Construction of Values in Online and Offline Dating Discourses: Comparing Presentational and Articulated Rhetorics of Relationship Seeking*

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This manuscript compares presentational rhetorics in online personal advertisements to articulated rhetorics generated through interviewing sessions to understand rhetorics of online dating. Online self-presentation literature is reviewed and an argument for a rhetorical-epistemological approach to studies of online dating is presented. 30 online daters from a metropolitan region of the Midwestern United States (mostly white, aged 25–35, gender diverse) provided a copy of their online personal advertisement and participated in an interview. Personal advertisements and interview transcripts were analyzed separately using values coding to consider rhetorical dimensions. Results indicate ethos is a primary concern of online daters and limits what can be stated in online profiles. Discussion explores implications of articulated and presentational rhetorics as well as potential future studies.

Key words: Online dating, articulated rhetorics, presentational rhetorics, interpersonal communication, qualitative research, values coding, online self-presentation

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Introduction

The commercial trajectory of online dating suggests it will continue to be a popular way of seeking romantic partners. A report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project showed that in 2004 dating websites netted $470 million in consumer spending (up from $40 million in 2001), meaning that they generated more revenue than any other pay-based online content category that year (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). The same report estimated that 16 million individuals had gone to websites to meet people online. Three years later, Jupiter Research reported revenues for online dating sites near $900 million (Business Wire, 2008), and some of the most popular dating sites recently reported 20-22% increases in membership (Carpenter, 2008). Indeed, it would appear that online dating continues to grow as a solid and stable entry in the continually expanding ways people attempt to tap into the “utopian potential the internet holds for our relationships” (Baym, 2010, p. 99).

Studies of online dating suggest a great deal of thought and consideration go into identity-construction processes. Online daters are faced with a continuous cycle of self-disclosure that is shaped by how they believe others may see them. As Heino, Ellison, and Gibbs (2010) assert, in many ways online dating turns relationship-building processes into a metaphorical marketplace where interested individuals shop each others’ profiles in hope of finding romantic love. This marketplace metaphor helps to explain why so much of the existing research about online dating focuses on topics such as uncertainty.
reduction (e.g., Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011) or detecting honesty in online dating (e.g., Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). Online dating participants are aware that while shopping, they may be dealing with a product that is being sold; and that what they are buying relationally may be different from what it seems.

While existing research has built from traditional print personal advertisement studies (e.g., Merskin & Huberlie, 1996) to largely focus on how individuals may build confidence in reading and responding to online personal advertisements, this study takes a step toward understanding how individuals construct the personal ads they place on online dating websites. Specifically, this study uses analysis of 30 online personal advertisements and qualitative interviews with the individuals who placed the ads to interrogate rhetorical dimensions of values, beliefs, and attitudes as they are constructed in an online dating environment. Informed by past research regarding online self-presentation (e.g., Toma & Hancock, 2010) as well as Duck’s (2011) notions regarding rhetorical dimensions of relationships, the ultimate goal of this work is to explicate understandings of how online personal advertisements constitute one dimension in a rhetoric of online dating relationships. To begin, previous research examining online self-presentation is reviewed.

Online Self-Presentation

Drawing upon the work of Baumeister (1982), Goffman (1959), and Leary (1996), Toma and Hancock (2010) define self-presentation as the “packaging and editing of the self during social interactions to create a desired impression in the audience” (p. 336). Numerous studies of demonstrate that computer-mediated communication facilitates selective self-presentation in many ways (Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Joinson, 2001; Walther, Van Der Heide, Tong, Carr, & Atkin, 2010). Online self-presentation often involves a tension between what social media users hope to convey (usually socially desirable aspects of the self) and what they can convey (limited by truth and social acceptance) within a situation and context (Toma & Hancock, 2010). The behaviors associated with positive self-presentation are not, as one would expect, unique to online dating interactions. Research suggests that when encountering a potential dating partner for the first time, individuals will likely alter self-presentational behaviors to try to accommodate values or attributes they suspect are desired by their prospective mate (Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1998) and that individuals even engage in such self-enhancement behaviors with strangers (Schlenker & Wowra, 2003).

Online self-presentation involves both motivation and construction, meaning that individuals must be motivated to try and control how others see them in consideration of all circumstances; thus, they engage a construction process to go about doing that identity work (Toma & Hancock, 2010). In online personal advertisements, this construction is somewhat static and is typically built through words and photographs (unlike face-to-face self-presentation, which is usually embodied) (Toma & Hancock, 2010). Individuals creating online profiles are afforded asynchronicity and editability in the process (Walther, 1996, 2007), allowing them a comfortable space for constructing rhetorical possibility (especially compared to face-to-face interaction). Online daters report that they often consider how others might scrutinize the cues they present (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). The same research also demonstrates that those engaging online dating tend to make overattributions based on minimal cues provided by other online daters while also scrutinizing even the most minuscule of details in order to make an assessment about viability (Ellison et al., 2006).

Of course, deception is also a possibility in online personal advertisements (Hancock & Toma, 2009). Research suggests that deception is common (Toma & Hancock, 2010) even if it is often subtle in nature (Ellison, et al., 2006). Toma and Hancock (2010) found that not only was compensation frequently used in the construction of online personal advertisements, but so was deceptive self-enhancement.
(frequently via online photos) and the showcasing of desired attributes one possesses. Research about personal advertisements has also revealed that those crafting ads face dilemmas about whether to engage an honest self-presentation (that will likely produce fewer dates) or to self-aggrandize and produce a deceptive self-presentation that may attract more potential mates (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Whitty, 2008). Still, given that some research indicates misrepresentation is less likely when individuals have the potential of meeting someone face-to-face at a later date (Leary, 1996; Toma et al., 2008), online daters may be mindful of misrepresentations when constructing their profiles.

Research about potential deceptions in online personal advertisements (e.g., Caspie & Gorsky, 2006; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010), as well as other work exploring online self-presentation (e.g., Walther, 2007) or online dating (e.g., Baker, 2005) is compelling and important. Up until now, however, such research has not considered rhetorical dimensions of what has been constructed in personal advertisements. For example, Hancock and Toma (2009) found that “the profile photograph is now a central component of online self-presentation, and one that is critical for relational success” (p. 368) – but what are the rhetorical facets of that photo? How, specifically, might it work as a suasive force? What might the rhetorical vision be of the person who chose to include it in her or his advertisement? No doubt, constructing a personal ad requires people to turn to what Aristotle coined “available means of persuasion” (p. 24). This study takes up Duck’s (1998) challenge to examine such rhetorical dimensions of relational discourses and consider how these rhetorics carry “social and relational consequences” yet are also “constrained by social and relational forces” (p. 47). A rhetorical approach to relationships considers that “words are not idly chosen but express personality, attitudes, and a person’s total view of the nature of the world and their self-identity within culture” (Duck, 1998, p. 29). This epistemology offers the potential to explicate new understandings of online dating.

Rhetoric and Relationships

Given the rhetorical nature of online dating, this study is grounded in the ongoing scholarly work exploring rhetorics of relationships (e.g., Duck, 2011; Manning, 2009). Epistemologically, studies of online dating have focused almost solely on what is there (or what is perceived to be there) and not about how people create meaning about what is there (or what they want to be there). Beyond the sense that relationships are rhetorical in their public presentations, they are also rhetorical in the sense that publics create social exigencies about what is ideal for them (Manning, 2009). These exigencies include public articulations regarding how specific relationships should operate, values dimensions of particular relationship types, and larger questions about what actually constitutes a relationship. In short, rhetorics are conduits for meaning-making about relationships in a given culture.

Presentational and Articulated Rhetorics

Although romantic decision-making does not necessarily lend itself to rational understandings, it does lend itself (or, perhaps, becomes entangled in) individuals’ and cultures’ attempts to rationalize the process (Duck, 2011). A variety of studies have examined how people often make emotional decisions and then, maybe even unconsciously, rationalize logical reasons for those decisions (e.g., Zey, 1992). Rather than continuing on this largely psychology-oriented path, this research takes up recent critiques of relational communication studies that suggest they rely too much on sociopsychological constructs and not enough on negotiated meaning (see Baxter, 2011; Foster, 2008; Manning & Kunkel, in press). As such, Kenneth Burke’s observation that “wherever there is ‘meaning’ there is ‘persuasion’” (1969, p. 172) lends itself well to expanding relationships studies. Once an individual buys into and articulates meaning, it asserts a particular way of seeing or envisioning a reality. This study, then, approaches personal ads as socially constructed rhetorical visions.
Rhetorical vision is defined as “a depiction of values, preferences, or opinions, whether explicit or implicit” (Duck, 2011, p. 18). In this study, I argue personal ads serve as a form of explicit rhetoric openly trying to persuade another to take interest; and, in the case of my interviews with those who placed the advertisements, the talk to me as an interviewer serves as a form of implicit rhetoric where “a person’s values, judgments, preferences, and opinions are bound up in the topics chosen or avoided in everyday conversation” (Duck, 2011, p. 18). That is, there are two different rhetorics being observed and analyzed in this study: what I call presentational rhetorics, where individuals engage a heightened awareness of suasive forces as they attempt to attract another in relational pursuit; and articulated rhetorics, where individuals are less focused on language’s suasive forces and the exigencies of the social situation as they present themselves to me as an interviewer. While I separate these rhetorics here, they both play into a communicative relationality (Condit, 2006) where deeper understanding is generated in context of and as constituted through each other. Alone they are informative; by placing the two side by side and considering their interplay, each can be better understood.

Rhetorics of relationships in online personal advertisements
Online dating profiles often serve two purposes: attracting and impressing potential mates and allowing for others to scrutinize the potential that someone might be a good match (Ellison et al., 2006). Clearly, these purposes involve relational rhetorics constructed through numerous verbal and visual cues with multiple layers of meaning. As Gibbs et al. (2011) observe, “The car one drives provides cues about one’s socioeconomic status; attendance at a professional conference signals professional interest” (p. 71). Thus, for any given symbol offered through online personal advertisements, multiple meanings can be generated, especially because communication does not have to be intentional to be intentionally strategic (Kellerman, 1992). Consequently, the choices made in presentational rhetorics of personal advertisements are multilayered, complex, and significant to the online dating process.

Rhetorical constructions of relational selves can happen in many ways in an online environment. In examining homepages, Wynn and Katz (1998) discovered that homepages often constructed a linkage to offline social groups through self-description, generating an applied audience, and providing links that demonstrated other people, groups, or interests. Individuals often include personal tastes to draw links between similarities and differences to others (Liu, 2007). These rhetorical choices, and others, raise the stakes in regards to online daters’ desire to “present themselves as unique individuals within the constraints of a technical system that encourage[s] homogeneity, negotiating a desire to stand out and the need to blend in” (Ellison et al., 2006, p. 433). Ultimately, these elements of presentational rhetoric are also likely shaped by what others on the website are doing with their advertisements, allowing a sense of one’s culture along with the sense of one’s self (Postmes & Baym, 2005).

Rhetoric and self-presentation
In discussing online dating, Toma and Hancock (2010) point out that “self-presentation is a complex and communicative process that involves understanding one’s own strengths and weaknesses, being receptive to the values of the target audience, and using the medium of communication to one’s advantage” (p. 336). This observation is of particular relevance to rhetorics of self-presentation that occur in online personal advertisements. Leary and Kowalski (1990) assert that image construction generally is reliant upon considering the values of the person or persons who may be the target of a self-presentation, and constructing a self-presentation involves strategizing and acting in order to achieve desired impressions. As these considerations illustrate—and those that become apparent in
examining the data collected for this study—those seeking dating relationships online face many exigencies. The methods for this study seek to explicate such exigencies.

Methods

Participants and Procedures
All participants in this study were members of a commercial dating website and maintained an active online dating profile. The site was selected based on popularity and its open-ended nature that allowed participants to put more of their own ideas into the advertisements in narrative form (as opposed to some sites that guide participants with numerous questions). Everyone involved was 25-35 years old ($M = 28.2$ years) and from the same United States Midwestern metropolitan region of approximately 2.2 million people. Participants for the study were initially located by examining a list of individuals who had been involved with a past study (not related to this topic) and who indicated interest in being involved with future research studies. From there, participants were located through snowball sampling with an eye toward generating as diverse a sample as possible. Of the 30 individuals involved in the study, 15 were men and 15 were women, with ten of the men identifying as “men seeking women” and five as “men seeking men;” and ten of the women identifying as “women seeking men” and five identifying as “women seeking women.” Despite my best efforts, the sample was mostly White except two of the participants (woman seeking man, woman seeking woman) who identified as Black and three of the participants (woman seeking man, woman seeking woman, and man seeking man) who identified as Asian.

Participants were asked to share a web link to their online personal advertisement and to bring a copy of this advertisement to an interview session. In advance of interview sessions, I familiarized myself with the personal advertisements to gain a sense of what they contained. Once meeting with the participants (usually in a public location over coffee or tea), I covered six items. The first and second asked what they were looking for and had to offer in terms of a dating relationship (“What are you looking for in a dating relationship?”; “What do you feel you have to offer in a dating relationship?”); and the third and fourth asked if there was anything else they wanted to tell me about themselves or about their desired dating relationships with follow-ups only asked for clarification. While participants were answering these questions, I took notes about anything they talked about that did not appear in their personal ads. For the fifth item, I presented participants with a copy of their individual personal advertisements and asked them to tell me about the choices they made in writing their advertisements and for the pictures included (“I have a copy of your personal ad here. Do you mind taking me through it and telling me about each element?”). Finally, I went to the list of things mentioned earlier in interviews that were not mentioned in the ads and asked about why they were not included in the online personal advertisement (“Okay, I made a list of the things you told me earlier in the interview about what you had to offer or what you wanted in a dating relationship but that you didn’t include in your personal ad. I want to go through them one by one and hear about your choice to not include them in your online ad.”).

The interview was structured so as that the first four questions would generate an articulated rhetoric that spoke to how individuals were presenting their relational selves to a segment of the social order (given that I identified myself as a social scientist and that the individuals were not pursuing a romantic relationship with me). The fifth question served as a validity check. The sixth question allowed for me to further consider the relationally discursive component of this study. That is, given that this research seeks to understand rhetorical dimensions of online dating profiles, comparing the presentational rhetorics in the actual personal ads (separate from the interview sessions) with the
articulated rhetorics from the interview sessions (questions 1-4) and then examining participants’ rhetorical articulations of differences between online and offline discourses (question 6) allowed for a fuller rhetorical understanding of the relationality of both rhetorics.

Interview sessions were generally short, lasting between 22 and 41 minutes ($M = 31$ minutes). This brevity made sense given the simple nature of the questions; and it was particularly appropriate given the shorter length of most of the personal ads. After transcribing, a total of 236 double-spaced pages of data were available for analysis as well as 30 personal advertisements that contained both words (usually about 400 words per participant, not including standard demographic categories) and images (1-5 photos per ad). All participants indicated that they were searching for a long-term relationship.

**Data Analysis**

In line with the goals of this study, an analytical method was sought that allowed for a deep consideration of the means being used to form presentational and articulated rhetorics of dating. To that end, values coding (Saldaña, 2009) was employed. Saldaña (2009) developed values coding from the work of LeCompte and Preissle (1993) as a way of interpretively analyzing data in consideration of values, attitudes, and beliefs. This articulation of values, attitudes, and beliefs lines up well with the traditional rhetorical proofs of ethos, pathos, and logos, respectively. Values express “the importance we attribute to oneself, another person, thing or idea” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 89); attitudes are ways “we think and feel about oneself, another person, thing, or idea” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 89); and beliefs, simply put, are things held as factual or truthful (Saldaña, 2009). Once salient attitudes, values, and beliefs are assessed, the researcher then examines how they collectively allow a system of meaning.

To this end, values coding was applied separately to the personal advertisements and to the interview data. Each sentence was considered in terms of the beliefs, values, and attitudes it contained. Typically sentences would require being coded with multiple beliefs, values, and attitudes; and many statements were coded as both an attitude and a value or as an attitude and a belief (e.g., “I love a family man” contains a positive attitude toward a family man and confirms a value for family). Categories were interpretively derived from coding results. Analytic memos (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) were maintained during the coding process and in creating categories to consider the properties, dimensions, and nuances of each category as well as to consider the relationships between different categories and across different participant profiles. As Saldaña (2009) notes, while values coding can be used for just about any qualitative study, it is particularly useful for studies that “explore cultural values and intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (p. 90). Given this study’s focus on intrapersonal notions of self as they apply to interpersonal relationships and presentation of those relationships to others, the fit seemed strong. Internal and external member checks (presenting data findings to study participants and individuals who match the demographics of the study, respectively; Manning & Kunkel, in press) indicated values coding produced valid categories.

**Results**

In the interest of relevance, only dominant themes or types are presented here to consider differences between the presentational rhetorics found in online advertisements and the articulated rhetorics found during the interviewing process. Dominant themes or types are those that would typically be expected in a personal advertisement, and that—in context of the data—would be notable not to find within a given case (Manning & Kunkel, in press). The application of values coding revealed that for both the presentational (online) and articulated (interview) rhetorics values seemed to be at the center of the discourses, especially as sentences or statements that were coded for attitudes or beliefs were often
justified or supported by participants with a statement that was values-laden (discursively undergirding attitudes and beliefs with values). Moreover, and as the data illustrate, values, beliefs, and attitudes were often used to establish ethos. The results are explained in detail, beginning with presentational values.

**Presentational Values**

**No drama**
Online advertisements clearly employed presentational rhetorics to construct a sense that those seeking dating partners valued drama-free relationships and lifestyles. In turn, ethos is established in that the person placing the advertisement is not the type of person to seek such a relationship (and is not likely to be drama-oriented him or herself, either). All of the categories except for men seeking women were quite explicit about this value, with statements such as “I don’t want drama in my life,” “I’ve had enough of the drama so please don’t bring it,” or “I don’t need attitude in my life.” Men seeking women also mentioned this quality in more subtle ways (“don’t like to get in the middle of things,” “gets along with others and don’t cause problems”), but they also attributed this attribute to a particular kind of woman (“I don’t want one of those women who collects men so they can fight over her” or “Women who always have to stir things up aren’t my type”). When those creating the advertisements walked me through sections that were coded as drama-oriented, they often explained they were trying to convey that they themselves were not the dramatic type.

**Harmony**
As some of the data included in the previous category illustrate, another dominant value presented in ads is harmony. As one woman seeking a woman shared in her ad, “I don’t want fighting. I want to spend my time sharing life with the one I’m with.” Many ads talked about desires for partners who exhibited “good communication” so that they could “be on the same page” or who knew that “opening up and accepting is important.” As the beliefs section of this study indicates, participants generally believe they are gregarious and assert that they want someone else who will, as one participant put it, “mesh well with.”

**Seriousness**
One assertion extracted from the personal advertisements is that some people who are engaging online dating are not serious, but that the individuals represented in the ads are (as is indicated in the beliefs section of this study) and that they value that in a dating relationship as well. For instance, one man seeking a woman wrote in his ad that, “I really want to make this happen. Write me if your [sic] serious to[sic].” For both men seeking women and men seeking men, this was sometimes articulated as a new focus, as one participant constructed with, “I’ve had my fun, but now I want to settle down and really live my life.” Many women seeking men were concerned with “players,” illustrated with statements such as “I’ve dated guys who played with my heart. Now I need something more.” One woman seeking a woman took it to a level of relational coconstruction, simply stating, “Love comes when people can open up and be serious about life.” These articulations of maturity clearly seek to establish ethos.

**Life experience**
Life experience was also rhetorically constructed as a value in personal advertisements. In some ads, this life experience was expressed as something the individual gained through some kind of life event ("I am happy to say I learned a lot from my first marriage and am going to get it right this time"); but
in most were listed in a vague manner (“I’ve been through a lot”). Life experience was also presented through events such as traveling (“I have been on five continents and have experienced what the world has to offer”), education (“Now that I am through with college I am ready for a serious relationship”), and even family (“[My family and I] have stuck together through thick and thin”).

Articulated Values

Values emerging from interviews were often derived from direct articulations of attitudes (see the articulated attitudes section) as well as articulated beliefs. Additionally, and as one might expect, many individuals articulated value by pointing out their own moral high ground in dating relationships and other aspects of their lives, such as holding a job.

Hard work

Participants were much more active in constructing values of hard work in their articulated interview rhetorics. This value was often associated with desiring a partner who is gainfully employed and financially stable (see articulated attitudes) or, in the case of men seeking women, with being that partner. Rhetorics of hard work were not quite as salient in discourses of men seeking men and women seeking women, but statements such as “It’d be nice if he made money, too” or “I want her to have a career she feels good about and for her to like what she does” add to this sense of work being valued.

Humor

This articulated value matched up closely to the presentational value found in online personals. Comments such as “If you’ve had a hard day, someone who can make you laugh is good to have around” or “A guy who’s funny is usually good with kids, too” support this value and help to illustrate a less-dominate belief that was still articulated in some interviews, that a person’s humor indicates other positive characteristics.

Spontaneity

Unlike the other three identity categories in the study, women seeking men did not present rhetorics valuing spontaneity in their online personal advertisements. During interviews, however, women seeking men included it, too, meaning all four identity categories articulated the value. One woman seeking a woman said, “I stay active, so it’d be nice if she liked that, too. Like, it’d be good if she came home one day, and was excited, and said, ‘Let’s go to the park and play some frisbee.’” More often, though, this spontaneity was not so specific in terms of activity (or even referring to an activity) and was more ambiguous in nature with statements like, “I want surprises” or “Things shouldn’t always be the same.”

Finding “the one.”

This value was sometimes presented directly (“I do believe that everyone is meant for someone, and I’m hoping I find my someone here”), but often it was presented in an apologetic (“It may be cliché, but I really am looking for the one”) or humorous (“Prince Charming, Mr. Right, blah blah blah, just give me that guy”) way. One woman seeking a man said, “It’s all about finding the right guy. You know, hard worker, family oriented, serious, free of crap from other parts of his life.” A man seeking a man offered, “I think I’ll know it’s right when we, we have things to talk about and it all feels like we were supposed to be together. And, uh, we’re, we’re both committed and there’s no drama and, and, it’s uh, it feels right.” As can be seen from these exemplars, notions of “the one” often intersect with other
beliefs, values, and attitudes. This category was also one of the few that a sense of establishing ethos did not dominate, although some pointed out that they had the ability to know when someone was right.

Physical appearance
Taking up little time during interview sessions, physical appearance was still a dominant value by virtue of attractiveness being mentioned by every interviewee as a desired attribute of a potential partner. This positive disposition toward good looks is further explained in the articulated attitudes portion of this article. Participants’ value of physical appearance, to a much lesser degree, was also supported by occasional statements such as “I’m pretty good looking” or “I take care of myself” when participants were articulating what they have to offer to a dating partner. Some participants couched physical appearance by explaining that an individual’s health is important, although these explanations were few.

Presentational Beliefs: “I am . . .”
Every personal advertisement included in this study contained an “I am . . .” statement, where participants would offer up in belief form what they perceived as the building blocks of who they are. While these statements were occasionally offered in predicate nominative form, especially with men (e.g., “I am a medical technician”), they were mostly expressed as predicate adjectives that dominantly pertained to three areas: gregariousness, seriousness, and intelligence. All were aimed at establishing ethos.

“I am gregarious.”
Every advertisement but one examined in this study put forth the idea that the person was “happy,” “laid back,” “drama free,” or otherwise gregarious. Heterosexual women often used language typically considered feminine when doing so (“I’ve got a smile on my face and a full heart. I love sharing it with the world!” or “I’m a social butterfly.”), but advertisements in the other three categories were often masculine (“I’m chill,” “I’m the kind of guy who likes to stop and get a beer with friends after work,” or “I’m cool about things”) or gender-neutral (“I’m very social” or “I’m someone who enjoys interacting with people”). This notion of gregariousness is often presented in vague terms without specifics.

“I am serious.”
Some of the data in the “no drama” presentational value section of this study indicated that participants were not into people who were playing games instead of genuinely seeking a relational partner. More often, though, seriousness played out as a belief statement near the beginning (“I have recently started dating again and am serious about finding a good guy”) or end (“so if you’re serious, write me and we’ll see where this goes”) of a personal advertisement.

“I am intelligent.”
In most cases this salient belief was succinctly stated (“I am a smart woman”) or included with other ideas (“I am a laid-back intelligent guy looking for a woman who is the same”), but sometimes it was presented in a way that clarified what kind of intelligence the person had, particularly if the person did not believe him or herself to be academically smart. As one woman stated in her advertisement, “I may not be book smart, but I’m aware of the world.” One man shared, “I’ve been through a lot in life. That’s what makes me who I am, that’s what lets me be confident that I know what I want in life.”
Articulated Beliefs

I have a job
The career “I am” element that only tended to dominate men seeking women’s advertisements was pervasive across all gender and sexual orientation categories in participants’ articulated rhetorics. Often it was offered in a matter-of-fact way (“Oh, I’m a teacher.”) or as a sidebar (“Like the people I work with—I manage a Hardee’s—they do.”). Whereas men seeking men mentioned working as a virtue in some of their personal ads, all five of the men mentioned that they were employed without championing having a job as virtuous (“Yeah, uh, I work in a bank.” or “I do like my job, so I wouldn’t want to leave here.”).

I am a family member
Participants also identified in family member roles much more in their articulated rhetorics. Occasionally it was presented as mere factual information to illustrate a person’s background (“I’ve got four brothers and sisters” or “I was an only child”), but it was also used to illustrate values (“I’m from a close family”). Participants also articulated this theme in the future tense, saying things such as, “Oh, I’ll have kids” or “I’m going to be a good dad.” It is important to note that while wanting kids was not dominant in the presentational rhetorics, it is likely because the online dating website asked individuals whether or not they have or want to have children as a general profile question.

I have a lot to offer
The ads generally implied a sense that an individual has much to offer, and in a few cases it was explicitly stated; but in the articulated interviews, this belief was universally and directly asserted by all participants. Sometimes it happened in a searching manner (“And, uh, yeah, I have a lot to give. There’s, there’s a lot to me.”) as interviewees were thinking about what else they could say about what they have to offer in a dating relationship; but it was also used as an introductory statement before going into more detailed explanations of who they are (see the articulated beliefs section for more detail).

Soul mates exist
The articulated value of finding the one is undergirded by a belief that soul mates exist. Two interview participants (both men seeking women) mentioned the term “soul mate” explicitly, but an idea of a special person meant for the participants was established almost universally in interviews. As one woman seeking a man shared, “There is someone out there, you know. That, uh, that was meant, that I was meant to be with.” Women seeking women and men seeking women tended to make similar statements.

Presentational Attitude

Positivity toward nice people
This attitude refers to the kind of dating partner the author of the personal ad seeks. Words for nice include “sweet,” “friendly,” “cool,” or “warm” and sometimes is presented in terms of what participants liked about actions of a potential partner: “I like guys who smile,” “I want a man who treats people with respect,” or “I like a girl whose [sic] friendly.”

Investigating specific categories of ads
Given that only one dominant presentational attitude is listed, it is important to note that only one dominant attitude emerged across all four identity categories. That is, if the study were to analyze each gender/sexual orientation category separately, then dominant presentational attitudes indicating positivity
toward travel and masculinity would be listed for men seeking men; travel and sports for men seeking women; and outdoors and cuddling for women seeking women. Women seeking men only expressed one dominant presentational attitude, positivity toward nice people, matching the overall analysis.

**Articulated Attitudes**

While this section is filled with more emerging types than any other analysis category, it is important to note that many more were listed overall. Still, without exception the following positive attitudes toward people who had the following qualities were mentioned by every participant interviewed (and often without much elaboration): laid back (“easy to get along with,” “doesn’t make everything a big thing”), good looking (“cute,” “nice looking”), financially stable (“has a good job,” “who’s self-supporting”), sweet (“treats me nice,” “does nice things for me”), funny (“good sense of humor,” “makes me laugh”), perceptive (“gets me,” “knows what’s going on”). Most participants also expressed an affinity for cuddling (“snuggles up,” “keep me warm at night,” or direct statements like “I love cuddling”). Few people articulated any apologies for their attitudes, although some people did so when saying something that might be considered rude (“I’m sorry, but I don’t like fat people.”)

**Explaining Rhetorical Differences**

As the results indicate, different values, beliefs, and attitudes were prevalent in the online dating profiles than what was articulated in the interview process. Answers to the final interview question, that asked why elements mentioned in the interview conversation were not mentioned in the online advertisements, revealed much about the rhetorical strategies used in constructing the online profiles. First, participants reported that they did not want to appear shallow. As one man seeking a man shared, “I don’t want someone to read my ad and think I’m only about finding a guy who’s good looking. I mean, I want so much more than that. I’m not that shallow.” A woman seeking a man noted, “I don’t think it’s weird to want to date someone with a job. [Laughs.] But if, if you write it then it almost seems like you’re making a big deal of it, and that you’re being insensitive or shallow.” Many other participants offered similar statements, usually about looks, money, or possessions.

Second, participants reported being embarrassed about some elements. One woman seeking a man said, “Yeah, I’d pretty much sound like a slut if I said I wanted a man who was ripped. But I do think that’s hot.” A man seeking a woman shared, “You don’t put up front that you haven’t even finished college and you’re thirty years old. That stuff makes you look lame.” Other sources of embarrassment included body features, gained weight (often enacted through photographs), and being divorced. Finally, participants reported withholding information because they did not want to look as if they did not know how to engage a dating relationship. As one woman seeking a woman shared, “You don’t do that. Everyone knows you don’t do that. I’d look like an idiot if I did.” A woman seeking a man offered, “It’s kind of like, you know he knows deep down that you want a kid or something. But to, to just come out and say it makes it so uncomfortable. So if I put that in an ad, then I’m giving too much too soon. And that shows I don’t know how to engage a dating relationship. As one woman seeking a woman shared, “You don’t do that. Everyone knows you don’t do that. I’d look like an idiot if I did.” A woman seeking a man offered, “It’s kind of like, you know he knows deep down that you want a kid or something. But to, to just come out and say it makes it so uncomfortable. So if I put that in an ad, then I’m giving too much too soon. And that shows I don’t know what I’m doing.” A man seeking a woman said, “Part of it, it’s being smooth. Women know men like boobs. But they also know if a guy knows enough to not say that, then there’s something to him. So you don’t, I mean come on. You don’t put that in a personal ad.” Many of the elements excluded for reasons of being sensible about what you can or cannot say were desires for good sexual relations, discussing finances or material possessions, and mentioning recent life changes such as divorce, job loss/career change, or a death in the family. Once again, the reasons offered by participants for excluding information in online dating profiles is related to ethos.
Discussion

This manuscript explores rhetorics of online dating by examining values, beliefs, and attitudes embedded in online dating profiles and considering their relationality to articulated off-line discourses. In addition to answering a call for the “warmth of an interpretivist lens” (Manning, 2007, p. 430) in an area of study that has largely been enacted in postpositivist or realist qualitative paradigms, this research also unpacks actual constructions of personal advertisements (as opposed to examining the effects or impacts of such constructions). As the study reveals, both online and offline rhetorics were values-dominant discourses, with beliefs and attitudes helping to construct those values. Past research indicates both thought and strategy play into constructions of online dating profiles (e.g., Toma & Hancock, 2010), and that is evident in this study through the presentational rhetoric where online daters suavely draw upon rhetorical vision to create an advertisement that highlights their ideal features and that will draw an ideal dating partner. As exemplars from the online profiles illustrates, many times ambiguous words and phrases are used, suggesting that intentional ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) may be one rhetorical strategy in creating ads. Participants were also apt to demonstrate that they were gregarious, serious, and intelligent; and that they valued relational harmony, ideally with someone who is kind. Beyond describing qualities, these assertions also establish ethos.

Articulated rhetorics (in the form of interview data) reveal a different rhetorical understanding. When the audience turns from an ideal dating partner to the interviewer for the study, attitudes about what is desired in a relationship become more specific: participants want a partner who is laid back, good looking, financially stable, sweet, funny, perceptive, active, and who likes to cuddle. In sharing this list during external member checks, no one flinched at it, and two individuals asked me if this information was even newsworthy. Indeed, confirmation of many of these explicitly listed attitudes can also be found in textbooks that cover romantic relationships (e.g., Goodwin, 1999); but the significance of these results comes not through the findings themselves, but through their relationality to the online presentational attitudes: These specifics seem to be somewhat forbidden in rhetorical visions of online dating presentations. To list these qualities in an online profile would defy the rules of online dating rhetorics and indicate that, as one participant described it, “You don’t know how to play the game.” This idea also extends the present study into the larger world of rhetorical theory, showing that even in relational discourses different rhetorical exigencies called for different rhetorical visions.

Constructing an online personal advertisement also seemed to demand an indication that the individual placing it is good-natured, serious, and somewhat intelligent or wise, whereas face-to-face participants did not often feel the need to indicate their seriousness or a positive nature to me. Instead, rhetorical ethos was established in different ways during the face-to-face interviews, mostly via direct articulations that the participant had something to offer and specific lists of those somethings. The specifics were another element off limits for online dating profiles, as individuals reported not wanting to appear “desperate” or “full of” themselves. Other off-limits elements included elements in the advertisement suggesting that a person wanted to get too close too quickly, indicating a tension between closeness and distance. Because a proximal/distal tension became quite evident in the data, future studies of online personal advertisements might examine them in the context of relational-dialectical theory (Baxter, 2011), a theoretical perspective that considers interpenetrations of such competing discourses; and through a lens of communication privacy management (Petronio, 2002) given that particular qualities articulated in interviews were not co-owned in personal advertisements.

Rhetorical sensitivity also played into the values presented in online dating advertisements. Again, ethos seemed to drive presentational values because participants wanted to make it clear that they
were not individuals whose lives were filled with drama; and, further, that they valued individuals who were, like them, harmonious and serious about finding a long-term dating partner. During interviews, participants mostly pointed out that they did this for two reasons: 1) because it is what was required if they hoped to acquire a face-to-face meeting and 2) because they wanted to make sure they were finding someone with similar personalities to their own. The values established through the online dating profiles served to reach these goals. As such, existing work on self-monitoring and online dating (Hall et al., 2010) might be expanded to more fully consider impacts of self-monitoring practices and how it assists in moving toward those goals. This self-monitoring also involves a tension between what is and what is being presented, and past research (e.g., Heino et al., 2010) has indicated online daters adjust expectations (as well as ways of detecting deception) in the face of such potential for misrepresentation. Future rhetorical studies of online dating might unpack such rhetorics of misrepresentation.

This study is limited in that the online personal advertisements were only examined in one moment and do not take into account how the ads may change based on dating experiences. It would be enlightening to explore how rhetorical sensitivity comes into play with rhetorical vision in such cases. Instead of examining a static personal advertisement and its rhetorical qualities, it may be valuable to examine how rhetorics change as an individual becomes more experienced with online dating. This study is also limited in that it looks at all four identity categories (women seeking men, women seeking women, men seeking men, and men seeking women) together in order to consider dominant rhetorics. While this allows for inclusive results, it does not get into specific rhetorics that are involved with particular relationship types and may even result in some gendered and sexual identity-oriented results being masked via dominant heteronormative institutions (Foster, 2008; Manning, 2009). To this end, future studies ought to consider rhetorics of gendered online personal advertisements and, in consideration of heteronormative potentials, perhaps even how these rhetorics play out in relation to each other. This study is also one that clearly does not use content analysis or other methods that attempt to quantify elements of online dating profiles, instead focusing on results that demonstrate salient rhetorical elements of personal advertisements. These salient qualities, however, may lend themselves to postpositivist theorizing.

Although self-presentation and online dating have been successfully studied in a variety of contexts, this manuscript offers entry into a new epistemological realm and, consequently, allows another angle for understanding online dating. Qualitative research is ideal for examining new areas or breaking new ground (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), and this study certainly breaks ground by demonstrating how presentational online dating rhetorics relationally compare to articulated rhetorics presented in a social order. Such a comparison allows glimpses into overt ways personal advertisements are rhetorically constructed, and they invite further investigation into how online dating rhetorics (or rhetorics of relationships in general) may play out given different relational situations. Although dating and courtship has a long and varied history (see Halwani, 2010), the data presented here help to demonstrate Livingstone’s (2009) assertion that “the media do not simply add a new element to the story, they transform it” (p. 8). Online personal advertisements offer a unique avenue of relationship pursuit, and understanding rhetorics they contain allows for deeper understandings of contemporary relationship building.

References


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