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**Revealing the 'real' me, searching for the 'actual' you: Presentations of self on an internet dating site**

**Monica T Whitty**

This paper considers the presentation of self on an internet dating site. Thirty men and thirty women were interviewed about their online dating experiences. They were asked about how they constructed their profiles and how they viewed other individuals' profiles. What types of presentations of self led to more successful offline romantic relationships were also investigated. Additionally, gender differences were examined. In line with previous research on presentation of self online, individuals were quite strategic in their online presentations. However, important differences between initiating a relationship on an internet dating site and other spaces (online and offline) included the type of self disclosed as well as the depth of breadth of information individuals self-disclosed about themselves before any one-on-one conversations took place.

**Keywords:** online dating, internet dating, internet relationships, possible selves, self presentation, identity

## 1. Introduction

Previous research has demonstrated that individuals can be quite strategic in their presentations of self in cyberspace (e.g., Walther, Slovacek, and Tidwell, 2001). Others have contended that the success of moving an online relationship offline may be dependent on the type of self that is presented in the cyber-world (e.g., Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green, and Gleason, 2002). This study was interested in how men and women presented themselves on an online dating site. It does so by considering theories on 'possible selves' and Goffman's 'performed self' theory.

### *1.1 Presentation of self online: possible selves*

It has for some time been recognized that online relationships do initiate online and can move successfully offline (Whitty and Carr, 2006; Whitty 2007). In more recent times researchers have been interested in how these relationships progress. Some, for example, have been interested in how individuals go about presenting themselves in cyberspace and what presentations of self lead to more successful relationship development.

Theorists have argued that individuals can be quite selective in their self-presentations online (e.g., Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna et al., 2002; Walther et al., 2001). For example, Walther and his colleagues (2001) believe that while of course individuals do tend to be strategic in their presentation of self offline, in CMC impression management is more controllable and fluid. They claim that "online communicators may exploit the capabilities of text-based, nonvisual interaction to form levels of affinity that would be unexpected in parallel offline interactions"

(Walther et al., 2001, p. 110). As a consequence in some situations CMC users idealize their virtual partners. John Bargh and his colleagues (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna, et al., 2002) have also focused on presentation of self online. In particular, they have focused on which presentation of self on the internet is more likely to lead to closer relationships. These researchers have drawn from Rogers' and Higgins' work on personality to come up with two aspects of self that they believe are important to consider when focusing on the development of relationships online -- 'true' selves and 'actual' selves.

As stated above, Bargh et al. (2002) and McKenna et al. (2002) have drawn from Rogers' and Higgins' work on personality to arrive at two aspects of the self that they believe are important to consider when focusing on the development of relationships online, these being the *'true self'* and *'actual self'*. These theorists drew from Carl Rogers' (1951) work to define the *true self* (or what they also refer to as the *'Real Me'*) as traits or characteristics that individuals possess and would like to but are not usually able to express. Rogers (1951) developed a humanistic personality theory where the 'self' is a central construct. Rogers' believed that the self developed through interactions with others, and that the point of therapy was to help people to discover their true selves. He understood the 'true self' to represent one's inner core – who they really are. Theoretically, an individual can do this if they experience 'unconditional positive regard'. In contrast, drawing from Higgins' (1987) research, these theorists defined the *actual self* as traits or characteristics that individuals possess and express to others in social settings. Higgins (1987) made a clear distinction between three aspects of the self: the *'actual self'*, *'ideal self'*, and *'ought to self'*. The *'actual self'* is the representation of how you or another actually believes you are; the *'ideal self'* is the representation of how you or another would like to see

yourself, including hopes and wishes for you; and the 'ought to self' represents the attributes that you believe you should possess. In line with Higgins, these researchers claim that as one develops trust and intimacy with one's partner they are more likely to disclose aspects of themselves that are not widely known to others. They have argued that individuals who are more likely to express their true self online will consider the relationships they form in this space to be more identity-important compared to those individuals who are more likely to express their true selves in non-internet relationships.

To test the above ideas, Bargh, McKenna and their colleagues conducted a number of experiments. Bargh et al. (2002) measured true and actual selves by asking participants to list a maximum of ten traits or characteristics that participants believed they actually possessed and expressed to others in social settings, as well as what characteristics individuals possessed and would like to but are typically unable to express to others. Their series of experiments revealed that the individuals' true selves were more accessible in memory after interacting with a stranger online compared to face-to-face. Moreover, they found that participants tended to like each other more when they meet first online compared to face-to-face.

Taking this work a step further, McKenna et al. (2002) were interested in whether individuals who are better able to disclose their 'true' selves online than offline were more equipped to form close relationships online and then take these relationships offline successfully. They randomly selected 20 Usenet newsgroups to include in their study. Over a 3-week period, questionnaires were emailed to every fifth poster in each of the newsgroups (excluding spam). Their first study found that when people convey their 'true' self online they develop strong internet relationships and bring these relationships into their 'real' lives. Two years after this initial study

354 of the 568 participants were emailed a follow-up survey (the remainder of the sample had email addresses that were no longer valid). In line with these researchers' prediction, these relationships remained relatively stable and durable over the 2-year period; however, one has to wonder how the 38% of the sample that were not followed up fared. In this same research, McKenna et al. (2002) found that participants who were more socially anxious and lonely were somewhat more likely to believe they could express their true selves with others online than they could with people they knew offline. McKenna et al. (2002) conclude from this research that:

rather than turning to the Internet as a way of hiding from real life and from forming real relationships, individuals use it as a means not only of maintaining ties with existing family and friends but also of forming close and meaningful new relationships in a relatively nonthreatening environment. The Internet may also be helpful for those who have difficulty forging relationships in face-to-face situations because of shyness, social anxiety, or a lack of social skills. (p. 30)

### *1.2 Presentation of self online: Goffman*

Goffman was very interested in the ways people present themselves in their everyday face-to-face encounters. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) argued for a dualistic image of the self. He described the self as both a performer and a character. According to Goffman (1959) the 'self-as-performer' is not merely a social product, but also has a basic motivational core. In contrast, the 'self-as-character' represents an individuals' unique humanity. It is this

part of the self which is a social product; that is, performed outwardly in social life.

The 'self-as-character' is one's inner self.

Goffman believed that individuals need to present themselves as an acceptable person to others. He stated that "the impressions that the others give tend to be treated as claims and promises they have implicitly made, and claims and promises tend to have a moral character" (Goffman, 1959/1997, p.21). He argued that individuals can be strategic in their impression formation. In particular Goffman was interested in distinguishing between expressions 'given' (e.g., spoken communication) and expressions 'given off' (e.g., nonverbal cues) in a face-to-face interaction.

Researchers have applied Goffman's theory to online presentations of self. Miller (1995) claims that although depth and richness of self presentation might not seem immediately apparent online that nonetheless "the problem of establishing and maintaining an acceptable self remains, and there is a range of expressive resources available for this end". Miller and Arnold (2001) applied Goffman's theory to explain how woman academics construct their own webpages. Drawing from his theory they suggest that women academics struggled with establishing a credible presence on the websites.

### *1.3 Offline presentations and relationship development*

Of course long before the internet ever existed psychologists were interested in how romantic relationships initiated offline and what types of presentation of self typically leads to budding relationships. One of the most popular theories to explain relationship development is '*Social Penetration Theory*' (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Social Penetration Theory is an incremental theory which argues that relationships

move to greater levels of intimacy over time. According to this theory, how greater intimacy is achieved is typically through depth and breadth of self-disclosure. Breadth of self-disclosure refers to discussing a range of topics, such as information about one's family, career, and so forth. Depth refers to the more central core of one's personality; that is, the more unique aspects of one's self. The timing of how much one self-discloses is crucial to determining whether a relationship will continue to proceed. Rushing self-disclosure in the early stages of a relationship can seem unnatural and desperate and can quite lead to an abrupt end.

#### *1.4 Study purpose*

This present study was interested in how individuals present themselves in cyberspace. Given that cyberspace is not one generic space (Whitty and Carr, 2006) it is important to investigate how individuals present themselves in different spaces online. In particular, this study was interested in how individuals present themselves on an online dating site, as well as their judgments on how others present themselves on this site. Online dating sites have increased in popularity and will no doubt continue to do so (Brym and Lenton, 2001; Whitty and Carr, 2006; Whitty, 2007). However, there is a dearth of research available on how individuals use this space to initiate and develop relationships.

Online dating sites are set up very differently to other places online, such as newsgroups, chat rooms, and the like. On online dating sites individuals are required to construct a profile. On this profile they can upload photographs and videos of themselves and are given the opportunity to write a description of who they are. The way individuals contact each other on the site varies depending on the way the site is

set up. The online dating site which this study focused on is one of the largest Australian online dating sites. Individuals contact each other on this dating site by firstly sending someone a 'kiss'. The 'kiss' is a sentence sent through the site to an undisclosed email indicating that the individual is interested in the person they contacted. The contacted person can then respond to three options, including a) they are interested and are requesting that the other person spend money on sending an email through the site, or b) they are interested and they themselves will spend money on emailing the person through the site, or c) they were flattered but uninterested. Next, individuals pay for '*stamps*' which would enable them to send emails through the site. This is how the company makes their money. Individuals can write anything in these emails. It is within this email that individuals can disclose their personal email so that contact can be made off the dating site.

This present study examined the types of selves individuals are more likely to present on an online dating site, and how they view other people's presentation of self. Additionally, it considered what types of presentations of self will lead to the development of a successful romantic relationships offline. Moreover, because previous research on offline attraction has found that men and women are attracted to different qualities in the opposite sex, gender differences were also taken into account.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Participants*

Sixty online daters were interviewed for this study (30 men and 30 women). The ages ranged from 23 - 60 years, with an overall mean age of 43.40 years ( $SD = 8.70$ ). This is very close to the average mean age for the total number of individuals

who use the site ( $M = 45$  years). The mean age for men was 42.63 years ( $SD = 10.57$ ) and for women was 44.97 ( $SD = 6.27$ ) years. All participants resided in Australia. Forty-three percent of the sample stated that their relationship status was single, 46% were divorced or separated, 8% had a girlfriend or a boyfriend, and 3% were married or in a cohabiting relationship. All of the participants self-reported as being heterosexual. Individuals reported that they had been using the online dating site for an average of 27.42 months ( $SD = 16.36$ ). Interestingly, about a third (27%) of individuals stated that they were using online dating as the only method of finding a potential date.

In considering the highest level of education achieved by this sample, 34% had completed high school, 28% had a diploma, 28% had a degree and 10% had achieved postgraduate qualifications. The Australian 2001 census data revealed that 3% of Australians held postgraduate qualifications, 8% had a degree, and 22% had received a diploma (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Hence, this sample was slightly skewed towards a better educated group of individuals.

## *2.2 Procedure*

Participants were recruited from the largest Australian online dating site. For ethical reasons (to keep the online daters' identity confidential) the manager of the online dating company carried out the recruitment of participants. She randomly selected 300 participants from the database inviting them to participate in a telephone interview about their online dating experiences. There was a response rate of 20%, which is reasonable given the personal nature of the study; the possibility that many of the participants might have discontinued using the site and hence had no interest in

participating in the study; and some of the emails might have no longer been operable. The individuals were emailed from the manager the details of the study, including the aims of the study, what was involved, and contact details of the principal investigator and the ethics board at the University of Western Sydney (where the research was conducted). They were told that if they were interested in being interviewed that they were to either phone or email the principal investigator to organize a time for a telephone interview.

A structured interview schedule, which mostly consisted of open-ended questions, was designed for this study. Participants were initially asked to report basic demographic details about themselves (e.g., age, relationships status, and socio-economic status). Next they were asked to explain their motivations for using the site. Participants were then asked to explain in detail how they went about using the site, including questions on how they constructed their own profiles, what sort of profiles they were attracted to, and how they went about contacting other individuals on the site. They were then asked to explain how the relationship progressed from online to offline, including questions on the pace of the relationship, how well others matched up to their profiles, as well as what kind of personal information they disclosed to their online potential date. They were asked to describe how their face-to-face dates were typically set up and why they were set up in this way. They were finally asked to compare online dating with other forms of dating.

The interviews were all conducted on the telephone. Male participants were interviewed by a male research assistant and female participants were interviewed by the author of this paper. They typically went for 40 - 50 minutes. All participants granted their permission to have the conversations audio taped. Participants were assured anonymity and were told that pseudonyms would be used to replace their real

names. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time up until the completion of the study and were given a number for a free telephone counseling service in case the study raised any issues for them that they wanted to speak to a counselor about.

### 2.3 Analysis

Grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) guided the procedures for this research. As Willig (2001) points out “grounded theory involves the progressive identification and integration of *categories of meaning* from data. Grounded theory is both the process of category identification and integration (as *method*) and its product (as *theory*)” (p.33). In this study themes emerged from the participants’ responses rather than a priori categories. Although strictly speaking grounded theory puts aside any previous theories in order to develop new theories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), this analysis did take into account previous work on presentation of self online and offline when considering the data. Previous researchers have also conducted qualitative research in this way (Willig, 2001). Once themes were decided upon each transcript was re-examined and coded for whether that theme was absent or present. To ensure inter-coder reliability two scorers separately coded the entire data set. In the very few cases where there was disagreement the researchers discussed their disagreements until consensus was reached. Moreover, given that this study was also interested in gender differences, logistic regressions were carried out using the Backward Wald procedure, which produces a Chi-square statistic. Because logistic regression cannot always obtain accurate calculations with zero cells, Fisher’s exact test was carried out when there was a zero cell.

### 3. Results and discussion

The following analysis details how the participants presented themselves on this internet dating site, what aspects they misrepresented, as well as what features they found attractive in others. Next, participants' views on how others presented themselves on this dating site is discussed as well as how well these profiles matched with the person when they met them face-to-face. Extracts from the interviews are presented here as illustration of the themes. Pseudonyms are used in place of the participants' real names.

#### *3.1 Constructing their own profile*

The online daters interviewed for this study stressed the importance of crafting an attractive profile. Table 1 presents a list of aspects that individuals considered in constructing their own profiles. Participants typically elected to have a photo (many selecting the most flattering photo they could find), some even going as far as having a glamour shot. Descriptions of favorite interests and activities, one's personality, occupation, and hopes and dreams were also deemed important by some of the participants. Others tried to make their profile stand out by adding humor or finding a way to make themselves appear unique. More women than men stated that they included a photo (and more women than men said that this was a glamour photo). Moreover, more women than men said that they wrote about their interests.

*Table 1* Aspects individuals included in their own profiles

Constructing own profile	Men <i>f</i> (%)	Women <i>f</i> (%)	Total <i>f</i> (%)	$\chi^2$	$\beta$	Exp $\beta$
Photo	18 (60.0%)	26 (86.7%)	44 (73.3%)	5.03*	1.47	4.33
Interests/activities they enjoy doing	11 (36.7%)	21 (70.0%)	32 (53.3%)	6.43*	1.39	4.03
Description of personality	10 (33.3%)	11 (36.7%)	21 (35.0%)	<i>ns</i>		
Made it humorous	7 (23.3%)	3 (10.0%)	10 (16.7%)	<i>ns</i>		
Occupation	4 (13.3%)	4 (13.3%)	8 (13.3%)	<i>ns</i>		
Demonstrate their intelligence	4 (13.3%)	3 (10.0%)	7 (11.7%)	<i>ns</i>		
Wrote it to sound different/unique	4 (13.3%)	3 (10.0%)	7 (11.7%)	<i>ns</i>		
Played down own beauty	1 (3.3%)	5 (16.7%)	6 (10.0%)	<i>ns</i>		
Glamour shot	0 (0.0%)	5 (16.7%)	5 (8.3%)	5.46*		women > men
Hopes and dreams	1 (3.3%)	3 (10.0%)	4 (6.7%)	<i>ns</i>		

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Note: Fisher's exact test was carried out for glamour shot

It is noteworthy that participants did discuss in detail the importance of having a photograph on their profile. This is nicely illustrated by Joan:

I Did you put a photograph up of yourself?

J Yes.

I And how did you decide what type of photograph to put up of yourself?

J Well obviously you want something decent and I didn't have a lot of things around. So the photograph that I have got was a studio glamour photograph where they did your makeup and your hair and made you look gorgeous, but that is the only decent photograph I had.

(Joan)

A number of previous theorists have downplayed the importance of the body online and the need to appear physically attractive. For example, Levine (2000) wrote that “the beauty of the virtual medium is that flirting is based on words, charm, and seduction, not physical attraction and cues” (p.565). Similarly, Rollman, Krug, and Parente (2000) comment that “by eliminating time, distance, and body, the architects of the Internet have created an unhindered medium that connects the mind and spirit” (p. 161). However, in stark contrast, this study revealed that participants believed that the need to present a good physical image of themselves was more important than any other characteristic.

The results from this study highlight some of the similarities between online and offline attraction. Offline, physical characteristics play a critical role in attractions for both men and women. Moreover, research on face-to-face attraction has found that men are typically more readily aroused sexually than women by visual stimuli (e.g., Ellis and Symons, 1990; Townsend, 1993). Hence, it is no surprise, that more women than men included photos in their profiles, and more women than men choose to have ‘glamour’ photos of themselves. Townsend and Wasserman (1997) also contend that women are more interested in men that demonstrate a willingness to invest in them. This perhaps explains why the women put more effort into detailing their interests – to be certain that they are attracting someone truly interested in them.

Participants talked about the importance of writing a profile that successfully attracted others. Some described this as a process of ‘selling themselves’. This is explained by Wayne below:

W The other thing for me personally is I’m great at writing trade manuals for someone, but when it comes to writing about yourself and trying to sell yourself it’s a very different story. I don’t know whether that’s more of a male trait than a female trait. It depends how good you want to try selling yourself too isn’t it?

(Wayne)

Individuals did admit to misrepresenting themselves on their profiles. This they stated was not for malicious reasons, but rather as a way to attract others. Mostly they saw their misrepresentations as exaggerations rather than blatant lies. About half the sample (51%) admitted to misrepresenting themselves on the site. As demonstrated in Table 2, individuals admitted to lying about their looks, their current relationships, age, weight, socio-economic status, and interests. Interestingly, the women lied about looks or used outdated photos more than men did. Again this can be explained by men placing more emphasis on being attracted to a partner who is physical attractive. With this being the case women have more reason to misrepresent their looks.

Table 2 Participants misrepresentations on their own profiles

Misrepresentations on own profiles	Men <i>f</i> (%)	Women <i>f</i> (%)	Total <i>f</i> (%)	$\chi^2$	$\beta$	Exp $\beta$
Looks: photo over a year out of date	2 (6.7%)	14 (46.7%)	16 (26.7%)	9.38** women > men	2.51	12.25
Details about their own relationship/children (e.g., having them, who they live with etc)	4 (13.3%)	2 (6.7%)	6 (10.0%)	<i>ns</i>		
Age	3 (10.0%)	1 (3.3%)	4 (6.7%)	<i>ns</i>		

	2	2	4	<i>ns</i>
Weight (e.g., said average when a bit overweight)	(6.7%)	(6.7%)	(6.7%)	
SES (occupation, being employed, professional, income)	2	1	3	<i>ns</i>
	(6.7%)	(3.3%)	(5.0%)	
Interests	3	0	3	<i>ns</i>
	(10.0%)	(0.0%)	(5.0%)	

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

As stated above, most participants rationalized that their misrepresentations were not out-and-out lies, but rather mere exaggerations, and often exaggerations that they thought others were probably also doing in their profiles. To give some examples:

S      Actually, it's quite funny that there is, you can pick, there is a thing for body type and you can pick 'slim, average, athletic, a bit overweight'. Do you know any chick that is going to tell you that they are a bit overweight?

I      I wouldn't know, I guess not?

S      That is right, so I just say average.

I      It's like the idea of perception of what is 'average', and average is you know probably a bit overweight anyway.

(Suszi)

M      Well it's all perception of reality isn't it. Everyone's view of the world is different, my view of myself may be very different to what someone else thinks it is. But you know, my view is that you had to sell yourself without being. I mean the last thing you want is reality shock, when

people get there and go 'that is not what he said he was about', so you have got to make the most of what you have got without exaggerating it so much that they never see you again. So, I would say it was probably 90% accurate with a few little embellishments you know.

I Tell us about the embellishments.

M Oh gosh ... you know things like portraying things in the most positive light. You know things like interests. I don't think I really have definite music interests or anything, but I just said, 'I am on a first name basis with people at HMV' but I am not really but it doesn't matter. You know that sort of thing.

(Matthew)

The interviewees explained that constructing a profile was a dynamic process. As demonstrated in some of the quotations above, people experimented with what photos and descriptions of themselves would be more successful at attracting others to their profile. They also re-wrote profiles to attract the partner they were searching for. However, there was a third concern that participants considered in constructing their profiles. Participants were also aware that relationships were not developed online but rather offline. Over half of the participants (57.4%) stated that they met their date within a week or two after initial contact on the site. Another 10.3% stated that they met their date within a month. Hence, 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. In fact, participants were adamant about the importance of the first meeting, with 67.6% of the participants stating that the first meeting determined if the relationship would progress. They also stated that

any emailing or telephone calls that were made prior to the first date were more to organize the date and verify information about a person, rather than disclosing any further information about themselves. As expressed by Andrew:

- A We exchanged at least two emails each after the first contact email I guess and then probably phoned up to organise a time to meet and get together. Not so much as getting on the phone and speaking for 3 hours or anything like that ...
- (Andrew)

Given this, individuals were concerned that their profiles reflect how they 'actually' are in everyday situations. In order to ensure this, individuals asked their friends and family to check if their profiles were a true reflection of themselves, as Crystal explains:

- I What about your own profile?
- C I tried to vary it I suppose ... As far as myself goes, I tried to just put who I am but I must admit it is really hard because other people may see you in a different way, so I actually think it's a good idea to have somebody else look at your profile, like a friend because as I said you may see yourself differently than everyone else does.
- (Crystal)

The findings reported here differ somewhat to the results yielded in the work carried out by Bargh, McKenna, and colleagues (e.g., Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna et

al., 2002). As summarized earlier in this paper, these researchers believe that individuals who are able to express their 'true' self online (traits or characteristics that individuals possess and would like to but are not usually able to express in their everyday lives) are more likely to develop strong internet relationships and bring these relationships into their 'real' lives. However, the participants in this current study instead appeared to be trying to create a balance between keeping their profiles real (actual self) as well as selling themselves (or describing how they would like to be). The motivation for this was based on not wanting to disappoint the date once they met them face-to-face, but at the same time trying to attract a decent number of individuals to choose from. Therefore, cyberspace is partly perceived by these participants as a safe space to identify their 'true' self or play around with presentations of themselves (Whitty, 2003) but at the same time how much people do this is restricted if they want to ensure their date is not disappointed when they meet face-to-face.

### 3.2 Considering other online daters' profiles

Individuals might have felt the need to present a profile that presented a mix of their actual and true self; however, is that what they, in turn, expected of their potential dates? The interviewees were very clear about what they hoped for in a partner. In fact, when asked they presented a '*shopping list*' of characteristics they were seeking out. Table 3 presents a list of the attractive qualities people were looking for in a partner.

*Table 3* Aspects participants were looking for in a partner

Attractive qualities	Men <i>f</i> (%)	Women <i>f</i> (%)	Total <i>f</i> (%)	$\chi^2$
Looks	29 (96.7%)	25 (83.3%)	54 (90.0%)	<i>ns</i>
Similar interests/values	25 (83.3%)	26 (86.7%)	51 (85.0%)	<i>ns</i>
SES	22 (73.3%)	22 (73.3%)	44 (73.3%)	<i>ns</i>
Personality	19 (63.3%)	24 (80.0%)	43 (71.1%)	<i>ns</i>
Honest/genuine/real people	17 (56.7%)	15 (50.0%)	32 (53.3%)	<i>ns</i>
Attracted to a certain age group	11 (36.7%)	17 (56.7%)	28 (46.7%)	<i>ns</i>
Height	9 (30.0%)	16 (53.3%)	25 (41.7%)	<i>ns</i>
Proximity	11 (36.7%)	13 (43.3%)	24 (40.0%)	<i>ns</i>
Size/weight	14 (46.7%)	8 (26.7%)	22 (36.7%)	<i>ns</i>
Non-smokers	11 (36.7%)	6 (20.0%)	17 (28.3%)	<i>ns</i>
Different/unique people/ people with different interests to their own	7 (23.3%)	10 (33.3%)	17 (28.3%)	<i>ns</i>
Humour	6 (20.0%)	8 (26.7%)	14 (23.3%)	<i>ns</i>
Someone with no children/off their hands	5 (16.7%)	7 (23.3%)	12 (20.0%)	<i>ns</i>
Someone who has children	5 (16.7%)	5 (16.7%)	10 (16.7%)	<i>ns</i>
Opening line	5 (16.7%)	2 (6.7%)	7 (11.7%)	<i>ns</i>
Star sign	1 (3.3%)	5 (16.7%)	6 (10.0%)	<i>ns</i>
Someone who wants children	1 (3.3%)	3 (10.0%)	4 (6.7%)	<i>ns</i>

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Contrary to some theorists' views (e.g., Levine, 2000; Rollman et al., 2000) these online daters did not de-emphasize physical attractiveness as an important quality. Noticeably, looks actually topped the list. The importance placed on physical characteristics may be greater for online daters than for individuals developing relationships in other places online. This is for two reasons: a) when individuals first

'meet' the person online, they are presented with a photo and not simply text, b) there are a plethora of choices (and unlike places where 100s of people are interacting online, such as MOOs, online daters 'know' that everyone on the site is seeking romance) and so they can bypass the less attractive profiles and make a play for the more attractive ones.

Interesting, the traditional gender differences for what men and women are attracted to did not emerge in this study. Unlike previous studies on offline attraction (see for example, Ellis and Symons, 1990; Townsend, 1993), men did not state significantly more than women that they were looking for an attractive looking person. Moreover, women did not state more than men that they were looking for someone with high socio-economic status. This is contrary to what researchers have found in regards to offline relationships (see for example, Buss and Barnes, 1986; Kendrick, Sadalla, Groth, and Trost, 1990; Townsend and Wasserman, 1997) where women are typically more interested than men in seeking out a partner with high SES. Physical attractiveness (mentioned by 90%) and socio-economic status (mentioned by 73.3%) were highly sought out qualities by both men and women in this study. Therefore, what might be happening on these dating sites is that given the numerous perceived choices available to individuals (with 1000s of profiles to sought through), these online daters are consequently adding more to their 'wish list' for a potential partner. This is a very different playing field when compared to traditional methods of meeting people in pubs and clubs where one perceives far fewer potential dates.

Despite admissions of their own exaggerations in their profiles, the participants in this study were often outraged to find when they meet face-to-face that their date had misrepresented themselves in their profiles. Table 4 displays some of the characteristics that the participants' dates misrepresented about themselves.

Interestingly, male online daters were said to misrepresent their height and their relationships status more than women.

*Table 4* How other online daters misrepresented themselves on the online dating site

Other online dater's misrepresentations	Men <i>f</i> (%)	Women <i>f</i> (%)	Total <i>f</i> (%)	$\chi^2$
Looks (including describing themselves as better looking than what they really are; out-dated photos; a photo of a different person)	24 (80.0%)	17 (56.7%)	41 (68.3%)	<i>ns</i>
Weight/Size	9 (30.0%)	16 (53.3%)	25 (41.7%)	<i>ns</i>
Personality	10 (33.3%)	9 (30.0%)	19 (31.7%)	<i>ns</i>
Age	9 (30.0%)	6 (20.0%)	15 (25.0%)	<i>ns</i>
Height	10 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (16.7%)	12.00** men > women
Their intentions (e.g., just for sex not relationship)	5 (16.7%)	5 (16.7%)	10 (16.7%)	<i>ns</i>
SES (education, occupation, income, being professional)	6 (20.0%)	3 (10.0%)	9 (15%)	<i>ns</i>
Relationship status (did not admit on profile that they are married)	8 (26.7%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (13.3%)	9.23** men > women
Having children	2 (6.7%)	3 (10.0%)	5 (8.3%)	<i>ns</i>
Being a smoker	1 (3.3%)	2 (6.7%)	3 (5.0%)	<i>ns</i>

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Note Fisher's exact test were carried out for height and relationship status

The most common way that individuals misrepresented themselves was in regards to their physical appearance. Again, this is perhaps not surprising given this was the most highly valued characteristic. Some exemplars of the ways the participants' online dates misrepresented themselves are presented below:

- I In what way do they lie about their profession?
- L Most guys make you understand on their thing [profile] that they are in management, but when you talk to them they are not really in management, they are not even middle management some of them.
- I So they kind of exaggerate their role considerably?
- L Yes definitely.  
(Lisa)
- C A lot of people say they are looking for a long-term relationship or a friendship and what I think they are after is a one night stand.  
(Christine)

As demonstrated in the extracts above, some of the misrepresentations were blatant lies; however, it could also be argued that some of the misrepresentations were individuals' representations of their 'true' selves. As illustrated by Kim:

- K I think also some people have got a very different grasp of who they are compared to what the rest of the world sees, so I don't think it is so much that people blatantly lie, I haven't experienced that. One guy who I found, he was relying on how he has got a very funny personality, or a good disposition sort of thing. He turned out to be one of the most depressing people I have ever met in my life.  
(Kim)

In addition to sorting through the lies presented on profiles, interviewees were often weary of profiles that contained 'cheesy' clichés. They mostly avoided these types of individuals, as they believed these people to be far less 'real'. To some, clichés became a 'turn off', rather than the 'turn on' that the person writing the profile had hoped for. To give an example of a clichéd profile:

G ... and everyone says that they like walking on the beach, and anyone will tell you that it is so god damn boring (laugh). And when they say that I think 'oh my God, not another one, it is almost a turn off'.

I They are all on that beach walking (laughing).

G Oh my God, if there are so many on that beach walking, why don't they run into each other.

I So a bit cliché that one?

G Terrible, it is almost a turn off now.

(Grace)

When we examine which characteristics individuals are attracted to in this particular online space, again Bargh, McKenna, and colleagues' (e.g., Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna et al., 2002) theory does not hold true. Rather interviewees stated that they were attracted to genuine and honest people and they hoped that an individual's profile presents something about who the individual 'really' is -- rather than a stereotypical, clichéd self or a self that the individual would like to possess but typically do not express in their day-to-day settings. In fact, over half of the participants said that an attractive person was one who was genuine and real (see Table 3). It appears that these individuals were more attracted to individuals who

expressed their 'actual' self. That is, online daters perceived honest and genuine people to be those who included in their profiles the traits or characteristics that they typically express in everyday offline social settings.

These online daters were most concerned with what their date looked like and how they behaved in their first face-to-face meeting. In fact, 67.6% claimed that the first face-to-face meeting was a screening out process – one that determined if there was a possibility for a relationship to develop. This is nicely expressed by Phil:

P Well I got sick of meeting girls and everything's based on this, even though it's not supposed to be looks, everything's based on the first meeting, that's the big shock compared to meeting someone in a pub or someone introducing you.

(Phil)

Given the importance placed on that first meeting and making the best first face-to-face impression, if the individual did not match up to the profile, as described earlier, the online dater was highly disappointed with their date – often judging them as dishonest people. These online daters learnt fairly quickly that people might present a different self online than they do offline. Therefore, unlike McKenna et al.'s (2002) sample, individuals who used the online dating site did not want to spend time getting to know one another in cyberspace. In fact, they were quite the opposite, expressing a desire to meet the person face-to-face as soon as possible. Hence, there was little opportunity or desire for people to get to know individuals 'true' selves or for individuals to gradually express their true selves.

### *3.3 Developing a theory for the presentation of self on internet dating sites*

This study revealed both similarities and differences between dating initiated on an internet dating site when compared to other forms of dating both online and offline. Similar to dating face-to-face, individuals stressed the importance of physical looks as an attractive quality they were looking for in a partner. Also, as other previous researchers have contended (e.g., Turkle, 1995; Whitty, 2003), these participants found that cyberspace was a place where they could be somewhat creative with their identity and presentation of self. However, there were limits to how imaginative individuals could be in their presentations of self.

In line with Walther's theories (e.g., Walther, 1995), these online daters were very strategic in their presentation of self. However, the ways these individuals presented themselves in cyberspace differs to what previous researchers have found. Although online daters were tempted to present a 'true' self or a more attractive self than what they typically are in face-to-face encounters, they were nonetheless mindful of the importance of presenting an 'actual' self. Although further research is required to test this claim, it seemed apparent that, contrary to McKenna et al.'s (2002) study, those who presented their 'actual' selves in this study were more likely to successfully progress a relationship offline.

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, some theorists have applied Goffman's theory to explain presentation of self in cyberspace. His theory might also be of use to explain individuals' expectations of how others ought to present themselves on an online dating site. On an online dating site there is very little opportunity to witness expressions 'given off'. Possible ways to 'read between the lines' or look for the expressions 'given off' is evident when participants skeptically

viewed clichéd profiles. Moreover, online daters checked to see if their date matched up to their profile when they meet face-to-face. In Goffman's terms they are able to see how well the 'real character' matches up to the performance. When there is a discrepancy, as Goffman would predict, the online daters in this study judge their dates are immoral, believing they had an obligation to match the impressions created in their profile.

Gender differences that are evident in offline attraction were only partly evident in this study. Women were more likely than men to present a photo of themselves and made greater attempts at ensuring an attractive image of themselves was presented. However, when it came to what attractive qualities men and women preferred there were no significant differences. However, rather than de-emphasizing qualities, online daters appeared to hope for more from their potential date. Arguably, this is because online daters have a greater number of potential mates to select from than in typical face-to-face situations. Given this perception of choice, online daters might be raising their hopes and expectations as to what potential mate they might attract. However, while on the surface this might seem a strength of online dating, future research needs to investigate if one does indeed attract a better quality mate, or if this raise in expectations leads to greater disappointment.

What also emerged from this study is the amount of information individuals initially self-disclose to their potential mates is very different to other forms of dating both online and offline. As highlighted in the introduction, when it comes to offline relationships the social penetration theory initially proposed by Altman and Taylor (1973) and modified by others (e.g., Morton, Alexander, and Altman, 1976) essentially argues that relationships move from less intimate to more intimate involvement over time. The process has been described using an onion analogy,

arguing that people self-disclose deeper and deeper aspects about themselves as the relationship progresses. This theory discusses depth and breadth. According to social penetration theory, in the early phases of relationship development one moves with caution, discussing less intimate topics and checking in the conversations for signs of reciprocity. Gradually one feels safer to admit to other aspects of themselves. This process arguably happens in chat rooms, discussion boards, IM and the like. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, researchers have found that this process often takes place quicker, since people are potentially in a safer environment to reveal core aspects of themselves (e.g., Cooper and Sportolari, 1997; Walther, 1995; Whitty, 2003, 2004).

There is far less opportunity for relationships to develop on an internet dating site in the way proposed by the social penetration theory. On an internet dating site the profiles are set up in such a way to reveal both depth and breadth. For instance, within the profiles, individuals typically have to provide information about surface level aspects of themselves, such as, eye color, drinking and smoking habits, relationship status, number and types of pets and occupation. In addition, they are given space to write more in-depth about themselves, where they are asked to describe their personality, interests (what they read, music they listen to and so forth), their ideal date, their political persuasion. They are encouraged on these sites to open up about all aspects of themselves online -- so that they will attract the most appropriate person. Given the amount of information they are presented with it is no surprise the conversations that take place via email, telephone and so forth prior to the first meeting are more to clarify information about the person as well as to arrange the meeting.

Therefore, online dating is arguably even more removed from what people are used to when it comes to developing a relationship. There is not any real opportunity to test the waters gradually and check for reciprocity, instead, reciprocity is determined prior to communication with the individual. Therefore, as others have found when it comes to presentation of self online – this can be quite strategic. In a way though, individuals have more control over their presentation on an internet dating site than any other space online. However, in turn, because the profile compiles all the information about the person in one chunk, it is easier to check back to. Hence, others are less forgiving when there is a mismatch between the person they meet face-to-face and the person they were presented with in the profile.

### *3.4 Limitations*

There are some limitations to this study. Given that this was a small sample size the results are difficult to generalize. Moreover, different online sites are structured in slightly different ways and some are geared towards specific interests (e.g., sites set up for certain religious orientations). Again, this makes it difficult to generalize these results to all online daters. Nonetheless, the rich data presented here does present some important insights as to how online daters present themselves and their expectations of how others ought to present themselves. Future research might test out the claims made here by developing a survey which can be distributed to a variety of types of online dating sites as well as a larger sample of individuals using them.

### *3.5 Conclusions*

This research highlights that it is critical that social scientists should not develop one grand theory to explain how everyone presents themselves within cyberspace. Cyberspace is not one generic space. Rather it is important to consider how different spaces online are constructed. This research points out that individuals are strategic in how they present themselves on an internet dating site; however, the strategies employed here are different to others spaces like newsgroups. Although online daters found this to be a space where they can experiment with how they present their identity, in order for the relationship to continue offline successfully it would seem that presentations of how they appear in everyday face-to-face situations are crucial.

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