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An Exploration of Identity Re-Creation in the Context of Internet Dating

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Evidence of individuals using their behavior to form and re-form identities has been found in many offline consumer contexts (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh, 1993; Kozinets, 2002; Thompson and Troester, 2002), as well as in several online consumer contexts (Kozinets 1997; Schau and Gilly 2003; Schau and Muniz 2002). Although researchers have suggested that both online and offline feedback from others concerning information posted about oneself on the Internet might have an impact on that person's identity, an explicit examination of the ways in which this feedback affects people's perceptions of themselves has been absent from previous studies. If identity is truly a social phenomenon as suggested by the symbolic interactionist perspective (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Solomon 1983), then feedback from others would be an important part of the identity creation and re-creation process.

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Evidence of individuals using their behavior to form and re-form identities has been found in many offline consumer contexts (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi, Rose, and Leigh, 1993; Kozinets, 2002; Thompson and Troester, 2002), as well as in several online consumer contexts (Kozinets 1997; Schau and Gilly 2003; Schau and Muniz 2002). Although researchers have suggested that both online and offline feedback from others concerning information posted about oneself on the Internet might have an impact on that person's identity, an explicit examination of the ways in which this feedback affects people's perceptions of themselves has been absent from previous studies. If identity is truly a social phenomenon as suggested by the symbolic interactionist perspective (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Solomon 1983), then feedback from others would be an important part of the identity creation and re-creation process.

The purpose of our research, then, is to expand the current understanding of the identity re-creation process as it occurs online not only by exploring the ways in which individuals use their web postings to explore aspects of their own identities but also by investigating the impact that online and offline feedback to these web postings have upon these individuals' identities. We focus on the consumption of Internet dating services because, within this context, the potential exists for both online and offline interaction with and feedback from others.

Theoretical Framework & A Priori Themes

According to Markus and Nurius's concept of possible selves (1986), an individual's identity is composed of many different self-conceptions, or ideas about the person he or she thinks that he or she is. Self-conceptions can be divided into now selves, which "describe the self as it presently is perceived by the individual," and possible selves, which are "images of the self that have not yet been realized" (Markus and Nurius 1986, p. 957). At any given time, an individual's identity will be composed of some combination of both now selves and possible selves. However, this combination does not remain completely stable over time. Instead, identities are endlessly created and re-created as individuals engage in the continuous, dynamic process of cognitive negotiation and re-negotiation. During this process, the importance of feedback from others is emphasized (Wurf and Markus 1991) as individuals re-create their identities by either changing their possible selves into now selves or removing possible selves from their identities following validation or refutation from others, respectively.

Using the concept of possible selves as a theoretical framework, our study examines the process of identity exploration and re-creation in the context of Internet dating. Our research is guided by the following questions: What motivates individuals to begin the identity exploration and re-creation process by posting personal profiles on Internet dating service websites? To what extent do the profiles that individuals create on an Internet dating website represent current conceptualizations of themselves (i.e., now selves)? To what extent do the profiles that individuals create on an Internet dating website represent conceptualizations of themselves that they would like to possess in the future (i.e., possible selves)? What effect does response in the form of e-mail messages from other users have on an individual's identity? What effect does an offline encounter with other users have on an individual's identity?

Method

Due to the fact that one's identity is a complex phenomenon, an ethnographic interview technique (Holloway and Jefferson 2000; Schouten 1991) was used because it allowed the informants to freely explain their perceptions of themselves and their Internet dating experiences. Eleven adults (6 females, 5 males) who had been actively using at least one Internet dating service sometime in the past year were recruited for participation by networking through friends and colleagues. Face-to-face interviews lasting between 45-120 minutes were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We then read these transcripts several times from start to finish and coded key phrases. These phrases were constantly compared and contrasted across all interviews in an effort to create categories that represented important themes in the responses. In cases of disagreement, we negotiated until agreement was reached.

Principle Emergent Themes

Informants' responses seemed to support the a priori themes. It does appear to be the case that individuals can re-create their identities through the use of Internet dating services. Markus and Nurius's (1986) concept of possible selves did seem to be applicable to the Internet dating context. By posting profiles of themselves that contained aspects of their identities that they would like to possess but did not currently possess, informants were able to test the identity water, so to speak. Posting anonymous profiles allowed informants to safely explore aspects of their personalities that they may or may not have wanted to explore through overt behavior in the offline world.

The importance of feedback from others in the process of identity creation and re-creation was evident in informants' responses. The symbolic interactionist notion that one's identity is constructed not only of self-characterizations but also of reflexive-characterizations was manifest when informants indicated that they took other people's perspectives into account both when they were describing themselves through the use of now selves and also when they were attempting to appeal to other users through the use of possible selves in their profiles. The effect of online and offline validation or refutation of the identities presented in these profiles, in turn, seemed to have an impact on informants' beliefs about themselves and their behavior in both online and offline environments. Thus, our data support Wurf and Markus's (1991) contention that validation of possible selves is a key aspect of the identity re-creation process.

Future Research

Several issues remain unexplored by our research. Although our interview questions referred to other points in time, it is unclear from our data how long the identity re-creation process takes, how enduring the changes in one's perception of oneself are, and how often the identity re-creation process can occur via consumption of Internet dating services. Addressing these issues in a longitudinal study could prove to be a fruitful area of future research.

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