browsing profiles based upon chosen search criteria, much like a search engine for potential dates. For instance, a date seeker could search for someone a certain age, within a certain geographic radius, with a particular educational background. From there a date seeker could view profiles and make decisions about whether or not to pursue communication. Dating sites send periodic emails to date seekers with updates on matches with whom they may be interested. Members can then go to the website and view the profiles of these matches. The websites varied in the amount of information that can be viewed for matches depending on the web design and membership. For example, fee-based sites allowed users to view matches and maybe initiate contact with a wink for free but no further communication could occur until paying the fee. Each member had a method for using the emails from sites.

Each website had its own behind the scenes matching process in terms of who counted as a match. Typically websites based it upon criteria set by members but the site may use information from a personality quiz. On Plenty of Fish, Sheila said

They do come up with a list of people that they feel are close enough and fill your compatibility you know requirements and everything. So you just go on there, the pictures are on there, it tells you when someone is online, and you can, that’s all you have to look at at first, is a picture of someone… you click on the pictures then it pulls up a
certain guys, whatever guy you’ve clicked on, it will pull up his profile. So basically when you’re looking at it to begin with, all you’re looking at is a guy’s picture. (p. 4-5)

Seeing only a picture of a match or potential match was only a characteristic of Plenty of Fish and not the other websites participants used. This may be indicative of the importance placed on appearance and not personality traits as the other sites claimed. While physical appearance still mattered in the matching process, a user on Plenty of Fish could not learn anything about potential matches until he/she passed the physical appearance test. Once someone clicked on a picture,

…then you click on their profile then it tells you the same things that you have put on your website about only about them of course. And then at the bottom their username is their contact address, so if I wanted, saw somebody on there that I wanted to talk to, I could send them a message and it goes to their mailbox on the website, and it also notifies them on whatever, like I have Yahoo mail, if somebody sends me a message, it shows up and alerts me that I’ve got a message on Plenty of Fish. So I can check my mail on there and you know see who’s called or sent me a message. (Sheila, p. 5)

Match.com provided matches via email to members in addition to their search feature on the site. Derek explained the email match updates from Match when he said they set you up with your five daily matches. And then that’s kind of how the ball gets rolling and they say well okay these people are 85% you know similar to you and we think these people would be a great match, you know do you like them are you interested, yes or no? You have the option to email them right off the bat. (p. 4)
Users had their own system for using the email matches. When Shane was asked how he used the emails with matches sent to him from the dating sites he said it depended on how much time he had. He said

It depends how busy I am. I can either go a few ways. If I’m busy, then I’ll, I won’t see them for a month, I’ll just pass it all up right? And when I finally get to it, there’s so many there that you have two ways of responding…the busy way is to go through it and look at their profile really quickly, especially I’ll look at their picture, see if I find them attractive, and there’s generally some sort of connection, you look at her picture and like wow I find that, it’s more than just do they have a nice ass. And I’ll send an icebreaker. If they respond, then I’ll actually read their profile and think if I actually am interested. If I’m not busy, then I won’t send the icebreaker right away, I’ll look at their profile, I’ll read their information, you know think about it for a little bit and then you tend to delete a lot more at that point. And then you know if I am interested I’ll send an icebreaker or send a message. (p. 7)

The email matches were more important on eHarmony since users were not allowed to openly search or browse profiles through the site. When asked how he used the emails from the sites, Jason explained

eHarmony I don’t think they send it daily, but they do send you the same type of thing [as Match], these are people that we think you match with, and it’s actually more important for eHarmony, because eHarmony doesn’t let you search on those quantitative traits on your own like Match does. You kind of have to rely on their guidance of who they think you’re a match to. So you know you kind of are relying on what they give you to see you know who’s out there. (p. 6)
Jason also said “it was nice to get those [emails], but I didn’t rely on that solely because I think they, both eHarmony and Match sent me a lot of people that I didn’t think I matched with in any regard, so I didn’t take it as gospel truth” (p. 6).

Sites as Search Engines

Using a “search engine” dating site provided members with a database of profiles to search through based upon criteria entered in search boxes. When using the dating sites as a search engine, a user inputted their search criteria such as age, education, geographical location, or physical traits in a search box. For instance, Rebecca said she initially entered she is seeking men of a certain age and geographic location. She stated,

Well the first thing I choose is age or well first thing you choose is who your like sexual orientation is and I am a woman looking for a man. And then often it is, it tends to be geographical, like within how, like 50 miles, within five miles of this zip code. And I tend to make that pretty limited. You know, within, I don’t know, 20 miles or something like that. (p. 10)

Geographic area was a major concern for most of the participants. Participants adjusted the radius or distance they were willing to search within depending on the results. If matches came up in search criteria that were too far away, users changed the radius for search criteria. If the pool of matches was too small, users widened their search radius. For instance, Ashley (p. 6) was not presented with many matches (she is a woman searching for a woman) within a smaller radius so she had to widen her search area. She said “…I broadened my search criteria mileage wise. And certainly the number of persons increased significantly…” Date seekers could also enter more superficial search criteria such as physical characteristics, which may filter out potentially suitable partners. Jason said
…I think it [being able to openly search and browse on Match] obviously gives rise for people on Match to be a little more superficial. You can just search willy-nilly on your own for a very specific type of person from a quantitative perspective. While you know from eHarmony, you get sent people who you may look at initially and say oh I’m not attracted to that person from a physical standpoint, but from an emotional standpoint, they share all of my values that I do and they think just like how I think and they very well may be somebody that I could be very happy with. Just you know somebody that you may overlook on Match just because they don’t fit your physical attractiveness perspective right away. (p. 7)

Sites as Matchmakers

Matchmaker sites matched members with others and provided a handful of people for consideration. Searching and browsing were not available. eHarmony was an example of a matchmaking website. There was no search engine option for users and the site set a user up with personalized matches. Rebecca explained eHarmony provided members with a list of matches and a brief description and said “…the people it matches me to seem pretty close to like, what I’m looking for” (p. 11). Lindsey explained eHarmony matched members on dimensions of personality and allowed users to consider only a few matches. She said the website

…tagline basically is I think they match you on like 26 different levels of your personality profile to a guy’s personality profile. 26 different points that are you know similar… they would send me matches and I could either close them out if I didn’t like how old they were if I didn’t like where they lived… (Lindsey, p. 4)
Lily explained on eHarmony, after joining the site, an email with matches was received within the first day. She explained “…You can’t like view matches at all, they send them to you” (Lily, p. 4). Lily went on to say that members logged on to eHarmony to view matches. She explained:

You get an email and it says meet your new match, you can go on and view them. Well you have to log on to eHarmony to view them. You go and they have like tabs that have new matches or matches, click on it and you can click on their profile…It’s the name, profession and age. And then you click on it and that takes you to their profile which is a picture. (Lily, p. 5)

Again, in the matchmaking sites users were set up with compatible matches to try out and consider. The next step was viewing the profile of the match which included reading their information, looking at pictures, and deciding to contact them. Figure 11 (above) provided an outline of this guided communication process. Daters could close their match or wait for later consideration. When logging on to eHarmony, daters could see:

…their [other daters’] answers to the questions and then you can look at their picture tabs and you can either close it or you can start communicating or you can just not look at it. I mean you can just go to a different match and just kind of ignore it. Like you don’t have to make a decision to talk or close right away. They can stay in your matches for as long as you want them there. (Lily, p. 6)

**Using the Site**

Regardless of the set up of the website, users decided how they wanted to use the site. For instance, Match provides matches via email and through the website homepage and offered users a search engine. Members utilized either service. Megan explained “…sometimes I would look at the ones [matches] that they [websites] would provide for me…I did a lot of different
things” (p. 4). Mary explained she utilized Match’s search features so she could eliminate undesirable men.

In terms of searching for people, I think their site [Match] is pretty well set up, like I liked their search engine that you could pick like the radius that you wanted people and you could exclude things that you didn’t want to search for, like if you didn’t want to search for guys who were divorced or had children or you know anything like that. They had, like it was kind of nice, you could be picky and do your search that way, which I actually had, I found people that seemed more attractive to me doing it that way versus looking at the emails they sent me…. (p. 4-5)

Again, site members utilized their membership in ways that worked for them. If a user chose not to browse or search profiles when that option was available, it was not a requirement. For example, Cathy said she chose not to browse profiles and waited to be contacted by men. She explained,

…I’m really bad because I don’t browse profiles… I sit around and wait, if somebody winks at me, I look and see if I’m interested. If I’m intrigued at all by their profile, I’ll wink back and we’ll start to chat. If I’m not intrigued I say no thank you and I move on… I don’t use the website probably the way you’re supposed to use it; I don’t go out and take a lot of time to do a lot of searching. It’s more, I put myself out there and make myself available and if somebody is interested I’ll hear from them. (p. 8-9)

Decisions about Matches – Intrapsychic and Interpersonal Scripts

Once date seekers were matched with others or had search results, they made decisions about the potential matches. Like creating a profile, making decisions about matches, in terms of passing them by or choosing to contact them, was a very complex process. All of the
participants had a process they used for reviewing matches’ pictures and profiles which was done within the restraints of the dating websites. It was important to note that decision making about matches occurred during all phases of the online dating process from reviewing potential matches until meeting face-to-face. Matches or potential matches were constantly being scrutinized throughout the entire process and could be unmatched or eliminated from consideration at any point. Decisions about matches were presented in this order because this is where the process of deciding on matches began, not ended. This theme included the categories of elimination strategies, criteria for decision making, and importance on physical appearance.

Elimination Strategies

The matchmaking sites (i.e. eHarmony) only provided users with a handful of matches for review while the search engine sites both offered suggestions and open browsing/searching which influenced the decision making process. Participants had clear criteria for deciding whether to pursue a match. Individual criteria varied according to age, goals for online dating, and their personality type. Regardless of participant, everyone had some sort of filtering mechanism for deciding who would be pursued. In most cases, physical appearance served as a gatekeeper for a date seeker to either look at a full profile or decide to communicate with someone. Depending on the pool of available partners, individuals were usually more selective online. I use two metaphors to explain some of the decision making process: the shopping metaphor and the Guess Who game metaphor.

Shopping for a date. The shopping metaphor illustrated that individuals had a list of criteria a potential partner must possess and searched for individuals who met these criteria. A date seeker examined profiles like items on a shelf to see how the qualities met the needs on their list. Items (or profiles) were taken off the rack (dating site) to review and tried on for size. If it
fit, the date seeker kept the item. If the item did not fit, the item was placed back on the shelf and the shopping continued. This metaphor was useful for the search engine type dating sites and was a proactive approach to finding a compatible match. Because date seekers could not browse or search on their own on matchmaker sites, this metaphor only applied to search engine sites.

Individuals went into the decision making and search process with a shopping list for a potential partner. For instance, Rebecca said her list included age, marital status, no children, and a professional career. She explained

I would say I definitely do have sort of a laundry list. Even sort of on my Craigslist ad, it’s like you must be, like 30 to like 40 or 25 to 40 I think is what I put, you know, like even 25 is a little young in my opinion. And you know, single, never married, don’t want kids. Preferably never married, I’m not into the whole divorcee thing, but. If they were I guess it wouldn’t be a big deal, but, I mean race isn’t a big issue but you know I definitely want someone to have a professional career. (Rebecca, p. 20)

She went on to say that decision making mimics shopping because items are not always as great as anticipated. Rebecca said

it’s also like shopping because you buy something and get it home and it’s not at all what you thought it was going to be. It’s like shopping like on TV, like you know this product is like the greatest thing ever and you pay your $9.95 and you get it and it sucks.

(Rebecca, p. 20)

Search engine sites allowed for items on a shopping list to be found easily. For instance, Steve utilized the searching and browsing features of dating sites to find different types of women with different appearances. He explained
I think it’s [shopping] a perfect analogy for it. I can pick and choose; I can choose what size I want, it’s like buying a car, what options am I looking for. I can test drive it, eh it’s not really my fit, I’ll put it back and go try another car. I mean I think it’s a perfect analogy…You know I might start off [searching] with you know average looks. And then it’s like nah they’re not really hitting it for me, so I might choose athletic, then maybe athletic is not good enough, so then I might go to, okay I only want skinny chicks who you know have all the other same criteria. And I think that’s the one thing about you know any of these sites, you have the ability to save your different searches based on criteria, so you might say I only want to look for redheads today, so I’ll save the search where all my other criteria are the same, education, professional, but I only want to look for people who have red hair… (Steve, p. 17)

Having a list in mind helped daters eliminate undesirable partners. Jason said he even had a budget for how much he could spend on his shopping items. He explained of his decision making:

It’s a lot like window shopping. You go out there with a list and you know you have your budget and you see what fits and then you know if things don’t fit in your budget then [you have to] change…what are you willing to compromise on to find somebody to be with?...some people choose that they don’t want to compromise on anything and other people find through that experience that wow, you know after meeting all these people I find that having dogs isn’t necessarily a deal breaker for me…(Jason, p. 18)

Jason brought up the idea of deal breakers, or qualities or characteristics that a potential partner must possess or not possess. Assessing these criteria will be discussed further below.
Guess Who? The metaphor I considered to illuminate the decision process was the Guess Who game, which fit for matchmaking and search engine sites. While similar to the shopping metaphor, it explained the process of eliminating potential matches. Guess Who? is a Milton Bradley board game in which

Each player is given an identical board containing cartoon images of 24 people identified by their first names. The game begins with each player selecting a card of their choice from a separate pile of cards containing the same 24 images. The object of the game is to be the first to determine which card one's opponent has selected. This is done by asking various yes or no questions to eliminate candidates, such as "Does this person wear glasses?" When one's opponent provides the answer, one eliminates those that do not fit the criterion by “flipping down” the cards on one's board. (Wikipedia, 2009)

Figure 41 shows a picture of the game board. In the case of online date seekers, individuals were provided with a list of matches or results from a search. The Guess Who? metaphor fits for when a date seeker was either previewing a profile (a quick look at a picture or general characteristics such as age, location, or education) or reviewing a profile in more depth. A date seeker went through a list of criteria to evaluate the limited profile and flipped down those profiles that did not fit what was desired. It was a process of elimination much like the Guess Who? game where individuals were excluded from further examination because they did not pass a set of tests or criterion set by the date seeker. After this elimination process was completed, the date seekers were left with an individual or several profiles that fit a basic set of criterion.
Ashley’s experience fit the Guess Who metaphor well because she weeded out potential matches by eliminating those with undesirable qualities (such as having children). The process was one of elimination in which having undesirable qualities eliminated profiles from further consideration. She explained her decision making process saying

I looked at the profiles in general just a really quick search…it would show the little thumbnail picture of the person, and it would show a couple of bullet point information,…it would be…I think like their age, their living status, so like single or living with children or lives alone or has a roommate, that sort of thing. And maybe what they were looking for… if you were interested you know you could click and see their full profile. And so what I did was literally kind of pulled down and eliminated anyone who had kids because that’s not what I was looking for. And then would kind of click
through and one by one and then kind of browse their profile and if their profile was something that interested me, I would… [send a wink to show my interest]. (Ashley, p. 6)

She said her decision making process fit the metaphor well because she eliminated potential matches based on a set of criteria. Ashley explained

…the part where you’re looking at the profiles is definitely like that game [guess who?]. I mean maybe less so once you’re actually interacting, but the actual, yeah where you say like I’ve got two kids and you’re done… I’m looking for something more casual than that and don’t want to really mess around with that sort of situation. So yeah, absolutely or, there were folks who seemed real nice who had less than a high school education, and I was like nope, no I don’t think that you know that’s what I’m looking for either…

(Ashley, p. 8)

Like shopping, participants had a list but this metaphor worked for both kinds of sites and illuminated how profiles were eliminated from consideration. The next section discusses this list of criteria.

Criteria for Decision Making

Everyone had criteria for decision making about potential matches and deal breakers they sought to continue communication. Having children or not, geographic location, previous marital status, and education were some of the filters for matches. Other criteria were being close to family members, trying new things, and enjoying travel. To start, most date seekers filtered matches based upon qualities their ideal match would have (this was set up in the profile creation process) and how important each of those qualities was to them. Everyone knew what they were looking for in a match and searched through several people and profiles to find it. For instance, education was important for several of the participants as was geographical location
(these were deal breakers for some). Jon (p. 13) said qualities he was looking for were “Education, one or less kids” and Steve (p. 13) said “I kind of look at education level, that’s a big one for me, like I want a Bachelor’s degree or better. I tend to look for people who either are divorced or single, no kids always.”

While Jon and Steve presented a few deal breakers and general criteria, Megan described some more specific criteria for deciding on a match. She said

There were some things that were like non-negotiable for me, like I didn’t want somebody who had been married before. I didn’t want someone who had children.

School, you know an education is important to me, so I think I usually searched for someone with at least a Bachelor’s degree. A non-smoker… (Megan, p. 5)

Participants pinpointed the qualities they sought pretty clearly. For instance, Mary explained she sought someone close to their family, honest, career-oriented, and who liked to travel. She explained

I wanted somebody who was close with their family, because I’m very close with my family, family is very important. I wanted somebody who seemed honest and trustworthy…somebody who seems like they have fun who likes to travel who seems to know how to relax but also like somebody who has a career and is established... (Mary, p. 11)

A date seekers’ age and goals for online dating influenced criteria for decision making. As opposed to many of the participants in their 20s or 30s looking for a relationship or to get married, Sheila (age 62) has been married, has a family, and was looking for different things. She was looking for someone with whom to spend time and try new things but not necessarily a relationship. Sheila was looking for
Somebody that’s fairly active. Somebody that is involved with their family, that likes kids, because of my grandkids and stuff and maybe even has grandkids of their own.

Somebody that doesn’t like to just sit in front of a TV and watch TV all day long…like to travel, because I love to go places, I don’t care if it’s just to [a nearby city] to go to a, you know I would love to go to some art shows, I’d love to go to a theater, I’ve not done a lot of that stuff. So somebody that is not afraid to go and do things. (Sheila, p. 14)

An education and career make a difference to Cathy (age 43). Cathy explained she asked herself several questions in her decision making process:

Do they have a degree? Then I look at their career field, what do they do? Because that will tell me. My experience has been that the people in professions, attorneys, engineers, you know physicians, I tend to have more in common, those are people who have had a greater degree of education, greater degree of exposure, greater degree of experiences, and I tend to have more in common with them. I look to see if they state that they like certain kinds of activities or events. I look to see whether they’re a smoker or not a smoker. But you know those are all really superficial kinds of things and they aren’t going to tell me [if a relationship will work]… (p. 16)

Regardless of their individual criteria, participants stuck to their criteria when reviewing matches. Mary (p. 6) explained

I utilized the search engine on there to pick you know like I didn’t want a long distance relationship, so I think I had said that it had to be like within I don’t know 40 miles or something. So I used that to search for people and I also found some people that way and just from looking at their profiles, if they seemed you know seemed interesting, like the kind of people that I would hang out with, then I would decide to send them a wink.
Participants explained that they discovered whether or not matches met their criteria through the content in their profiles (Derek, p. 9) and used the websites creatively to find out what they needed to know. Looking at backgrounds in pictures, what the other person sought, and details about interests helped date seekers in the decision making process. For instance, Jon explained he did not just look at pictures to assess appearance, he used them to learn about the women and make informed decisions. He said “…I look at pictures from the perspective, what city are they in, where these pictures are taken. Are they on vacation… Or are they out partying and extremely drunk at a bar?” (Jon, p. 14). Jon also read through profiles to make sure he was what the other person sought. For instance, he said “are they looking for my type? If I see somebody who has a bachelor’s degree but they’re only looking for someone with some college, some college is pretty vague and I’m doubting whether they want somebody with a PhD” (Jon, p. 15). Of course this varied depending on the website. Sheila felt Plenty of Fish did not provide enough detail in profiles to make an accurate assessment of someone. While someone might say they liked to travel, “…their idea of traveling might be going 20 miles north to Wal-Mart, you know where my idea of traveling is going” (Sheila, p. 14).

Like appearance in pictures, profile content was not all that helped daters determine whether or not someone possessed desired characteristics. For example, several participants mentioned they judged profiles based upon the grammar and language choice in their writing. Profiles with bad or incorrect grammar were viewed negatively. As an example, Steve said one way he learned about someone from their profile was “how they write, whether it’s the grammar, proper punctuation…I look for sentence structure. So I kind of look at that in terms of their display of intelligence level and you know grasp of the English language” (p. 14). Shane also said “…as I read their profile, one of the things that really bothers me is really bad
grammar…it’s a huge turnoff for me. So that’s one thing I look for, you can tell really quickly” (p. 11). Language choice provided information about a person. For instance, Sheila explained one man came across as intimidating because

…his profile was so intelligent…I think I have a pretty broad understanding of the English language, he had a few words in there that I had to Google because I had no clue what they meant…you could tell he was looking for a very intelligent woman. And that kind of put me off because I thought you know I love to joke with people and goof around and everything… but this guy sounded like he was more interested in you know someone with a high level [of education]. (p. 15)

**Physical Appearance/Attraction**

Appearance in profile pictures of potential matches was extremely important in the decision making process for all of the participants. Participants said appearance was judged almost instantly and there needed to be something interesting about the picture to intrigue them in order to look further. Shane said that physical appearance was a “huge” part of the online dating process and “…it’s an instant to analyze a picture, I mean it’s so fast…there is no instance that I have seen a picture that I found unattractive and went on to read their profile. Zero” (p. 12). As Cathy explained, there had to be something interesting about someone’s appearance even if they were not “GQ model material” (p. 11). Even though not all of them said they were looking for someone very attractive, they still admitted that the appearance of a potential partner was part of their decision making process. For example, Jon (p. 9) said physical appearance was important but not the only criteria when deciding on a match. He said appearance was

…important to me. I think ultimately if you want to have a substantial relationship you should be physically attracted to someone. Granted, is it the only thing? …do they have
to be I don’t know, Carmen Electra to garner a date? No… I would… consider… people who were just average…like myself, I don’t consider myself anything special, you know? I have average looks…

Matches did not have to meet certain specific characteristics (such as a specific eye color) but appearance and attraction mattered. Being traditionally attractive was not necessary but appearance was considered. For instance, Ashley said appearance “wasn’t the be all end all. [but] It certainly did play a role. Like there were some, a couple of profiles that I had absolutely no interest in, based on their appearance” (p. 6). Also, Sheila said

I am not into everything being all about looks, I do want a guy to look good, dressed up or be able to put a pair of jeans on and still look nice. And I’m not, I’m not expecting a person that’s my age that’s going to be the most totally fit person in the world, but, I certainly am not… I don’t judge somebody by just what they look like… of course [if] I met somebody and their hygiene and everything else was totally disgusting of course…You know that would be a turn off right there. (p. 9)

If someone was thought to be too attractive they would not be contacted. For instance, Rebecca explained “…well I look at their pictures first…and if they’re really hot… then I wouldn’t click on it [the profile], because I would assume they wouldn’t go out with somebody like me, you know because he’s like gorgeous, you know” (p. 10).

In most cases, if a match did not have a picture posted, their profile would not be viewed or they would be eliminated from further consideration. For example, Mary (p. 6) said “I’m not going to lie and say that the picture didn’t matter… I don’t think I sent winks to anyone who didn’t have pictures on there.” Having a picture was not enough just to be considered, however. A person’s profile picture was an invitation to look further into someone’s profile if the person
was considered attractive or interesting looking. If not, the profile was not viewed. For example, Jason said he started searching on Match and entered criteria within a certain radius, under 5’9” tall (shorter than him), and athletically built and the search …came up with a few hundred people or so. And you know I spent a lot of time kind of just going through you know a page of 20 at a time and just initially seeing okay, like, this person is not at all physically attractive in my opinion, or this person is somewhat physically attractive in my opinion or this person is very physically attractive in my opinion and I would like to either message this person or at least read further… (p. 8) However, as Jason pointed out, seeking contact with attractive people online was no different than an offline dating scene. He explained … [it’s] just like in a conventional dating scene, obviously…attractiveness is kind of first qualifier that you have to go through. And you know whether or not the majority of the public will say that you know physical attractiveness is important, obviously it is, and I say anybody who says otherwise is lying to themselves (p. 8)

*Contacting a Match and Establishing a Mutual Match/Connection - Interpersonal*

Once the decision making process has started and a profile has passed initial inspection, the next step was for the date seeker to either contact a match or wait for someone to contact them. To develop a mutual match/connection, daters had to pass the others’ decision making process and communication must be reciprocated. Depending on the design of the website, contacting a match took different forms. On Yahoo, the first contact with another person was an icebreaker, on Match it was a wink, on eHarmony a user started communication with one of their matches, and on Plenty of Fish, initial contact was usually a message sent within the website’s mail system. On sites that required payment, this was typically where payment begins – a date
seeker saw their matches (except eHarmony did not show photographs) before paying but to exchange more than just closed-ended messages, a member had to pay the membership fee. Once a match was made through the site and someone’s profile passed inspection, the decision was made to contact the other person or wait to be contacted. If someone made contact with another person, they must wait to see if the other person responded, meaning they also passed the other person’s inspection. If someone contacted a date seeker, the decision making process began as to whether to respond, decline, or ignore. Just because contact was made by either party, it was not guaranteed that the other responded. Despite the barrier of a computer, there was some face saving involved when rejecting someone. To make a mutual connection, decisions were made by both parties to communicate. The categories at this step of the process are contacting a match or waiting to be contacted, establishing a mutual match, how initial communication occurred, and making a mutual connection.

Contacting a Match or Waiting for Contact

When participants discussed making first contact with another person online, almost everyone said they would initiate contact. If they were interested in someone’s profile they sent a wink, message, or invitation to start communicating. Steve (p.8) said if he was interested in a woman, “… I normally will give them an icebreaker or a wink at first. I’ll wait and see if either they wink back, email or you know give some kind of sign of interest.” Ashley (p. 6) said after conducting a search she would “…browse their profile and if their profile was something that interested me, I would …wink…” After looking at someone’s profile, Mary said “…if they…seemed interesting, like the kind of people that I would hang out with, then I would decide to send them a wink” (p. 6). Rebecca and Derek both said they would initiate contact and not wait for someone to contact them.
Just because they made contact with others, date seekers typically were not opposed to being contacted by others. For instance, Lily said “Sometimes I’ll send them questions. Sometimes I’ll just sit and wait and see if they send me questions, I’ve done both. I guess it depends on like if their profile answers or their picture interests me” (p. 6). Perhaps level of interest determined whether or not they contacted someone. If they were more interested in someone they probably did not sit back and wait to be contacted. However, the two participants who said they waited to be contacted were also the older participants. Cathy (age 43) explained

... I sit around and wait, if somebody winks at me, I look and see if I’m interested. If I’m intrigued at all by their profile, I’ll wink back and we’ll start to chat. If I’m not intrigued I say no thank you and I move on. (p. 7-8)

It may be an issue of generational culture for a woman to wait to be contacted by a man. For instance, as Sheila (age 62) explained

... I guess maybe coming from the age group that I grew up in when calling a guy was a no no, you know you were supposed to wait for the guy to call, I’ve pretty much assumed that that’s the way it would be. But most guys on this website I find do not contact you. They, at the end, they said if you’re interested contact me…I’ve had several messages you know to me from different guys, especially when I first went on there. (p. 4-5)

**Communication in First Contact**

The first contact took the shape of a wink, a message, or a set of questions depending on user preference and design of the website. Sometimes contact was made through a simple wink or icebreaker. How much time a date seeker had influenced what kind of initial contact they made (i.e. having more time meant they sent a message versus a wink). For instance, Steve said “I normally will give them an icebreaker or a wink at first. I’ll wait and see if either they wink
back, email or you know give some kind of sign of interest” (p. 8). Jason explained a wink, “…is essentially like poking someone on Facebook, it’s not really a message… [it’s like] Yeah, I looked at your profile, and for some reason I’m interested in you, but I’m not interested enough to actually send you a message” (p. 9). Thought went into the depth of initial contact based upon level of interest after reading someone’s profile. For example if interested in a profile, Shane said

I would send a message…. [but] on eHarmony … You send them like five multiple choice questions that you can pick from… Or you can send an icebreaker. I used to do a lot more of sending the questions first and that was the first thing that I did, I had switched to sending an icebreaker now. (p. 13)

Jon said he was more forward and when asked contacted an interest, he explained

Well on Match I would either just send an email to say, introduce myself like hi, my name is [Jon], your profile caught my attention and you know….I just email. In some ways I think winking, I’m the type of person in some ways that I’m, I guess too blunt to an extent, I just say what’s on my mind. (p. 9-10)

Because a wink or icebreaker was less personal, a website selected (such as “Hi, want to chat) or open text message (any text can be written) was sent to be more personal. A date seeker also selected questions (eHarmony) to send for a match to answer from a provided list. The design of the site dictated whether an ice breaker or open text was sent. eHarmony, as Shane explained, had a list of questions a date seeker chose from and requested someone answer them.

He said eHarmony

…[has] like 50 questions you can choose from, I would guide those five questions to things I’m curious about or follow up questions to their profile, things like that. So it’s
custom, like it’s not them just saying the same questions all the time. And because of
that, it’s laborious, it takes you, it’s a ton of time. (Shane, p. 13)

Jason explained on Match users can send a wink, a pre-formed message, or an open message. He said

you could send people messages and they have little…pre-formed messages that you can use…if you just completely cannot think of anything to write. But I chose not to do that, because I wanted it to be a little bit more personal than that. (Jason, p. 9)

Shane (p. 13) said making initial contact was very important because “…any person who I’ve sent an icebreaker… to and they responded has always gone on to the questions. I’d say that 85 or 90% of those, like just the fact that the icebreakers happen, 85 to 90% of those it turns into exchanging emails and a phone call of some sort. I’d say 90% has gone to that point.”

Establishing a Mutual Match/Communication

Just because initial contact was made by one party, the other party did not have to respond or respond favorably. A date seeker made the decision based upon the other person’s profile, pictures, and initial communication whether or not to respond. Once a date seeker made initial contact, he/she waited for the other person to make an assessment and potentially respond. Mary (p. 6) said “…some of them [men she winked at] emailed me back right away, some of them never responded, never winked back or anything.” As Jason further explained

…it’s just kind of a waiting game at that point. You know you send somebody a message and you know, you don’t really know if they read it or not. Some people probably read it and trashed it, some people maybe never read it because they never used the site again, I mean you don’t really know what the end result is unless you get a message back. (p. 9)
Sometimes initial contact was not reciprocated or a message expressing disinterest was sent. Interestingly, even in a mediated environment, daters tried to be polite when rejecting someone. For instance, Jason said he had received polite rejections from women via the website. He noted:

I got messages back from some people saying you know thanks for messaging me but I don’t think we’d, I’d be interested or you know I just found somebody and I’m getting ready to delete my profile, but thanks anyway, and that type of thing. And you never know whether or not that’s true, you know, I think even though there is that physical barrier, people still have the same communication apprehension where they don’t want to, you know, face saving, they don’t want to necessarily tell you up front oh I think you’re ugly or think you’re an idiot, you know, they just say oh I found somebody else and you know just to make you feel a little bit better, even though they don’t know you, have never seen you and have no reason really to make you want to feel better about yourself, people still do it because that’s just the way that our culture is. (Jason, p. 9-10)

Once initial contact was made with someone, it was up to the other person to reciprocate or demonstrate interest and move the contact forward. As Ashley explained, it was not always clear if someone did not escalate contact after an initial wink. She said that once she winked at a woman:

…then I would kind of just move on…and if they either winked back or emailed, I would deal with it then. So I had some folks who just winked back…which was very much kind of putting the ball back in my court…. as I was doing it, I was thinking like gosh from a communication standpoint this is fascinating, this process of like what you do and who’s job it is to do something next. So the winking made it easy for, not to, like okay I did my part, like you can respond or not and either is fine, but I don’t have to do anything. So if
they would wink back, it was kind of that pain in the butt of like [ok, who takes it to deeper communication]. (Ashley, p. 7)

Throughout the initial contact phase, decisions about whether or not to continue contact were made relatively quickly. Date seekers quickly assessed those who initiated contact and decided whether or not to reciprocate. In many cases, if the other person was undesirable, contact was simply ignored. For instance, Mary explained “…obviously I was getting, there were people who were initiating winks and emails to me as well. Some of them I definitely did not answer because they were weird” (p. 6). Sheila also said “…I’ve gotten …probably like I said five or six emails form different guys, three of them I deleted right away because they were totally not what I was looking for” (p. 5). Being rejected immediately also happened to the participants. As Lindsey explained

…some people did close me out [delete her from their match list] before they even answered anything, which is fine. It doesn’t really hurt at all because you don’t really know these people, you’re like okay I wasn’t right for them so they closed me out, no big deal, because I mean I was doing the same thing with these guys, you know closing them out myself… (p. 6)

When contacted by someone else, date seekers engaged in more Guess Who like strategies to determine if contact would be reciprocated. For example, Steve said if he winked at a girl prior to looking thoroughly at her profile,

They [might] wink back or…if they email me chances are I almost always respond even if it’s to say no thank you. If it’s a wink, I’ll kind of go back and look at their picture again and their profile and kind of okay well, how much time do I really want to spend
writing this person an email, are they worth email to me? Then it’s, if I feel like yeah, okay I’ll at least figure out more about her, I’ll write her. (p. 8)

Experience with online dating helped to develop a strategy for filtering and deciding on making contact with matches. As Ashley explained her communication with matches changed after she gained experience with online dating. She said “….my first week or couple weeks on Match I was a little bit more generous with my winks than I would have been if I was, if I had had more experience on online dating or on the site…” (Ashley, p. 7). Once again, initial contact was a filtering process. Online communication moved to more rich channels as someone passed a filter.

*Online Communication and Movement in Medium – Interpersonal & Cultural*

The next step in the online dating process was communication through the website. Once initial contact was made between online date seekers and a mutual connection, communication took place online. The online communication took several forms such as sending pre-created questions or messages. Matchmaking sites such as eHarmony made members go through several guided communication steps before open communication occurred. In the other sites, different types of communication occurred such as sending closed ended questions or open messaging.

A date seeker could communicate with several people/matches online simultaneously. Some date seekers chose to limit their online communication to one person at a time while others juggled multiple matches. One issue that arose was whose job it was to advance communication and another was how did movement from initial communication to more personal communication occur? Categories in this theme were influences on movement through mediums, relationship initiation, and steps in mediated movement.
Influences on Movement through Mediums

Influences on moving through mediated communication included comfort and experience with online dating and comfort with using computer-mediated communication. Comfort level with online dating and length of time on dating sites determined how quickly the connection move to meeting face-to-face as well. Most participants wanted to advance communication to more personal or rich channels quickly (e.g., from a wink to emails) because if a date seeker was interested in the other person, he/she was eager to know more about them. Rebecca, who had been online dating for years, explained

…I pretty promptly go to phone as soon as I can. If they seem, you know, not bizarre…just like a general intelligent person then I’m pretty quick to move it to phone…Because I want, I mean I just want to move along in the process…emails don’t really tell you a whole lot. (p. 12)

Emily agreed and explained communication online depended on comfort with online dating and the individuals involved. She said

…the communication between two people really depends on the site and comfort level of the individuals…you might email or send questions back and forth before chatting online or on the phone…you also decide whether you want to give the person your Facebook or Myspace site, which tend to be more personal…on POF [Plenty of Fish] you can even video chat. (Emily, p. 6)

Derek agreed that more experienced online daters wanted to move more quickly through mediated communication channels. He explained
…there are some girls that I’ve talked to that want to email for you know three or four weeks and then progress to…calling each other on the cell phone. Or some girls will want to …talk on the phone after the first two or three emails. (Derek, p. 5-6)

Ashley was only a member of Match for a few months and preferred more mediated communication before moving forward in the relationship. When asked what her process was for communicating after initial contact she explained

… I did several rounds of email…my personality… is very cautious. So I emailed back and forth with folks like four or five times before I was even interested in exchanging phone numbers. And not because I expected that they were some creepy you know violent offenders of some kind, but because I didn’t want to move forward until I was comfortable with getting to know this person a little better. (Ashley, p 8-9)

Ashley’s process may change as her comfort level with online dating changes. As Jason explained, he was initially more cautious advancing communication but changed as he became more experienced. Jason said

I think initially I felt the same way [apprehensive about moving through communication so quickly], I wasn’t sure if I wanted to meet somebody right away and then after a month or two it was like okay, well why not, you know what’s the worst that could happen type of thing. So yeah I think that’s definitely how a lot of people go about it, they’re initially quite apprehensive and then over time that does tend to fade…I would say that I had far more people that I met up with after messaging only a few times than I did messaging and then talking to on the phone and then meeting up. That only really happened to me maybe twice. (p. 10)
Personal preference or comfort/reliance on computer-mediated communication played a role in this as well. If participants were not fans of email as a mean of communication or they preferred other means, they moved communication more quickly through mediated channels. As Jon explained he preferred to talk on the phone instead of email as soon as possible. He said after initial contact,

Typically then I would email someone, talk on the phone or I guess email back and forth for a few times, then I’d normally ask for a phone number because I can’t stand emailing, mainly, I’m not a big fan… So ultimately I tend to ask for numbers like probably within a few emails, just because I guess in some ways I don’t like to beat around the bush, you know? Just if you’re into me and you want to talk to me, here’s my number, feel free to call me, that’s quite alright. (Jon, p. 10)

Steve also wanted to move the conversation away from messages and email quickly because he felt lengthy email conversations made it was difficult to get to know someone. He said

…I’m not big on sitting there and having a million conversations via email, so I will normally in the first email, offer up either my IM or my phone number for texting. Hey, if you feel like you know contacting me off the site, you know feel free, here’s my email, here’s my phone. Normally they’ll respond… (Steve, p. 9)

Relationship Initiation

The speed of this process and the emphasis on meeting in person reinforced the idea that online dating would more appropriately be called online date seeking or online romantic relationship initiation as most people did not date online. Date seekers used the site to meet more available partners for the purpose of having offline contact. Shane explained how quickly the online dating process usually occurred. He said
…what I’ve noticed is you do the icebreaker, usually blow past or go really quickly up until like the last few parts, which are the more open questions and then the just sending emails back and forth through the system. You usually get there pretty quickly; people want to get to that point. … I’d say within a week, you’ve gotten to that point. For most people, I mean sometimes it takes longer, but in most of my experiences, within a week you’ve gone through the first few steps and you get right to the, you know like you pick three questions you can send but you get, you can write the questions yourself or you can pick theirs and then you get a lot longer answers. So you get to be a little more specific, you get to ask what you really want…. You get there fairly quickly. And then at that point…you’re like emailing each other but through the system, so they don’t have your contact information, they don’t have yours etc. From my average experience, you do that, I’ve done that for a couple of times, you send a couple of messages and then I’ll reach out and say you know, I’d like to communicate out of this, you know here’s my email and my phone number, if you want to send me yours as well if you don’t want to call, if you want me to call you or email you, send me yours. And it’s, I’d say that everyone is comfortable with that, everyone it’s always moved on from that and you know it goes to email first, actually it’s mixed, 50/50. So it’s the email or it goes to a phone call. It’s really gone either way. And if it goes to a phone call, it generally goes to a date, you know, that week, you know the following weekend or the weekend after.  

(Shane, p. 15) 

Date seekers who were quick to move through the online channels hoped to get to know the person better and see if there was a connection in person (the decision to meet face to face is
discussed in more depth later). As Jason explained, he did not want to waste time becoming attached to someone online only to find the relationship would not work offline. He said

…I think after a few messages… it builds a little tension and it’s like okay well, this person sounds really interesting, I really want to meet them because now you’re kind of in that anxious situation where like, okay, I know that they meet a lot of these initial criteria, they’re very interesting to me, now I kind of have to see them in person because I have to see the physical part of the relationship is there as well…. So, you don’t really want to waste anymore time getting to know them past that initial icebreaking point because you don’t want to get super involved emotionally with somebody through messaging like building them up in your head to be this great person, and then you meet them in person and you know they have some like ridiculous quirk that you just can’t get past or they’re just completely physically not attracted to you and you just know that it will never work….it’s kind of a huge disappointment. (p. 10)

Again, at every step along the way, decisions about continuing communication with another date seeker were made and communication could be stopped. For example, Emily explained she made decisions based on conversations with other site members. She noted

I made a decision [to communicate more] based on our conversations. If I felt the person was trustworthy, I was willing to take the next step… then after a few conversations or sometimes more than a few, I would decide whether I wanted to meet the person. (Emily, p. 6)

Communicating online through several steps helped date seekers determine if the person on the other end was really a match for them. As Shane explained the process filtered out potential matches who were not a good fit as he said “… one of the girls had something like very religious
or something…like she was Christian…well it’s never going to work [he is an atheist], so you
know, sorry. That was useful” (p. 15). Communicating online in levels helps date seekers
determine if there are deal breakers before moving the relationship to the next level via
communication or meeting in person (which was again a version of the Guess Who? game).

*Steps in the Mediated Communication Process*

The timeline typically looked something like this depending on several factors including
the design of the site. First, initial contact was made through a wink, icebreaker, or questions
sent (eHarmony). Then, the next step depended on the design of the site and the person. On
eHarmony which restricted communication of members, it moved to closed-ended questions
from a list of questions. On the other sites, members send messages to one another through the
site’s messaging system. The next step on eHarmony after a few rounds of questions was to send
one another their lists of must haves and can’t stands. As Shane explained,

So icebreaker usually leads to …where you send them multiple choice questions, then it
goes on to sending some information about yourself, like you have, especially fairly good
tool, it can be, for witling things out, they have something on there called your must
haves and your can’t haves, you have a list like of ten things that you need to have in a
relationship or you need to have in a partner, and counter things you just can’t stand…
And then you go on to a little more, that you have a few questions that are more open
ended, and then you go onto this open communication and you just start sending
messages back and forth… (p. 15)

Throughout this process, decisions about whether or not to continue communication were
being made. If a match survived this level of communication it moved to the next level of more
rich computer-mediated communication. The next level was usually exchanged messages or
emails through the website – personal email addresses (such as work email addresses or Yahoo) were not exchanged yet. Messages were exchanged through the website and users received an email to their personal email address saying they had a message on the site. Users had to exchange personal email addresses to begin emailing off the website. Online communication ranged from a few emails over a few days to several rounds of emails over a few weeks. The length of time email exchanges occurred varied depending on experience level with online dating and comfort with the process. Some members moved to instant messaging programs but the usual next step was a phone call or meeting face to face. Some face-to-face meetings were initiated during the email process and phone calls were skipped altogether. The next section discusses how the face-to-face meeting is initiated if a match has passed the online communication eliminations.

Decision to Move Offline and Discussion of Meeting – Interpersonal

Once date seekers communicate online and pass each others’ filtering, the decision to move offline was made. Again, a mutual match/connection did not have to make it to this point. For example, Shane communicated with over 20 women online and met about 16-18 face-to-face, Rebecca communicated with 50-100 men online and met about 25-35 face-to-face, and Steve communicated with about 50-100 women online and met five to 10 in person. This theme included the categories of the decision to move offline and discussing the first meeting.

The Decision to Move Offline

Either person initiated the face-to-face meeting. Some participants said they initiated offline meetings and had others initiate them and that either person could really make the move offline. For example, Cathy said she usually waits to be contacted initially by men but in the case of moving offline, she did not necessarily waited for them to make the move. She explained
“I’ve said hey well let’s grab a bite to eat or let’s get a cup of coffee or you know do what you want to do whatever. And you know we’ll agree to meet somewhere” (Cathy, p. 8). Amber said in her case a man gave her his phone number and she called him. She noted,

he said … I don’t want you to feel threatened or anything…but here’s my number if you want to call, go ahead and give me a call, so I gave him a call one night and we had just talked back and forth and then we’re like well you know let’s set up a time and go out to eat, so we had actually gone out to dinner the first time that we met. (Amber, p.9)

Steve said in terms of initiating face-to-face meetings, either person suggested it. He stated,

It could be either one of us [to initiate], I’ve been asked out by a girl saying hey I think things are going great, would you like to meet for a drink or something. So I might, I would say more often than not, at least in my case, women tend to initiate the first face to face, sooner than I do. But I think either person can initiate it. (Steve, p. 9)

The initiation took place either in a message online or over the phone. In some instances, the initiation of the first meeting happened during the messaging or emailing online and in others it occurred after phone calls were exchanged. For example, Ashley said “…with one person I set up a meeting through email and with another person… we exchanged phone numbers, had a couple of phone conversations and then over the phone set up a time to meet” (p. 9). In Lindsey’s case the first meeting was initiated “… on chat… we just kind of decided you know we were chatting for a few days and say hey you know you want to chat face to face? So I believe I initiated that, actually I initiated both times…” (p. 6). Sheila explained her most recent face-to-face meeting initiation: “…we chatted back and forth on the computer for a few days. And he wanted to know if I wanted to meet him for a cup of coffee and I said that would be fine” (p. 6).

Most of the others’ most recent first meetings were initiated after phone calls.
Depending on the date seekers’ views on phone conversations and getting to know someone, face-to-face meetings were initiated more quickly or after several phone conversations. Wanting to move offline was done more quickly so date seekers could affirm a connection in person, learn more about the other person, and see if there was chemistry. For instance, Shane preferred to move offline quickly after talking briefly on the phone because he wanted to save conversational material for face-to-face and he believed he got to know someone better in person. He explained

…On the phone call you, and you kind of have a little bit of a conversation and for me it’s always follow up questions like oh you mentioned this in your last message you know, talk about it a little more or maybe, you know stuff like that and just the normal conversational things. It, if that goes well the conversation goes well for like 15 minutes, you know there’s two ways you can talk forever, but I kind of want to save that conversation if they seems alright, and you can normally gauge in five to 15 minutes if you’re, if they seem nice or seem good, and at that point I’d rather save the conversation for a face-to-face. (Shane, p. 16)

He elaborated that he preferred to move to face-to-face quickly because “I feel like I can read people better face to face” and “if I have a conversation with someone like a really long huge conversation getting to know them, then my concern is when we go on the date we have nothing to talk about” (Shane, p.16). Steve (p. 9) said “I’ve had people in the first email, hey I think you’re a great person, you look interesting, would love to meet for a drink.” He believed the dating site really served as a filter to finding someone to meet in person and the real “getting to know you” happened face-to-face. Like Shane, he explained
there’s a lot more you can learn from a face to face interaction than you can over the net. People are just, it’s almost like they’re using the site as the first initial filter to get through the bull crap, you know questions, find out if they’re at least even closely on the same page as you, and then you can move into really getting to know the person online at a deeper level, face-to-face. (p. 9)

Others preferred to have more frequent or lengthier phone conversations before meeting offline. Phone calls helped them learn more than they did online and helped them determine if they could have a good conversation before meeting in person. For example, Jon explained

…depending on how the phone conversation is going...if you’ve talked to somebody I mean sometimes I’ve had two, three hour conversations with people. And you can typically judge if they’re interested in what you’re saying or not…I’ll ask well, if they’re doing anything…later in the week. If they’re not, if they’d like to get together. (p. 10)

Derek believed phone conversations provided information about an individual’s personality not available through the websites. He said

After I emailed them, we would talk on the phone and I think that’s kind of a truth test because if you can get, if you really can’t develop, find out what type of personality they have until you kind of talk to them. So after the phone conversation, you know maybe one or two phone conversations, then I’d say hey if you’re not busy tomorrow or next week you know let’s go out and grab a bite to eat or you know grab a drink or coffee somewhere. (p. 6)

Discussion About the First Meeting

The date seekers discussed when and where to meet offline and participants said they liked to be safe by meeting in a neutral location, but did not always do that. Participants who
lived in small towns preferred meeting elsewhere to keep their date from knowing where they lived so quickly. For instance, Cathy explained that she lived in small town and tried to meet men somewhere else because she wanted to avoid contact afterwards if it did not work out. She explained

> I usually meet somewhere on neutral turf and not in my town…I’m probably not doing anything that creates and makes it any more safe or less safe for me by having them come or not come to [my town], but there’s something, there’s just something psychological, I don’t want them in [my town] because I don’t want somebody to say well show me where you live or show me around town, the town’s small….And I just, I don’t need that, I don’t need him that close… we’ll spend time in a space that’s you know… neutral territory and it’s about halfway between where they live and where I live and we can see if there’s any interest or not... (p. 9)

Therefore, the main concern meeting in person was not necessarily safety, but rather having privacy from the other person knowing where she lived. Sheila had concerns as well with a man who wanted to meet in a park because while it was a public place, it was also secluded and did not offer the desired safety. She explained

> most guys on here [Plenty of Fish] tend to think that they should meet you in a park, a public place...I have not figured that one out, because a park can be a very not public place… at first I thought well that sounds pretty cool because [the city] Park is pretty busy most mornings and everything. So anyway, we agreed that we would meet at the park. Well the next thing I know, this guy practically knows where I live… So I started getting a little nervous about it. (Sheila, p. 6)
Most discussion about meeting involved making logistical arrangements about where to meet and how to be sure daters, mostly women, felt safe. Because site users were meeting people who have been hidden behind a computer, meeting in a neutral location with people nearby was preferable. Jason said most women wanted to meet in a neutral public location. He noted

…most people want to meet face to face in a neutral location, a coffee shop or you know a sports bar or some kind of a place like that… I would select the location that was somewhere between the two of us and exchange phone numbers and you know I would call them along the way and just say hey I just got here, you know are you, I already sat down, you know type thing. So we could kind of find each other. (Jason, p. 11)

Lindsey said she selected locations like this for safety reasons. She explained

I suggested the place, Borders book store, I used to work there so I had friends there, [in case the] guy was psycho I could be like okay you got to go now and hide and find a friend and say okay I need help. So that was the one time. And again I wanted it in public, somewhere where I wouldn’t be alone with the guy. And I met him there, so he didn’t find out where I lived, I didn’t want him [to know the way] to my house, whatever. And then with [my husband] the same things, we met at Dave and Buster’s, and from there we went…to see a comedy show, but that was because it was working out. But yeah, I wanted somewhere safe, somewhere in public, somewhere if I needed help I could ask either a bartender or waitress, a bouncer, somebody, I need help. (Lindsey, p. 11)

Not everyone was this cautious, however. Rebecca explained she has been online dating for years and felt she was a good judge of character and so she did not always meet dates in public. She explained,
I would like to tell you that I meet in like neutral location, ideally but not always, sometimes they just come right over to my apartment. It depends on how they sound. I’d like it if it was neutral, but lately it seems like it’s hard to get people to want to meet on neutral ground… (p. 13)

Goals and Expectations for the First Meeting – Intrapsychic Scripts

Date seekers had varying goals and expectations going into the first meeting offline with a match. Some participants indicated they did not set high expectations or goals for the first face to face meeting. If a relationship materialized it would be a bonus. Others went into the first meeting hoping to find or affirm a connection they perceived online both physically and emotionally. Participants were looking for good conversation, getting to know the other person, and to make a decision of whether or not to have a second date. Just because there was a connection online or over the phone, that did not always translate into a connection in person. Thus, the first meeting was pivotal for deciding if the connection felt online transferred offline and if a relationship (of some sort) was pursued. In this theme, the categories that emerged were having low expectations, finding or affirming a connection, and deciding if there would be a second date.

Low Expectations

Some participants indicated they had not set expectations or that they had low expectations for the first meeting offline. Participants who either had no first date experience (in an online setting) or had not experienced a satisfying experience were unlikely to set high expectations. For instance, Lily (online dating four months) explained that going into her most recent first meeting “I kind of had no expectations, I was kind of disappointed on his looks, his pictures didn’t look anything like he did in person. So I don’t know I think that kind of threw me
off right away” (p. 7). Amber also said of her most recent first date experience, “I don’t know if I had any goals in mind, it was just you know go out, have fun, meet somebody new, you know if things worked out great, if not it wasn’t a big deal” (p. 6). By setting expectations low, date seekers were less likely to be disappointed if nothing materialized romantically from the meeting. For instance, Jon explained that he’s learned not to “…get ahead of yourself… I did [have high expectations] at one time. But now if I get dumped I just say eh, oh well. There’s another one…if it works out fine, if it doesn’t, I’m not out anything” (p. 11). Ashley said she was not necessarily looking for a romantic connection and even a friendship would be considered appropriate. She said

I didn’t care what I found [at the first meeting]…if it wasn’t a romantic type connection I was like maybe I can make some friends on here…So the first meeting was just kind of a general curiosity thing, sure like if there was a spark, bonus, but it wasn’t the be all, end all for me. (Ashley, p. 9)

Jason said “…I didn’t really expect a whole lot of anything, I just wanted to meet somebody and see where it went from there” (p. 12). Thus, having low or no expectations helped daters disconnect from emotional involvement too quickly and avoid being disappointed if an offline connection was not achieved.

Finding or Affirming a Connection

When meeting face to face for the first time, some participants explained they were hoping to either find a connection with the person or affirm one they already had via the Internet or phone. Just because it seemed like there was a connection online, the connection does not always transfer in person. Individuals could present themselves more ideally online with careful selection of pictures to post and content to write in a profile. Thus, a connection may be
experienced online but it was necessary for online date seekers to have one in person. For example, Shane explained when he first met a woman he was looking for chemistry and a connection and to affirm what he felt was already there. He explained

it is not so much if I have a connection with them but to affirm a connection with them. Because if I’ve gotten to the point where I, if I want to go on a date with you, then I feel like there’s already a connection there. You know for me I can already kind of feel it, even before I contact them, just by reading their profile and their picture. Then you know by the time you’re there you’ve already exchanged email and talk on the phone or just talked on the phone. And through those conversations, again you can get a little better feel of the person…so I guess for me, again it’s definitely affirming if that’s a better way to put it, to affirm that that connection is there than to see if it exists. (Shane, p. 17)

Other participants also felt there must have been a mediated connection to even reach the point of face-to-face contact. Thus, the initial meeting was really to see if the connection remained offline as well. For instance, Steve said

if I’ve talked to them quite a bit, I hope that the chemistry that we’ve had through writing or IMing or whatever carries through, their personality in person… I’m looking for that chemistry; I’m looking for there to be a connection… (p. 10)

Mary was also hoping the connection online and over the phone transferred offline. When asked what her goals were for the first offline meeting, she said “You know, really I just wanted to see if we had a connection, it seemed like we did over the phone, I mean we would talk for hours and not even realize you know what kind of time had passed” (Mary, p. 7).
An important, but not the sole, part of the first meeting was to determine if there was physical chemistry. From there, the date seeker determined if the mediated connection transferred offline. For instance, Jason explained

I mean obviously the first meeting is to see, I mean obviously are they attractive…So I mean that’s a big part of it. And you know beyond that, the initial part is again just reaffirming a lot of those initial questions, …what do you do for a living, what are your goals for yourself in the next couple of years? You know where is your family from? You know all of those kinds of questions that are a little bit deeper than what you would ask somebody in an email. You know more open ended questions that you know, stories that might take a little longer than what somebody might want to type in an email. (p. 11)

Derek said his first meeting was to look for “some sort of connection, some sort of okay I think this person is mentally attractive but physically attractive” (p. 6). Megan said she went into the first meeting “just to you know see if there is any chemistry there” (p. 6). Even if there seemed to be a connection online or on the phone, that did not always translate into an offline connection.

_A Second Date?

_The first meeting was essentially a test to see if there would be a second date. Again, even when someone fits on paper either online or over the phone, it had to be solidified face-to-face. In addition to determining if there was a connection, date seekers were hoping for good conversation and getting to know the other person. If there was a good connection, chemistry, and conversation, date seekers hoped to move on to a second date. For instance, Cathy said (p. 10)
My goals are to find out is this a person that I have enough in common with that I would want to see again? …is this somebody that I can say, yeah this is worth making the investment to pursue…when I go, I’m trying to find out okay what kind of substance is there with this person? Is this somebody that I have enough common ground with that we really could have serious conversations, we could you know engage in an intellectual kind of dialogue about something that isn’t just fluff. You know. Do we have any experiences in common…travel is a big thing for me, I love to travel and I love people who have had experiences with different cultures in different places in the world and that’s something I love to talk about. Is this a person who has any of those kinds of interests? Do we listen to the same kind of music, is there anything here that would make wanting, make me want to pursue this further and if there’s not, I mean, I don’t want to, again I’m not out to waste a lot of time. So I mean I’m going in with sort of this singular purpose of is this somebody I would, I could see myself having coffee with again in the future and would enjoy you know conversing and getting to know or is this just a whole lot of work and it’s probably not going to go anywhere. (p. 10)

Having a good conversation was very important. If they did not have a good conversation, the date was unsuccessful. While online, there was not synchronous conversation and so a date seeker was unable to observe social skills. Phone conversations revealed more about a person’s ability to talk but were not the same as face-to-face. Shane explained “I actually had one of those experiences…with a girl that seemed really interesting [online] and we went out to dinner and within ten minutes this girl literally had nothing [to say], I mean her responses were yes and no” (p. 17). In this instance, the match seemed interesting online but in person the interest was not mutual. Thus, it was important to affirm a connection face-to-face,
not just online. Lindsey said her goals for the first meeting were to “Well just to get more personal, yeah the questions are fine, but you know, they’re not going to tell you, you know about their family or anything else like that, unless you actually ask that question…” (p. 6).

Meeting online was a good way to get introduced to someone and learn about someone in general but in the case of online dating, meeting in person allowed date seekers to learn about the other person, assess the connection, and have a conversation. Lindsey went on to explain how important having a good conversation was. She said about the men she met face-to-face, “I was expecting us to have, like the first guy, more to talk about. I think I did all the talking. And he didn’t say a word and he was like oh yeah let’s do this again I’m like no” (p. 6). The first meeting was still part of the filtering and eliminating process – the Guess Who game. For instance, Rebecca explained “My goal is to sort of weed them out to find out if they are sort of worth another date… I look for red flags pretty quickly” (p. 13).

*The First Meeting and Follow Up - Interpersonal*

Activities participants engaged in on first dates were similar to those who met offline (e.g., meeting for coffee, going out to dinner). For example, Jon said for a first date initiated online, he went to a nice dinner and maybe activities like miniature golfing, a movie, a park, or a sporting event. As with other first dates, the daters were trying to determine if there should be a second date. Participants said a successful first date from a dating site was in a public place and included a meal or beverage. For instance, Cathy said

…we met at the restaurant…And we sat and ate, it was afternoon, we had like a late lunch, and sat and drank some beer and just talked and spent the afternoon here, probably spent about, I don’t know three hours, just talking and drinking beer and you know, common kinds of things, what do you do, you know in your spare time what, what’s
work like, what do you do for your job, what do you like about your job, what don’t you like about your job, you know that kind of stuff…it was mostly just kind of what I will call small talk conversation, get to know you kind of conversation. (p. 12)

The intimacy of the dates depended on prior contact with the date online or over the phone. If someone has had more contact with the other person, the date was more personal or intimate than someone with whom little prior contact has been made. For instance, Steve said he planned more personal dates when he knew the woman better. He noted

The more time I’ve had talking to them via text or IM or you know on the phone, the more likely that first date will be more involved. If it’s the first you know email hey let’s meet up sometime, I’m more likely to just do the first you know first date and get drinks, because I don’t know if I like them at all. (Steve, p. 9-10)

When the mediated connection was strong, the decision to have a more romantic date was made. For instance, Derek felt a strong connection with a woman after a phone call and decided a nice dinner would be more fitting than simply meeting for coffee. Derek explained that with his most recent first date,

We had talked on the phone … Kind of found out who she was and whatnot … So through that phone conversation I realized okay I’d like to go to a little bit more romantic dinner than maybe just coffee or whatnot…. So I took her to this restaurant that had an outdoor seating patio and…a fountain. (p. 7-8)

Daters asked each other questions, engaged in dialogue, and made judgments about whether or not there would be a second date. For instance, Steve said “I give so many people chances to go on dates and then after that first date I know, it’s like nothing there” (p. 10). Most of the participants said they went to dinner on their most recent first dates. For example, Shane
said “A safe bet is dinner. I’ve tried other things and it’s not, it does not work that well. So a safe side is dinner” (p. 16). Others met for coffee or went to a concert. Participants compared the dates to a blind date in that they were not entirely sure what to expect and some of the participants had some pretty interesting outcomes when meeting online matches face to face. A positive first meeting included having a lot to talk about, having a good conversation with a lot of questions and answers, and not having their date violate expectations in a negative way. Neutral or negative experiences from a first date almost always related to their date being strange or having bad conversations. Thus, categories for this theme were what constitutes a bad date and what constitutes a good date.

**Bad Dates**

Participants shared several experiences of bad dates that did not lead to a second. Like every other step in the online dating process, decisions were being made about the other person and whether or not contact continued. The most commonly cited reasons for not having a positive first date experience were the other person being strange, having no chemistry, or having bad conversation. First dates partners who were negative, awkward in conversation, made inappropriate comments or brought up inappropriate topics, or violated expectations (e.g., initiating uncomfortable physical contact) were viewed negatively. For instance, Lily (p. 7) explained

One guy I met… for dinner and he was weird. He was very, very open and negative about things…he told me he got kicked out of his high school because of some stuff he did. He was in his mid 30’s and I thought it was kind of weird he was focusing on high school. You could obviously tell he was very bitter about being a middle child because he kept talking about … the stuff he had to deal with as a kid not getting things that his
older and younger siblings did. He talked about his job and money like right away which I thought was kind of odd for a first date, I don’t know, he just rubbed me the wrong way.

When conversation did not come easily, the date was seen as unsuccessful. Cathy said on a recent first date she met a nice guy but conversation was just difficult between them and a second date was not initiated. She explained he was a “… Nice guy…we emailed once [afterwards]…but I suspect that there was no real kind of hit it off, sort of conversation, it took work. It was not easy…I suspect we probably won’t go out again” (Cathy, p. 12). Steve also explained how important it was to have good conversation in person. Just because there seemed to be a good conversational connection online or on the phone, it did not always transfer offline. He said for his most recent first date:

We had met through Match, chatted a couple times via … the Match email system. Moved it to a one phone call and then some texting during the day. And then this past Sunday we met up for sushi. It was a painful, painful date. You know it’s like trying to pull teeth to get her to talk. And so, and that’s the thing, she was great at talking on IM, she was great at talking on the phone, but when we sat down, there was like no chemistry, it was like she just could not, she didn’t know how to ask questions or give answers to everything like a one word answer. So it was like hmm, that was a bummer. (Steve, p. 10-11)

Bringing up inappropriate or taboo topics was also viewed very negatively on first dates. Inappropriate topics included past romantic partners, politics, and strange conspiracy theories. A typical bad date was like Shane explained,

…we went out to dinner. And I was asked pretty much every inappropriate question in the book. I was asked about ex girlfriends, I was asked my political views, which she
also felt the need to tell me that she thinks that all foreigners…should be forced to leave the country….So I told her that I should get up and go, because I don’t belong here… [but] I mean this was so ridiculous that I just sat there and listened in amazement…it was…bad, I wouldn’t say it was the worst because it was pretty funny. But it was just, yeah it was one of those people who …tell you to talk about their ex boyfriend, you know ask you about yours. You know talk about money, talk about you know politics…and veered off into the direction of immigrants….it was pretty ridiculous. [Did you finish the date?] I did. Pure amazement, I was entertained…I had somewhat of attraction to her, you know she was physically attractive and she seemed really great up until the date…but yeah as soon as she told me that you know, that we should kick all immigrants out of this country, even if they’re citizens, you know it just instantly vanished, any sort of attraction. I mean my, it was just pure entertainment; I enjoyed picking apart her logic and hearing the crazy shit that came out of her mouth. It was funny. (p. 18)

Rebecca also had a date with a guy who she connected with online but in person, he violated her expectations by discussing his strange conspiracy theory. She explained

He was very weird, he believed in a lot of conspiracy theories, so he was telling me about them. But he seemed perfectly sane, but he believes in like the lizard people and stuff, which is like this theory a lot of conspiracy theorists have that like the elite of the world are actually like lizard people, and like presidents and those kinds of people and like they post videos on YouTube showing like when someone’s, their eye looks different or something saying that they’re like a lizard. I know it sounds weird, but he seems so funny and rational while describing these strange things to me and I just listened. I said
you know I don’t believe a word of what you’re saying, right? And he’s like I know. (p. 13)

Thus, it took meeting in person to determine how well someone could have a conversation and whether or not they violated social norms.

Besides bringing up inappropriate topics, attempting to engage in physical affection too quickly was viewed negatively. Inappropriate physical contact, as Sheila explained, contributed to having a bad first date experience. She met a first date at a park and had a cup of coffee and her date was not what she hoped. She said

… I go over and we sit down and the first thing he does when I get out of the car is he gave me a hug, which eh that’s okay…I sit down at the picnic table and he sits right next to me, as close as he possibly get, and he starts putting his arm around me and rubbing my back and talking to me and the next thing I know he’s got his hand down my knee…

So I kind of scoot over a little bit … I kept trying to discourage him and I kept leaning forward so he couldn’t rub my back … [and] he keeps scooting closer and he’s making all these suggestive remarks and he says something about wanting to give me a kiss and I said nah, I said I don’t think so… So as we’re walking back he wants to keep putting his arm around me, and I told him… I said this is the first time I’ve ever met you…this is a little more than what I want for the first time meeting someone. I said I don’t hug and kiss just anybody. And I never heard from him again. (Sheila, p. 7)

Good Dates

Participants reported that a good date involved having a good conversation, feeling comfortable, being able to talk with their date, and not violating social norms. One important
factor in good conversation was talking about appropriate topics. For instance, Shane said he had several topics he asked about on a first date, noting

… I kind of save a lot of questions for that meeting, I don’t want to ask prior to... you know what they do, how’d they get into it? … how do they like it? … do they want to do something else, are they happy with it? Family, how did they move here…? Stuff like that. I mean it tends to be really, really good conversation. Those are the key topics.

(p. 18)

Having a good conversation on a first date was the first step to developing a lasting relationship, which was the case for Jason. Jason said for his most recent first date “…we met up at a restaurant ... and talked… for a couple of hours...[we] went out about a week later and you know started seeing each other fairly regularly and that’s kind of the beginning of the relationship” (p. 13). In this case, having a good conversation and talking for hours predicted a future connection. Steve explained a recent successful experience as being attracted to the woman, having good conversation, and wanting to have another date. He said that a successful first date was when

We sat down and right away as she walked in I was like wow, way better looking than I was expecting from her pictures. And then she started talking and was right away just got each other’s humor… conversation just flowed; we didn’t have to worry about like what we were going to talk about next. And I never felt inhibited, like say anything and she’d respond to it. So I think that, we ended up having a good night kiss, walked her to her car and then I wasn’t even down the street and she called me, she was like would you like to go out again, I had a really good time. We went on another date. (Steve, p. 12)
While good conversation was important, Amber explained that being comfortable was also important. In her case, she was not comfortable drinking on a first date and so the absence of drinking was viewed positively. Amber explained about a recent first date:

…we had a lot to talk about, so we ended up going and playing some pool…so it was fun because both of us were terrible and we just kind of sat around and talked. There wasn’t any drinking or anything and I think that was one of the things that I wanted to make sure that there wasn’t drinking on a first date….that was something I didn’t feel comfortable with, because I’ve dated guys in the past that have a couple beers on a first date and wasn’t really into that. So I mean we had a lot to talk about and it was really comfortable, it wasn’t awkward or anything like that, so it ended up being a good first date. (p. 6)

Alcohol consumption was not an issue for everyone but feeling comfortable with the other person and the situation was important. Participants felt most comfortable meeting in a public location which allowed them to continue or terminate the date easily. For instance, Sheila had a negative first date experience in a city park and was able to describe what she would like. She said a first meeting should allow the option to end the date easily if it was not working. Sheila said for a first date,

it should be, meeting in a public place where you know you’ve got the option to have a drink and say okay, you know I really don’t think this is what I’m looking for, whether it was him saying it to me or me saying it to him… (p. 9)

Only a couple of the men mentioned having a kiss or some sort of physical romantic activity on the first day (or thereafter) as an indicator of a good date. Jon said if the date went well, he was hoping for a good night kiss. Typically, however, a good first date had limited
physical contact, which was saved for subsequent dates. In Shane’s opinion, the introduction of physical contact in an online dating situation was similar to that of relationships initiated offline. Shane explained

[on a first date] There has been several times where going back to your place or going back to their place, but rarely is it having sex...it’s just not physical, …generally, I mean for me it’s definitely been more of what I would consider the same as normal dating, like you go on a date and maybe you kiss on the cheek or you know peck, I mean really nothing, and then the next date is you know more fooling around or having sex or the third date is having sex, something like that. It’s pretty typical to normal dating I think with what I’ve experienced in dating. (p. 18)

Thus, meeting offline and wanting to go on a second date were good indicators of a successful dating experience. As Megan simply stated “I would think successful would mean that both people wanted to have a second date” (p. 6) and Rebecca said “a truly successful one [dating experience] would involve at least multiple dates …” (p. 16).

After the First Date

After the first date, there were obviously decisions by both parties whether or not to continue contact. If the first date was not ideal, sometimes daters stopped contact or decided to give it another chance. Regardless, the decision to further contact the person is made. For instance, Steve said

Sometimes I will [waste my time after a first date if there’s not an instant connection], if it’s like okay well maybe they’re having a bad day or something, and there was enough of [an] interest, okay she’s a pretty good looking girl, you know I’m going to give her a second chance. If I’m just kind of like eh, she’s not that good looking or if I find out
she’s completely against everything I believe in or something like that I’ll just nix it. (p. 10)

If there was a mutual connection, the relationship remained offline without the use of the dating site. For instance, Derek (p. 8) said “… normally after, after you go on that first date you don’t really use Match, because … you’ve got their phone number and whatnot…” Obviously some phone calls or emails were exchanged but there was no longer a need for the dating website. Again, this depended on a date seeker’s goals for joining the site. If he or she was not aiming to find a relationship, he/she may continue to find and meet people through the site. However, for most of these participants, once a connection was made offline with a match, the website was no longer needed. If the website is no longer used, issues such as when to remove one’s profile from the dating site(s) and how to explain how they met could arise. Once the relationship successfully moved offline, it mimicked a relationship in which the partners did not meet online. This theme included the categories of first-date follow-up, removing one’s profile, creating the story of how they met, and the end of online dating.

Follow-Up

After the first date, both daters made the decision to either continue or discontinue face-to-face contact. If continued contact was mutually desired, the relationship moved forward offline. In some cases, meeting again was discussed on the first date. Amber explained that she and her husband discussed meeting again on their first date and subsequently had dinner the following weekend. Derek said

After the date, I mean you can kind of get a feel of how they are … you ask them hey would you like to have a, I’d like to go on another date with you, you know I can call you tomorrow or text you or whatnot. (p. 8)
If continued contact was not desired by one or both participants, date seekers went back to the matching process and started again. If a mutual connection was not found during the first meeting, some users chose to contact the other person to gauge their feelings or reject them using mediated channels. After a first date where Cathy felt the conversation was a little awkward, she said

…I sent an email out thanking him for you know buying my lunch and meeting me and that it was nice to meet him and it was you know that I enjoyed learning some about him…he responded back to me… you know was it was great to meet you, I had a great time, I’m really busy right this minute with something at work but I’ll get with you this next week and I haven’t heard from him…. I suspect I won’t….there was just sort of this vibe that I don’t think that either one of us….Felt a real strong vibe or connection. (p. 12)

In Lindsey’s case she was contacted after a date where she felt no connection and had to tell him so. She said after that first date he “called me the next night and I just said… I need to be with somebody that talks more….I don’t want to be the only one talking and [I] didn’t get to know you. He kind of understood...” (p. 8). After a first date that did not go well, Steve said “…I’ll normally at least …email like hey you know thanks for the date, but I don’t know if there’s enough there to go out again” (p. 10). The other party could also be the one who did not want to continue a relationship and so the date seeker dealt with that. He/she might have contacted the other person and received no response. For instance, Rebecca said after a recent first date

…I text messaged him the next day because I thought he’s somebody fun and he’s really hot….Well, he texted me back and said he was busy right then and he would text me later and he never did, so. And I’m not; I’m sort of over this whole waiting for someone to
call me thing. You know, if I leave one message and they don’t respond, that’s enough. (p. 15)

Not everyone had contact after a missed connection face-to-face. In the case of online dating, there was no requirement to contact someone after a first date (much like offline) but online date seekers had the option of removing or closing a match online and even blocking someone from further online contact. Thus, if the first date was unsuccessful, online daters can reject them by removing that person as a match online or blocking that person from mediated contact. Removing a person as a match or blocking was completed without ever having to speak to the other person again. For instance, Steve explained “… if it [the first date] was really bad, like in this case [of the date having terrible conversation skills and saying ridiculous things], I might give a no thanks click on her profile” (p. 10). After the horrible first date Sheila experienced, she said “I never heard from him again. I deleted him off [the site], put a block on there so he couldn’t contact me again and that was the end” (p. 8).

Removing a Profile and Creating the Story

If a relationship formed from an online dating experience, removal of one’s profile and discontinuing dating online became an issue. Again, this was only true for those date seekers who were looking for a relationship or found a relationship from the dating site. If a date seeker did not want a relationship, removal of a profile did not become an issue. Thus, if a mutual match turned into a relationship, most people stopped using the date sites. In some instances, couples had conversations about removing profiles and in others the daters removed profiles without discussion.
Discontinuing online dating or removing a profile was a complicated process, especially when daters still received emails from the dating sites or other members. For instance, after she met her husband, Amber said she did not use eHarmony anymore. However, she explained:

…I was still getting a few emails, like I would still check my account, or I wasn’t actually getting emails but I was getting you know we’ve matched you with certain people and I wouldn’t really pursue anything and sometimes I would get someone pursuing me with like questions and I would just reply like I’m interested in someone else or I’m dating someone else, whatever that response was… then my subscription had ran out and so did my husband’s, they ran out about the same time, so we never renewed.

(p. 6)

The decision was not always easy, however, for when to remove a profile. Removing a profile too quickly without knowing how a relationship would advance made it necessary for the dater to create a new account. However, failure to remove a profile could cause tension between partners. For example, Jon said removing his profile was:

…a problem that I’ve always had…. Well what I did was I basically just started dating one [woman] and took my profile off. Actually didn’t take my profile off, I left it on unfortunately because I always think in the back of my mind she was probably going to dump me as soon as I take my profile off. So I might as well make sure it’s there to stay.

(p. 15)

Daters wanted to be sure their relationships offline would last prior to removing their profiles. For example, Jon said he previously removed his profile after meeting offline but said now “…I would have to date for at least a month and a half probably. Or a month, month and a half, or just to get a general vibe as to what the actual feelings in the relationship are” (Jon, p. 15). Thus,
online daters did not want to remove their profiles until they were sure the relationship offline lasted longer than a few dates. In the case of online dating, removing one’s profile marked that a relationship was monogamous and serious. For example, Mary said

…we had that conversation [about removing our profiles] I want to say maybe like a week and a half after our first date, we had that conversation of okay, like we’re going to take our profiles down, we’re not looking for anybody else right now, we’re going to see what happens with this…we both deactivated our accounts after a week and a half. (p. 9-10)

As with Mary, sometimes participants had conversations with their partners about removal of profiles from dating sites. For example, Steve said

For me I pretty much am the person who will say are we going to be exclusive? And if the person says yes… [I’ll say] I’m only going to date you right now then I will take myself off [of the dating site] and I will ask them to do the same. (p. 10)

These conversations were not always comfortable, much like traditional relational definition conversations. It was not always easy to ask someone else if he/she was ready to be in a monogamous relationship. The awkwardness was amplified because it was easy for a partner to see if the other person still had a profile on a dating site. Jason explained he had an uncomfortable experience when he thought he had deactivated his online dating account but his profile was still visible. The woman he was dating confronted him about the situation because she was able to see his profile on the website even though they were in a relationship. Jason explained

…that was kind of an odd conversation…there was a point at which she said, you know, okay so are you going to take your profile down, like what’s the deal? And it actually
was kind of awkward for me because I had in fact cancelled my subscription, but the profile itself stays up until you physically like tell them to remove it, even though your subscription is cancelled….so for a couple of weeks… she was seeing my profile that was still on Match and didn’t really say anything to me, and you know then like four weeks later she’s like well why are you still on Match, like I thought you wanted to be together, and I said well I’m not, like I cancelled my subscription a month ago. She’s like well your profile is still on there. And I was like, oh, okay, well why didn’t you just tell me that, like I would have taken it down if I knew it was still there…. You don’t have to send [the dating site] an email [to remove your profile], but like you go onto the account settings and you can like deactivate your profile…Even if you let your subscription run out, and you’re not like paying for it anymore, your profile is still physically there. And people can actually still see you on there until you tell them to quote unquote deactivate your profile through the account settings. (p. 14)

Interestingly, site members who are not actively using the sites (e.g., paying to be a member, logging onto the site, viewing profiles) were still contacted by other interested online daters. The ability to easily communicate with others online made it easy for daters to look for alternative partners.

Some participants purposefully used the dating site to keep an eye out for a more suitable partner and so they did not remove their profiles. Keeping their account active provided them with a choice. If they were satisfied in their current relationship, they ignored the emails sent from the site. If they felt there was something better out there, they still looked at matches. Keeping one’s online dating account active was a way to keep options open and showed a lack of commitment to the offline relationship. Shane explained he never removed his profile because
he had paid for a yearly membership and he could simply ignore correspondence from the website if he desired. Shane (p. 19-20) said

    I have never been asked to take my profile down…and I never have, I’ve just stopped looking at it. And maybe it would be different, but the [packages]… I bought were for a year or something like that. So I mean just leave it up. I guess my thing is why, I mean we’re not married and so things can always change, so why would I remove it for no reason? Just let it sit there, you don’t have to read the emails that they send you, just delete them….Like I said, I’ve never discussed it, it’s never brought up.

When asked if women he has dated had an issue with his profile still being visible, he responded

    Sure, I mean but to me it’s the same as any other relationship… it depends on my involvement in the relationship….I’m with someone and I meet someone better, or someone who I think is better for me, I mean why would I stick with the person I’m with, it doesn’t make any sense. So I wouldn’t go actively looking. But yes, if someone reaches out to me, yeah I’ll read the message and I’ll take a look. If they seem great, I mean then yeah I mean I’ll respond, for sure….I guess from my point of view, it’s not tempting at all [continuing to get messages from dating sites when I’m in a relationship]. If I’m with somebody, it’s because… I feel a connection with [her]. You know I’ve chosen to do this and so I want it. And so it’s really not that hard for me, I don’t even think about it in terms of not reading other people’s profile. I delete the email (Shane, p. 20-21).

Steve, however, felt that leaving one’s profile on a dating site showed a lack of commitment to a relationship. He said leaving a profile up while in a relationship
…leads me to believe that the person still isn’t satisfied, because you can very clearly end an account and you can very clearly tell it do not send me any notifications from anything on this site. So if they’re choosing not to eliminate those communications, they’re leaving themselves open for a reason, there’s something that they’re not satisfied with. (Steve, p. 20)

Even if a person was not actively dating online because they were trying out a relationship, the dating site can still send the member matches and communication from other potential matches. Obviously, this could cause some issues about commitment to a relationship or tempt someone to keep looking for someone better. For instance, Jason explained

I think after you stop paying, once your subscription physically runs out, they’ll send you an email saying that like somebody’s interesting in you or somebody is trying to contact you and for only $29.99 a month you can find out who it is. … I mean yeah it is [screwed up], and you know that causes issues in and of itself… humans by nature are curious, so if you’re in a committed relationship and you know you’re getting this email, someone’s trying to contact you, it’s like well who are they, I mean it makes you wonder who are they, who is this person trying to contact me, why weren’t they contacting me before, is it somebody new or is it somebody better than what I have now? It’s that whole you know grass is greener syndrome and yeah it is pretty screwed up; it really does kind of mess with your head a little bit. (p. 15)

Ashley was also contacted by other site members after she stopped actively using the site. In her case, however, she was not tempted by the new interest. When Ashley was asked about removing her profile after meeting her partner, she said
I didn’t [remove my profile] because I kind of forgot about mine… I had stopped signing on shortly after meeting this person and I remembered to take it down after I got an email from somebody else, like a hey, hi, are you, you know, like here’s who I am, are you interested? And I was like oh gosh, I forgot about my profile… (p. 10-11)

As in most relationships, whether initiated online or not, partners often created a how we met story. However, in the case of online dating, not everyone was comfortable being honest about how they met. Some participants believed non-online daters were not accepting or stigmatized online dating and so they did not reveal the truth about meeting a partner online. Online daters did not always want to identify themselves as needing to date online and so their membership was hidden. For instance, Jason said “I’ll say that one thing I thought was always interesting was being in a relationship where I met somebody through the [dating] site was explaining that to other people who maybe would never do something like that” (p. 20-21).

Even offline, the story of how couples met may be negotiated or altered to be more socially acceptable. The case of online dating was perhaps even more unique because there were still some who felt there was a stigma about online dating or that others would not be accepting. The truth about meeting online is not always shared with others. For instance, Shane said “…I prefer to say yeah we met online, I mean I don’t really see the big deal of it. But I’ve noticed some of the younger girls I dated are a little more uncomfortable about it… (p. 21). Men were more open to admitting they met their partners online whereas women were more hesitant to identify themselves as online daters. Steve explained that even though it was common for couples to meet online, he found some women were embarrassed to admit they were dating online. He explained
…some people don’t care [if others know they met online], but some people have said very blatantly…I don’t want them to know I was on Match.com, so where did we meet?… I get a lot of that where people, it’s very commonplace for people to be on these sites, but when it comes down to it, they’re almost ashamed to be associated with finding someone through this process. (p. 20-21)

Ashley said that she and her partner she met online and created with a story for how they met because she did not want everyone to know she had dated online. She explained

There, there are like two versions of the story [of how we met], depending on who you are, and the short, the two short answers are like either we met online and you know through Match or whatever, or like we met at the coffee shop in Charlotte, which is not a lie, but is, that’s the version that went to people who really don’t need to know my business, colleagues and general folk who are, you know who ask. And then the true version is you know the version our friends get and our family and people who know us. (Ashley, p. 11-12)

She went on to explain that there was either a real or imagined stigma surrounding online dating and she did not feel the need to justify herself to people who were judgmental. When explaining why she did not tell everyone that she met her partner online, she noted

….I think it’s like the old school stigma of online dating, which was like you know when it started back in the day, like it was kind of this shameful, like people can’t find themselves a spouse because you know, in real life because why? I don’t know… but I totally did not engage with the online dating [rationale] with people to whom it didn’t seem worth my time to explain it. But as to the why, I don’t know, I guess maybe I perceived a certain amount of stigma still, which would seem really unusual with the fact
that we do everything online at this point. But maybe that was there kind of on an underlying sort of basis. (p. 11-12)

Not everyone concealed their online dating status. For Rebecca, creating a story was not really a concern and she proudly shared when she met a partner online. Comfort level and experience with online dating and identifying oneself as an online dater influenced identification as an online dater. She said “… all my friends know that I date online a lot” (Rebecca, p. 22). Again, it boiled down to a person’s comfort level and experience with online dating as to whether they shared how they met their partner. If an online dater felt comfortable identifying himself/herself as such, they were less likely to hide that identity from others.

*The End of Dating Online*

Once the relationship moved offline and the decision made to either leave up a profile or take a profile down, the relationship became more intimate. Once the relationship began to develop, it mimicked that of an off-line relationship. Of course, if one desired to continue dating online, this did not signal the end. It was important to note that most participants felt that online dating was not an appropriate term to use for what actually occurred. Participants met others online or initiated a relationship online, but the relationship did not actually develop intimacy until partners met face-to-face. Thus, *dating* did not occur until the relationship moved offline. A more appropriate phrasing might be online romantic introductions or online romance initiations. Despite what the sites actually did, popular culture, members, and the sites themselves continued to refer to it as online dating.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I provided the results and discussion of my study. First, I provided my personal narrative of online dating and identified cultural scripts from dating sites. Second, I
provided the Model for Online dating and described it. Third, I elaborated on the scripts in the model using interview data. The next chapter provides conclusions to my study, introduces Online Romantic Relationship Initiation Theory and explains contributions to the field.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I provide conclusions for the study of online dating and the developed grounded theory. First, I present the grounded theory Online Romantic Relationship Initiation Theory (ORRIT) about the process of online dating. Second, I explain the contributions of this study to interpersonal communication theory, research and the public. Third, I discuss limitations and calls for future research. Finally, I provide conclusions of my study.

Online Romantic Relationship Initiation Theory (ORRIT)

The meta-inference of this study led to the development of a grounded theory, which I have named Online Romantic Relationship Initiation Theory (ORRIT). ORRIT is a theory that describes the process of online dating. I define online dating sites as websites designed for individuals to meet potential romantic partners for the purpose of initiating relationships and then moving the relationships offline. Walther (2009) recently argued that the field of computer-mediated communication needs to refine its theories, particularly by articulating boundary conditions. Walther (2009) further noted researchers in the field need to examine when assumptions from existing theories fit in other contexts and recognize when some conditions did not fit. In the case of Social Information Processing Theory, some of the concepts were applicable in the case for online dating (e.g., using available textual cues in place of nonverbal cues to make opinions) but not all of them fit. In this section, I describe Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT; Walther, 2008), the tenets of ORRIT and how my theory expands SIPT.

Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008) examines how relationships, not specifically romantic relationships, develop online. As noted in the review of literature, SIPT
(Walther, 2008) explains how people get to know one another online without nonverbal cues. Essentially, if people are unable to obtain nonverbal cues, they will do so in other ways such as writing and language. The participants in my study indicated they frequently looked at textual cues such as grammar and language to make decisions about potential matches. SIPT asserts that while cues are available, the rate at which information is exchanged is slower than face-to-face exchanges. Thus, it is possible to develop satisfying relationships online by using the cues available in computer-mediated communication; it just may take longer to happen. In the case of participants in my study, movement through mediated channels occurred rather quickly and participants placed a great deal of emphasis on the first face-to-face meeting. SIPT is applicable for those relationships developed online; however, online dating sites are used more for meeting people to form offline relationships. Therefore, SIPT does not completely apply to relationships that are initiated online and quickly move offline as is the case for online dating.

Another concept tied to SIPT is hyperpersonal communication (Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001). Hyperpersonal communication helps explain how in some circumstances, Internet users create hyperbolic and idealized conceptualizations of others met online, which leads to knowing more about an online partner because of available information. Hyperpersonal communication helps explain how a great deal of information can be obtained from profiles in online dating sites; however, it does little for explaining how people relate once offline. Because profiles contain photos and enough information to assess online matches, online date seekers can engage in hyperpersonalizing their matches. Participants in my study indicated they wanted to meet face-to-face to affirm connections found online and determine if the connection they felt online was real. In this instance, hyperpersonal communication was apparent. My participants felt a connection online through the photos, profiles, and mediated communication. However,
they needed to meet in person to affirm the connection. Thus, hyperpersonal communication explains how they felt connected online but that was only one part of the online dating process. It does not explain profile creation, the creation of scripts, decision making processes, or how face-to-face meetings are initiated.

Thus, while SIPT and Hyperpersonal Communication explain parts of the online dating process, ORRIT more clearly explains the entire process of initiating an intimate romantic relationship. ORRIT applies specifically to date seekers initiating romantic relationships through the use of an online dating site for the purpose of offline contact. It is particularly applicable for online dating sites in which pictures are posted on profiles for date seekers to view. As Walther (2009) argued the importance of boundary conditions for online communication theory, I offer these for ORRIT: The theory does not apply to initiating relationships online through other websites (e.g., social networking sites), developing relationships online through other sites (e.g., chat rooms), using dating sites as a means to initiate casual sexual encounters (e.g., Casual Encounters on Craigslist), or non-romantic relationship initiation (e.g., finding a hobby group on Meetup.com).

ORRIT describes the process of romantic relationship initiation through the use of online dating sites. There are five major tenets: (a) when individuals use online dating sites, relationships are not developed online, but rather are initiated online for the purpose of offline contact, (b) online date seekers actively choose sites based upon their dating goals, available members, site culture, and features of the site (including cost), (c) cultural, intrapsychic, and interpersonal scripts for online dating are reciprocal; the features or culture of the site impact some dating behavior, though date seekers use the sites in their own ways to achieve their goals, (d) online daters engage in a process of eliminating potential matches according to a personal list
of criteria and decisions are constantly made about whether or not to continue further contact, and (e) once offline, the relationship mimics that of a face-to-face initiated relationship.

First, in the case of online dating sites, relationships are not developed online but rather initiated online. When using online dating sites for the purpose of offline relationship development, the sites serve as a way to expose date seekers to a larger pool of available partners. The dating sites provide seekers with potential partners and a means to contact them. Because mediated communication progresses quickly to face-to-face interaction, it serves as a filter rather than a vehicle for more intimate relationship development.

Second, online date seekers actively choose dating sites based upon their goals for online dating, perceived members on the sites, and features of the site. Date seekers who have casual goals for online dating will select a site with similar members. Date seekers who are looking for a serious committed relationship will select a dating site perceived to cater to serious daters. Sites perceived to have undesirable members (e.g., Yahoo Personals if a committed relationship is sought) are not joined. Further, date seekers who prefer more control in the selection of potential dates will prefer search engine sites. Those who desire more privacy and guidance will prefer matchmaker sites.

Third, cultural, intrapsychic, and interpersonal scripts of online dating are reciprocal. The reciprocal process is demonstrated in a variety of steps in the model I offered in the previous chapter. There are several instances where the reciprocity is apparent. Intrapsychic scripts, including love styles and goals for online dating, influence how individuals select dating sites. For instance, if individuals are seeking fun or casual dates (intrapsychic) they will select websites with more fun or casual cultures (cultural). Concomitantly, the cultural scripts of matchmaking or search engine sites influence how date seekers can communicate with one
another (interpersonal scripts). For example, search engine sites allow date seekers to communicate with any other site members through messaging but matchmaking sites force daters to follow a series of guided communication steps. Decisions about matches, including individuals’ criteria and elimination strategies, are interpersonal scripts influenced by cultural scripts. For instance, the dating sites emphasize physical appearance and posting photographs (cultural) which are part of the decision making processes (intrapsychic). Therefore, date seekers used appearance in pictures as a way to filter out potential matches and this demonstrates a point of reciprocity in cultural and intrapsychic scripts.

Also, looking at profiles of others (intrapsychic scripts) can influence what date seekers include in their own profiles (cultural/intrapsychic scripts). For example, if Tom liked that Pat listed favorite vacation spots and liked how Pat included that in the profile, Tom can then change his own profile to include favorite vacation spots.

Mediated communication (interpersonal scripts) is also influenced by the site’s (cultural scripts) restriction or openness of communication. For instance, eHarmony does not allow site members to send messages to users without following a series of steps. Match.com blocks users from sharing personal email addresses too early in the messaging process. Furthermore, how daters communicate with others (interpersonal) can change what they want in a partner, relationship, or of online dating (intrapsychic). For example, if Tom exchanged messages online with Pat and discovered negative qualities, Tom could decide to filter out potential partners for possessing those qualities.

Advice and guidelines from dating sites (which could be cultural scripts) will only be followed or elicited from date seekers in specific instances (e.g., when it provides practical advice on information to include in profiles). Individuals who do not identify themselves as
needing dating advice will not seek advice especially when that advice is seen as common sense. Common sense advice, as participants said, implies they needed assistance with obvious dating skills. However, practical advice such as including hobbies in a profile is more likely to be followed. Practical advice does not suggest the date seeker needs dating advice and so it does not challenge their identity as competent daters.

Fourth, online date seekers engage in a process of eliminating potential matches according to their list of desirable qualities. They are constantly making decisions to eliminate further contact following the guess-who strategy. Date seekers search for matches using their shopping list and then eliminate potential matches from further consideration for possessing undesirable characteristics. The guess-who elimination continues throughout the mediated communication process, and contact is stopped when undesirable qualities or characteristics are discovered. Those matches with whom contact has continued have passed the filters of the elimination.

Lastly, once the encounter moves offline, it mimics that of a relationship initiated face-to-face. Participants indicated that first dates with individuals they met through online dating sites were similar to those initiated offline. While there was a focus on meeting in public places, participants noted the activities they engaged in on first dates (e.g., dinner) were similar whether they met online or face-to-face. Once a relationship forms offline, the use of the dating site becomes obsolete. While daters can communicate via mediated channels, the website is no longer needed. Concerns such as removing one’s profile from the site and telling others how they met must be managed. Removing one’s profile is a sign of commitment to the relationship. Date seekers who are comfortable identifying themselves as online daters are more likely to reveal to others that they met a partner online.
ORRIT, in addition to being appropriate for describing online dating, is applicable, in part, to other contexts as well. For instance, the second and third tenets explain how Internet users select websites to join and how they select content to use. The process of analyzing a website’s culture and features before joining applies to other media or technology, such as social media tools or mediated consumption. Users select appropriate media or websites to suit their needs. Additionally, the description of how cultural, intrapsychic, and interpersonal scripts are reciprocal helps explain the reciprocity in other mediated contexts such as reading magazines or browsing interactive or social networking websites.

Contributions

In this section, I describe the additional contributions of this study. First, I explain how this study offers support for Script Theory. Second, I explain how the study contributes to understanding of contemporary courtship and partner selection. Third, I discuss how the study provides insight into online daters and their identity management.

Script Theory

In addition to extending Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008), this study adds to the literature on Script Theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Script theory explains the processes individuals follow for dating, which informs how online dating sites may influence members’ scripts for dating. Scripts are “a metaphor for conceptualizing the production of behavior within social life” (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, p. 98). There are three distinct levels of scripts: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic. Cultural scripts are instructional guides at the level of collective life that instruct specific roles. Interpersonal scripting involves adapting and shaping material from cultural scenarios for content-specific behavior. It also involves balancing personal desires with appropriate expectations (Simon & Gagnon, 1986/1998). Intrapsychic
scripts are the internal dialogue and fantasies of the individual or the symbolic reorganization of reality to realize wishes.

This study adds to Script Theory by providing a context to illustrate how the different levels of scripts are reciprocal. Script Theory has been widely used to explain sexual scripts and how cultural scripts on sexual behavior influence individuals’ sexual behavior (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). It has also been used to explain the sequence for first dates (e.g., Bartoli & Clark, 2006; Laner & Ventrone, 1998). Many studies have asked participants what a hypothetical first date should entail and then to explain their most recent first date. These descriptions served to explain cultural scripts and interpersonal scripts. However, intrapsychic scripts were not explored and the reciprocity of the other levels was assumed. The model presented in my study demonstrates how scripts in the online dating process are reciprocal and how the different levels of scripts work together.

There are several examples of reciprocity in levels of scripts in the model I developed in this study. For instance, the design of the sites (cultural) restricts communication between matches (interpersonal). Also, the design and guidelines (cultural) of the site influence what date seekers can include in their profiles (intrapsychic) and then how they communicate with matches (interpersonal). All of the dating sites I analyzed required or strongly encouraged me to post a picture or pictures. Each site had its own interface with checkboxes and text boxes for describing who I am. The site-created profiles helped to shape how my image was portrayed in my profiles. The interface for contacting matches influenced how interpersonal communication could occur. Communicating with others (interpersonal) could change what I want in a partner or in a relationship (intrapsychic). Further, looking at profiles of other date seekers (interpersonal) could influence what I put in my own profile (cultural and intrapsychic).
Contemporary Courtship

This study also adds to our knowledge of contemporary courtship and decision making in terms of love styles, shopping lists, guess-who elimination strategies and how singles are relating to others. The online daters in my study explained they wanted it all in a relationship, including passion, friendship, and companionship. Further, participants indicated they wanted a partner who also possessed characteristics in accordance with their own shopping list of desirable qualities. This suggests date seekers know what they want in a partner and are looking for someone who fulfills a variety of needs. These findings were consistent with Whitty and Carr (2006) who found most attractive qualities to be looks, similar interests/values, socioeconomic status (education, intelligence, occupation, income, and professional) and personality.

Date seekers search for potential partners based upon criteria on a list of desirable qualities. Then, when a list of potential partners is attained, date seekers engage in a process of elimination like guess-who to eliminate potential matches who possess undesirable qualities. My findings extend Whitty and Carr’s (2006) findings that online daters viewed profiles as if they had a shopping list to check what products met their needs.

With the popularity of online dating and a diversity of sites, it raises the question: is online dating the new way of dating in general? Vangelisti (2002) explained traditional romantic relationship initiations were constrained by physical and social contexts. However, these constraints were less apparent online and there were more potential partners online. Regardless, results of this study indicate online dating has not necessarily replaced traditional ways of dating. Individuals see online dating as an alternative to traditional dating and a way to expose themselves to a larger pool of available partners, and not a replacement for offline exposure. If there were acceptable potential partners offline, many of the participants would not have used a
dating site. Thus, while many participants used online dating sites to be exposed to a larger pool of available partners, they were not opposed to meeting someone offline. It was seen as an alternative. Furthermore, the face some participants felt the need to create involved a different story to explain how they met their partners to outsiders, which demonstrates a real or imagined stigma that continues to surround online dating. While all couples have a story for how they met, some of the participants indicated online dating was particularly stigmatizing.

Insight into Online Daters

This study provides insight into who is dating online, how online daters manage their identities as online daters, and why they do not use the dating advice articles provided to them through the sites. The sheer number of people who date online and the popularity of the sites suggest a large population is dating online. In this study there were a variety of online daters from 24-year-olds looking for someone to date to a 62-year-old looking for someone with whom to share activities. These daters only provided one small snapshot of the variety of online date seekers. Date seekers tried to present themselves positively and accurately, which was consistent with other forms of alternative dating such as personal ads (Bartholome, Tewksbury, & Bruzzone, 2000). Furthermore, there are dating sites catered to a variety of different needs including those seeking a casual relationship or a serious one, gay daters, Jewish daters, farmers, and so on. However, several of the participants mentioned they did not start dating online until after they graduated college. In college, individuals are exposed to a large pool of available partners but once out of college, that pool dwindles. It is not that online daters must attend college or wait until after college to join a site, it is that they feel a pool of available partners is not available and so they turn to online dating to find one. Therefore, when individuals felt there was a lack of partners or no opportunity to meet partners offline, online dating was seen as an
alternative to meeting them. This is similar to speed dating, another form of alternative relationship initiation. Speed dating entails singles attending a round robin event of six-to-eight minute speed dates with other singles in attendance (Houser, Horan, & Furler, 2008).

Even with the popularity of online dating, online date seekers must engage in a process of identity management, which influences their online dating experience. Henry-Waring and Barraket (2008) explained that online daters spend considerable effort managing themselves online and this was supported among participants in my study. Results of this study suggest some online daters are apprehensive to identify themselves as online daters or as needing to date online. Despite the popularity, some daters feared outsiders would consider them as unable to find a partner offline, which threatened their sense of face. Furthermore, they were also worried about an acquaintance seeing their profiles on a dating site. Because pictures were included, online dating was less anonymous than newspaper personal advertisements (e.g., Bartholome et al, 2000).

The fear of being exposed as an online dater may be related to the date seekers’ perceptions that a real or imagined stigma (Goffman, 1963) of online dating continues to exist. Goffman (1963) defines a stigma as an attribute that is deeply discrediting. The stigma is that online daters are unable to find a partner offline or are socially awkward; something which Valkenburg and Peter (2007) have determined is not true. Stigmatization of alternative forms of dating may not be unique to online dating. Finkel, Eastwick, and Matthews (2007) noted speed dating, another form of alternative dating, is public and therefore potentially stigmatizing as well. As Goffman (1963) explained, when someone who is stigmatized meets someone normal, he/she feels unsure of how receptive the other will be. Regardless, online daters do not want to be perceived as socially awkward, unable to find a partner offline, or as needing dating advice
because they are incompetent. However, not everyone interviewed revealed they rejected their identification as an online dater. They still managed to save face, however, only by their refusal to seek additional dating advice and ignoring advice offered to them. Because they did not identify themselves as *needing* additional dating advice, they could maintain their identities as competent daters (which is an intrapsychic script). The advice and guidelines were viewed as something *others* needed.

**Limitations and Future Research**

As with all studies, this study has both limitations and opportunities for future research. I first discuss the limitations concerning the participants in this study and the websites chosen for analysis. Second, I suggest future research on refining and testing the theory, finding boundary conditions where applicable, and exploring a wider range of online daters and sites.

First, online daters are a diverse group, which was not completely captured in my sample. Because I used network and snowball sampling strategies, many of the participants were college educated and almost all identified as “White.” While they varied in their goals for online dating sites, none mentioned other ways of using dating sites, such as initiating short-term sexual encounters (which are popular among some sites such as Casual Encounters on Craigslist.com). Thus, the study and theory do not apply to all goals for online dating by all online daters.

Additionally, because most of the participants were college educated, that may influence what they seek in a partner and their identification as competent daters. Less educated online daters are likely to identify themselves differently and perhaps use dating advice differently.

Only one of the participants identified as gay or lesbian. Klinkenberg and Rose (1994) found lesbians and gay men did not adhere to specific gender roles in first dates like in heterosexual scripts; however, their general scripts did not vary greatly. While in this study, my
participant’s experiences were similar to heterosexual participants, issues such as gender roles in who initiates communication, should be explored further.

Second, there are numerous dating websites available, some for specific religions or sexual orientations, and only three dating sites were chosen for analysis. Because general online dating scripts were sought, I selected dating sites based upon my participants’ membership and site popularity. This left other dating sites that may have a unique culture unanalyzed. Each site has its own features but the general scripts are likely to be similar. Regardless, the websites I analyzed may differ from other sites, especially niche sites (e.g., Christian Café for Christian dating or Lavalife for casual dates and flirtation).

Future research can refine and test the theory, find boundary conditions, and explore a wider range of online daters and sites. First, the ORRIT needs to be tested using more online daters and websites. It can be refined through further research. Also, as Walther (2009) noted, boundary conditions must be articulated. I attempted to articulate conditions but another point of view and more research can further clarify these. For example, there are dating sites in which photos are not provided (such as Craigslist). The boundary conditions for these types of websites need to be determined. Also, dating sites that cater to specific daters such as gay, Jewish, Christian, or older individuals should be examined. The theory needs to be tested to see in which contexts and dating situations it is applicable. Because the goal in all of the sites is finding a date, sex, or a long-term partner, it is likely the theory will apply to other sites as well. It may also apply to other mediated contexts yet to be determined. Researching a larger variety of online daters such as those who use dating sites for very casual encounters, arranged relationships, and daters who have a variety of backgrounds will offer different points of view. Additionally, the idea of identity negotiation and stigmatization of online daters could be further
explored, especially as it relates to the use of advice articles. Because there is an abundance of research and advice articles on the sites, obviously the sites believe members are reading them. What online daters are reading them? Why are they reading them while others are not? Also, what determines whether or not date seekers identify themselves as online daters and what effect does this have on their experience? Lastly, the matching and decision making process is central to online dating. I have used the shopping and guess-who metaphors as strategies for making dating decisions. These metaphors can be further explored and could explain dating in other contexts.

Summary

Online dating is a popular social activity. My study explored how online dating sites and online daters co-create dating scripts and the reciprocal nature of cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts. In the first chapter, I provided the rationale and importance of the study followed by a review of relevant literature including Script Theory and Social Information Processing Theory. In the methods chapter, I described the use of mixed models, ethnographic content analysis and in-depth interviews, to develop grounded theory. I presented my personal narrative of joining online dating sites, cultural scripts from online dating sites, a model of online dating, and an in-depth explanation of the process through both the ethnographic content analysis and interviews in the results and discussion chapter. In this chapter, I presented the Online Romantic Relationship Initiation Theory and how it adds to Social Information Processing Theory. It also described contributions to Script theory, an explanation of contemporary courtship, and insight into online date seekers. Finally, it presented the limitations and future research. The idea of finding a partner through a personal advertisement is not a new one. From newspaper personals, The Pina Colada song, matchmakers, and now online dating, finding a
partner through mediated channels is not going to stop anytime soon. Researchers can continue
to explore how singles initiate and develop relationships and determine how new methods play a role in this process.
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APPENDIX A: ECA DATA COLLECTION PROTOCOL

1) Website name:

2) Title of document (if applicable) or key phrases (make note):

3) What is the “brief message”? (ex. get more winks!):

4) Who is the message aimed at? (men, women, pursuers, etc.)

5) What is the “meaning” or messages of the pictures/graphics (if applicable)?

6) What interactive elements are there? (i.e. Checkboxes, quizzes, etc.)

7) What scripts for dating are evident?

8) What cultural scripts for dating are apparent?

9) What expectations about dating are portrayed?

10) What gender role scripts are evident?

11) What does it say about the dating process?

12) What expectations about finding a partner and partner characteristics are evident?

13) What messages about dating does the document portray to viewers?

14) How are scripts played out (pictures, texts, messages, etc) in the document

15) Additional pertinent information (make note):
Introduction Questions and Warm-up
Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! If you feel any of the questions make you uncomfortable, please feel free to pass on the question. First, I have some general questions about online dating.

1. What prompted you to start using online dating sites?
   a. Are you currently dating online (visiting sites at least once per month)?
   b. Which dating sites are you currently a member of?
   c. If you are using more than one site, how do they compare to one another?

2. How long have you been using online dating sites to either post or view profiles?

3. What are/were your goals for online dating?

4. Overall, how do you think online dating compares to traditional dating? (probe on this)

5. Since you’ve been on [name of site], about how many people have you communicated with online? How many have you met face-to-face?

Dating Site Interface and Guidelines/Advice
I’d like you to think about the profile creation process, guidelines, and the tools dating sites provide to you.

6. What guidelines do you recall for creating a profile and describing your match?
   a. What tools were available to you for describing your “match”? (ex. checkboxes, personality quizzes, other quizzes)
   b. How did you use these tools?
   c. What specifically did the dating sites encourage for your profile and describing a match? How closely did you follow this?
7. Please think about emails or other tips and tools available through the dating sites. How did you utilize additional dating tools?
   a. What tools did you use? How?
   b. How helpful were the tips and advice?
   c. What were you hoping to gain from the additional tools?
   d. How did the tools present you with the means to find what you were looking for in a partner?
   e. How did the tools change or reinforce your approach to searching for a partner?

8. How do these tools change or reinforce how you date online? Traditionally?

**Online Dating Processes**

9. Walk me through a typical online dating experience.
   a. How did you set up your profile? What information did you include/exclude?
   b. How do/did you browse profiles/matches?
   c. How do/did you contact someone you’re interested in? (wait for them first?)

10. Once you establish a match, then what happens?
    a. Please explain how contact is/was made and what happens in each stage (email, meet face-to face)
    b. How is/was a face-to-face meet initiated?

11. If you have met someone face-to-face from an online dating site, explain the first meeting.
    a. What were the goals of the first meeting?
    b. What were you expecting?
12. If you have gone on a “date” with someone you met on a dating site, please describe your most recent first date.

13. How would you describe a successful dating experience using an online dating site?

14. How would you describe (in detail) a first date where you did not meet on-line?

15. How are first dates similar or different for partners met online versus more traditionally?

Assessment of Others

Now I’d like you to think about how you select others to contact.

16. What specific qualities are you looking for in a partner online?
   a. How do these qualities differ from meeting someone in another setting?
   b. How do dating sites allow you to discover these qualities about potential partners?
      (i.e. Checklists, personal descriptions, etc.)
   c. How do site interfaces allow you to discover these qualities?
   d. How do the options available for describing an ideal partner influence your dating process?
   e. If there were additionally features of the sites that would help you learned more about or connect with others, what would they be?
   f. What is the importance on physical appearance?

17. How has the availability of several partners listed online changed the way you date?
   How does this change your approach to dating?

18. Some people compare online dating to “shopping.” How well does this description explain your online dating experience? (probe on this)

Communication and Relationship Development

19. Think back to the last relationship that was initiated online. What specific stages did you go through to get to know the other person?
a. What specific communication mediums were used in different stages? Describe this process please.

b. How did you decide to move to a different stage (specific point where you noticed an increase in commitment, interest, or closeness)?

20. If you had to come up with a steps/script for explaining how you start and progress a relationship from an online dating site, what would that script be?

21. What would the steps/script (in detail) be for a first date with someone met from a dating site?

22. Think about how you typically relate to others romantically. How would you describe how you think a relationship should be? (probe on Styles of Love)

**Demographics**
Now I’d like to ask you a few questions for demographics.

23. (interviewer note sex)

24. What city do you live in?

25. What is your occupation?

26. What is your age? (can give 5-10 year increments)

27. What is your sexual orientation?

28. What is your ethnic background?

29. What is your current relationship status (single, never married, divorced, married, widower, dating)? Do you have children?

**Wrap Up**
Thank you for your help in this study!

30. If there is anything else interesting or important about online dating that we haven’t touched on please share it now.