A Differently Gendered Landscape:
Gender and Agency in the Web-based Personals

Kris Paap
Department of Sociology
SUNY-Institute of Technology

Douglas Raybeck
Department of Anthropology
Hamilton College

ABSTRACT

In this paper we use qualitative methodologies to investigate the way that ad placers represent themselves in online personal ads. Specific attention is paid to the comparison between self-expression in print (newspaper) media as well as the comparison between male and female ad placers. A variety of sites were investigated in a preliminary overview, and the data from (48 = 34 = 82) personals advertisements were examined in greater detail for an analysis of their content. Results suggest that the size and format differences between Internet and print personals is meaningful and that they allow for a broader range of self-representation, as well as imposing more specific requirements. As a result, although the use of cultural markers of desirability continues, the traditionally noted differences between genders (specifically gendered trade of women's looks for men's money) appears to be lessened. We believe that this not only has significance insofar as the method of partner seeking is likely to become more common in the future, but also because it appears to offer the possibility of altering the traditional gender inequalities present in initial processes of heterosexual courtship.

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Technology is generally understood to be a male dominated context (Cockburn 1988; Cockburn 1992; Connell 1987; Kuosa 2000; Van Oost 2000; van Zoonen 1992), as is the domain of heterosexual dating (Lottes and Weinberg 1997; Whyte 1990). If the two are combined, such as they are in the virtual environment of on-line dating services, one might expect to end up with a place and a culture that resembles something from a Sylvester Stallone movie—hard, cold, and masculine (male dominated). In our qualitative review of web-based personals, however, we have found quite the opposite. In fact, although the various structures and permutations of on-line dating services do appear to shape the ways in which gender and heterosexual courtship are accomplished, they appear to minimize some of the gender inequalities that occur in the dating game. By offering greater flexibility in the self-presentation of ad-placers, as well as encouraging backgrounding the demographic basics that include age, build, income, and education, on-line ads create a fracture in the dominance of the traditional heterosexual women-looks-for-men's-money exchange. In this way, at least, the processes and potentialities of on-line personals appear to offer the potential for more egalitarian ways of initiating and pursuing heterosexual courtship.

In this paper we use participant observation and content analysis to explore the ways that men and women present themselves in on-line personal ads. By building on earlier investigations of newspaper personals, we are able to investigate both the apparent differences (and similarities) in men's and women's self-presentations, as well as the ways that these presentations differ by medium. We conclude that there are several ways that on-line personals are certainly similar to the more traditional

print (newspaper and magazine) forms, insofar as individuals appear to be clearly working within and manipulating culturally normative scripts about what is attractive. However, on-line personals also vary significantly from the print personals in meaningful ways, due to the space and formatting options available to them. No longer limited to roughly twenty-five words, ad placers are able to move beyond the one-sentence ads that tend to reproduce the stereotypes of what is attractive for men and what is attractive for women. The on-line ads, by contrast allow ad placers to background much of the information at the heart of these stereotypes (e.g. income and weight or information about body build and size) by simply listing these pieces of information in sortable demographic categories. This change in format appears to allow ad placers to transcend the immediacy of proving themselves a desirable member of their gender category (physically or financially), and to focus instead on the nuances of their more personal self presentation. This not only has significance for the content of the ads, but also the experience of ad placing: It appears to grant ad placers both more freedom in their presentation (and thus determination) of self, and as well as a greater likelihood that they can locate a partner suitable to them as an individual and not simply as a gender performance. Although this change in medium does not appear to shatter gender in the manner predicted by earlier web-pundits, we believe that these changes allow both men and women to at least temporarily break the dominance of the traditional gender trade of women's looks for men's money. As a result, it is possible that these changes in dating and courtship processes can be part of a larger transformation in the gender politics of dating and mating. In this way the investigation of on-line personals is able to add both to the literature on gender, the performances of gender (specifically those that occur online), gender inequalities, and processes of heterosexual courtship.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Certainly the search for heterosexual love and marriage is not new, nor has it taken place through only one method across time or cultures. As anthropologists have long observed, most marriages in the world are arranged, not by the principles, but by older relatives, and the goal is not 'love' but economic stability and political alliances (Fortes 1962, Fox 1967, Murphy 1986, Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1964). Marriage

forms the family, the fundamental building block of societies (Murdock 1949) and, according to most peoples in the world it is too important a relationship to be left to the emotional whims of the participants.

In the United States, however, love is <u>the</u> reason for mating. This perspective is supported by a complex romantic ethic enshrined in films, television and popular culture. Indeed, a common theme of many films is the triumph of love over cultural and parental constraints (Mantaro 2000).[1] Love, generally seen as a force of passion existing beyond social considerations and logic, is supposed to drive the choice of lifelong partners and transcend the issues of social homogamy (Kerckhoff 1974). Those who marry for more practical reasons are labeled cold and passionless, calculating, or even 'gold-diggers' (a term itself reflective of traditional gender asymmetries).

Recently, however, the exclusive emphasis on love has been undergoing modification from two different fronts. Feminism has strongly critiqued the traditional subordinate woman's role and revealed the manner in which conventional constructions of femininity are used to reduce women's access to power (Davis 1990, Doyle and Paludi 1994, Penley, et al. 1994). Further, feminists have also lobbied for more egalitarian gender relations and have encouraged women to seek personal fulfillment through the workplace rather than the home (Freeman 1984, Sapiro 1994). Both of these trends have encouraged women to be somewhat less accepting of the romantic image of being 'swept away by a tide of emotion.' This hasn't, however, decreased the tendency for women and men to seek and marry heterosexual mates, in spite of the predictions that this might happen. Thus, the search for love and marriage continues.

And love is not only supposed to be independent of logic, it is supposed to also be spontaneous, and something that is found, but not sought. Thus the discovery of the perfect partner, complicated enough by society's—and even academics'—inability to define love or to find the formula for a successful marriage, is further exacerbated by societal trends that seem to make meeting marriageable singles—and even finding the time and place to seek such singles—more and more complicated for unattached heterosexuals in today's society. Increasing geographic and occupational mobility has meant access to fewer stable interpersonal networks. Where a person's 'Aunt Bessie' was once able to suggest a desirable possibility, now she is back in Oshkosh without

any knowledge of one's contemporary NYC circumstances. The comparative absence of networks derived from family and friends in new and continuously mobile lifestyles has reduced possibilities for introductions to appropriate others. Decreasing religious affiliations and church and synagogue attendance are also loosening individuals' bonds to an institution once regarded as an ideal safe place to meet like-oriented others. Even the delay in the average age of marriage can be seen as playing a role, since women and men are more likely to be looking for life partners after they have left the arenas of secondary and post-secondary education, natural "clustering" places for young singles ("U.S. Median Age"**).**

In addition, the pace of contemporary life, especially urban life, has greatly impeded the search for romance by limiting the time and opportunities that people have to seek that special someone. Research indicates consistently that the great majority of Americans and others in developed nations find they are being asked to do more in the same time span, to be more efficient, to utilize what had hitherto been 'free time' for productive activities (Anderson and McClard 1993, Birchall 1988, Levine 1988, McGrath and Kelly 1986). The impact of this ever-increasing demand for greater efficiency appears in both material and non-material culture. The prominence of fast-food services, predigested information services, pre-arranged trips, appointed buyers, as well as an increasingly reliance on the web to supply everything from information to clothing to groceries, all reflect our increasing desire to save time. This reliance not only keeps us in our own living rooms, as opposed to the grocery aisle where we might happen to meet Mr. Or Ms. Right, but also takes even more time from the search—or discovery—itself. Add to this the proliferation of cell phones, PDAs, and assorted wireless means to stay linked to the Internet, and we have little access to 'free' time (Raybeck 2000).

As a result, it is not surprising that people would choose to overcome the stigma of "searching" for love and that personal columns—the ideal way to "shop" for love at home—would become more popular. And they have. Just twenty years ago, an excellent study of these phenomena referred to personal ads by the popular cultural term, "lonely hearts advertisements" (Harrison and Saeed 1977) suggesting the stigma of desolation that was attached to the ad placers. Now these columns are widely utilized by people from differing social strata and rather particularistic pastimes

(Anonymous 1996). Most cities, including small ones, have newspapers and even radio stations with personal columns or services, and these are well utilized. The systems are usually similar. The ad placer calls an '800' number, records a message from which the ad is derived, and pays nothing for the listing. Respondents pay to listen to the ad placer's recorded message or to contact the ad placers from a code number appearing with the ad in the personals. The ads are generally brief and utilize a collection of well-known acronyms to save on limited space—"SWF seeks NSWM for companionship" replaces the more cumbersome and expensive "unattached white woman seeking a white man with whom she can share her life, and she requests that he have the same aversion to cigarettes as she".

Previous Research on Personal Ads in Print

Perhaps it is the slightly forbidden nature of the love-seeking process, or the ways in which individuals attempt to describe themselves and their life passions in less that 100 characters, but regardless of the source of the fascination, personal ads in print have been the subject of a number of interesting sociological, psychological, and anthropological research projects over the years. And overwhelmingly, the conclusions have been similar, consistently supporting the use and projection of gender stereotypes by ad placers. They found that males tend to seek younger, physically attractive partners, while females are more interested in financial stability and emotional commitment (e.g. Cameron, et al.1977, Davis 1990, Goode 1996, Harrison and Saeed 1977, Lance 1998). A more heartening recent study found personality to be the most mentioned category by both sexes, but otherwise, the only change in two decades had been the addition of 'non-smoking' as a desirable criterion (Lance 1998).

In spite of the changes in society and culture over the years, this sort of presentation does not seem to be changing as much as one would expect. Gender stereotypes are still with us and seem to color our preferences for partners and our presentations of self (Applebaum 1987, Hollan 1992). However, Americans are also more sophisticated regarding these cultural stereotypes and that promotes both more candor and greater sensitivity to messages, both sent and received (Goode 1996). In fact, in our own research on print ads (Raybeck et al. 1999) we found that ad placers do still appear to

use the beauty-for-money trade in describing their assets and desires, yet they also use their self-descriptions to reference desirable traits in ways that appear to speak to "meta-level" categories rather than speaking about the activities themselves. For example, a majority of both males and females describe themselves as spending time outdoors: camping, hiking and taking long walks (58 & 62% respectively). They also state that the most preferred location for a long walk is along the beach, this despite the fact that, as the crow flies, Utica, New York (the city in which the data were gathered) is 60 miles from the shores of Lake Ontario and 170 from the Atlantic. Thus, this suggests that the ad placers are not beach-walking quite as frequently as they'd like to imply. We interpreted the use of these categories as reflecting both interests, and to refer more broadly to themselves as individuals, implying not only good life habits, but also sound character, that the ad placers are genuine and natural themselves.

This use of cultural symbols in these presentations makes clear the sophistication that many persons exhibit in their manipulation of their social environment; that is, that we are aware of what others are likely to find attractive and can and do work to present ourselves as such, including and beyond the traditionally gendered trade of "men as success objects" and "women as sex objects" (Davis 1990).

It was additionally significant that our data revealed little difference in the actual interests listed by gender. Why this happened is unclear. Is it simply impression management combined with cultural knowledge, and people listing the interests that they hope will make them more attractive to others? Or it revealing what many feminist scholars have repeatedly suggested, that in spite of the pressures for differences between men and women, that maybe they *aren't* different planets, but instead seeking roughly the same things according to the social rules they are faced with? Although these data weren't able to answer that question, they do highlight the possibility, and thus suggest the further exploration of this issue under different and even "virtual" circumstances.

Literature on the World and Cultures of the Internet

When word of the Internet first began to spread, it seemed as if this new, virtual

landscape would not only replace but also revolutionize the social world currently known and inhabited (e.g. Gibson 1984; Plant 1998; Stone 1996). Persons, once on-line, were expected to be free of their genders, racial identities, age, and physical abilities. People would be free, it was argued, to reinvent themselves and inhabit the world with an entirely different identity. And certainly, some of this is true. The technology of chat rooms requires that persons create identities and allows the identities to be malleable, or at least chosen by the user. In other settings, however, the Internet can bind one more closely to her or his identity. We use e-mail to keep in touch with our friends and families, to perform our work, and to do our banking and shopping—all closely tied, of course, to credit card and bank account numbers. And, it appears that we are also increasingly using the Internet to establish and maintain personal—and even intimate—relations (c.f. Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich 2001; Hardey 2002). Thus the question of gender and identity for personal ads is clear: Is the resiliency of gender stereotypes able to survive the transformation to electronic media? Or are gender, race, and other relations truly destabilized by the use of electronic communications?

Although there is an increasingly vast collection of writings on the world of online dating, much of it is in the realm of pop culture (e.g. Harmon 2003; Hsu 2003; Hsu & Mulrine 2003; Saranow 2003) and describes the processes, successes, and risks of the venture. In this paper we extend our earlier work (Raybeck et al. 1999) to examine the manipulation of the cultural elements involved self-presentation in the on-line personals, and to relate these to contemporary conceptions of gender and sexuality. Further, we explore how a dramatic change in medium shapes the ways in which individuals approach and exploit the opportunities for the use and manipulation of cultural discourses around gender, sex, class, and "what is attractive" in order to increase their chances of finding a "soulmate", date, or sex partner in an increasingly complicated and fast-paced world.

SAMPLING AND RESEARCH METHODS

Sampling

In our exploration of the Internet dating landscape we began with a broad scan of the

available sites and programs, as well as the different types of "dating" sites that exist. This search quickly revealed a number of significant distinctions: Sites dedicated to personals include both moderated and unmoderated boards, they have different ways of making money, they address different populations, whether by sexual orientation, special interest, or those seeking love and marriage compared to people seeking casual fun. These distinctions have notable effects upon the ads and quality of the services. Moderated sites review all ads to ensure that they follow site rules, whereas unmoderated sites are more of a free-for-all with little oversight and rules enforced largely by honor code. Similarly, unmoderated sites are more likely to be free for all users (generating income from advertisers), whereas moderated sites are more likely to require payment of all users or, more likely, be free for those posting ads and charge only those people wish to communicate with an ad placer. Sites also vary by target: Web-based personals are aimed at people seeking friends and casual dates, romance and marriage, and those seeking strictly sexual or "intimate" encounters. Additionally, sites target both heterosexuals and gays and lesbians, though the larger sites tend to maintain separate sites for each population, and the smaller sites tend to specialize. Special interest sites also exist for more specific populations, such as Christian singles' sites, sites dedicated to larger women and the men who love them, and even people seeking bondage, domination, and group encounters.

In order to best create a sample comparable to our previous research, we focused on the mainstream, heterosexual romance sites, meaning those sites oriented toward seekers of long-term heterosexual relationships, and not persons interested in casual dates or strictly sex. These sites include, AmericanSingles.com, People2People.com, datingclub.com, OneandOnly.com, Match.com, Kiss.com, Webpersonals.com, Webwoo.com, XseeksY (a search engine for dating sites and services), and Yahoo! Personals, among others.

While we recognize that this is by no means an exhaustive list, we are confident that it is representative of the contemporary—or then contemporary—mainstream heterosexual romance sites on the web. We emphasize "then contemporary" to make clear that this virtual landscape is changing daily—and that even in the course of doing research, sites would change their names, format, tools, etc. For example, our primary site, Webpersonals.com, has since been renamed to 'lavalife', though many of

the services and styles appear to be the same. It is thus certainly possible that by the time of publication that some or all of the sites listed above are no longer in existence or are operating under a different name.

Of all the sites we visited in more casual observation, only one site, Webpersonals.com was examined in detail and the results treated quantitatively.[i] WebPersonals.com is a popular site that in 2001 claimed more than a million participants and one that offered a range of relationship possibilities. The site maintains three sub-sites; one designated dating, one labeled romance, and one termed intimate. They also run companion sites for gay men and lesbian women, named (Manline and Womanline, respectively) and these sites also use the three variations of relationship—dating, romance, or intimate encounters. As stated previously, we focused exclusively on the "Romance" site (for those persons looking for a serious relationship) for heterosexuals only, in order to have our data most closely parallel that of our previous study.

It is also important that Webpersonals.com is a moderated site. Moderated sites are reviewed by staff to ensure that the ad placers are following the guidelines of the site and are not, for example, using an ad to front for a pornographic web site to which they hope to lure lonely singles. Although the moderated nature of sites does not prevent the porn advertisers from responding to ads (in which case ad placers receive e-mail from "barely_8teen", inviting them to come see the pictures she has allegedly just posted of herself for him). However, the moderated aspect of boards does mean that the vast majority of ads are likely to conform to the regulations created by the sites—generally no profanity or nudity in photos, and similar such rules (in addition to the ban on commercial work). We chose to draw our sample from a moderated board since this makes it much more likely that the ads placed do sincerely represent the interests and beliefs of people seeking romance, and thus best matched the print ads that are similarly interpreted. Because of these limits upon generalizability, our results should be interpreted as applying to only such (heterosexual, mainstream, romance-oriented) sites.

Methods and Data Collection

The data was collected in two different stages, with participant observation data gathered in the spring and fall of 2000, and the qualitative data (the texts of selected

on-line personal ads) gathered in the fall of 2000. The participant observation data was collected by one of the researchers who had previously signed up as a participant at a number of the sites listed above, and been utilizing the sites and programs as an actual client (and not a researcher) of the programs. Although this participation began for goals of a non-research nature, the experiential data of the process has been used in this paper to augment the data gathered for the more traditional content analysis. The second researcher also created an identity on the primary site and used this identity to browse, but did not engage in any interaction with ad placers.

The data that was gathered for the content analysis was gathered on one day, drawing all of the male and female ads posted on the Romance site and listed as "local to you". "Local" according to Webpersonals is calculated as a roughly 160 radius from the address provided at registration. This created a natural boundary for our sample, and also provided the best comparison to our previous research on print ads. From these ads we then selected every third ad for the more in-depth analysis that is discussed here.

Coding representations of self and other. From each selected ad, we drew two types of data. First, we coded the *narrative self-description* provided by each ad placer, indicating important characteristics of the ad placer as well as the person sought. These were marked as "SELF" and "OTHER" respectively. The list of codes was created by one researcher, and then verified by a second researcher as well as a research assistant. The latter two personnel also coded all of the ads independently to ensure the validity of the process. Since these data were separated by the gender of the ad placer, they allow us to compare both the patterns of male and female ad placers, and the gendered patterns of print media in comparison to on-line ads.

Selected interest, values, and leisure pursuits. The second set of data we collected from each ad was drawn from the ad placers' responses to three phrases requiring completion: "Things I value", "In my spare time I enjoy", and "My idea of romance includes". Since the responses to these phrases were selected from lists created by the site, we began by creating a list of codes for the response options. This list of codes was created by one researcher and then verified by the other. These codes were then applied to the ad placers' responses, so that each ad placer was given three codes—

one for each phrase. Although our initial interest in this process was the comparison of category use by gender, it expanded to include the trends across groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal ads on the Internet, it appears, are notably different from their print counterparts in both form and content. These differences in both size and scope affect how ad placers express and represent themselves—as well as how they can experience the processes of searching for love from a virtual place. Some of the differences are surprising, given the history of resilience that gendered stereotypes have enjoyed in print personals. For example, including the ways in which men's and women's ads appear to be growing more similar rather than more divergent, and that the beauty-for-money exchange appears to be destabilized. It would be a mistake, however, to see these ads as revolutionizing gender or interpersonal relationships (c.f. Hardey 2002), although we believe that these changes are meaningful and significant. All of these results and their nuances are discussed below.

Different Format, Different Styles

Our first finding is that the format, structure, and feel of Internet personals are very different than the traditional newspaper ad. And, not surprisingly perhaps, these changes have significant effects on the ways that persons placing ads can represent themselves. Although some of the Internet dating sites were small and narrowly defined enough that they actually used some of the same language protocol (e.g. SWF, LTR, etc.), most of the sites were large and descriptive enough that the experience of dating and mating on-line is quantitatively and qualitatively different from its print equivalents. Webpersonals, for example, used text blocks the size of newspaper ads simply to list the different ads in each category. The seeker can then click on the screen name of the ad placer and jump to the Webpersonals "homepage" of that person.

The Webpersonals database for each individual is quite extensive. To begin with, all persons must create an identity that includes a screen name, a "headline" (that appears next to their screen name), and a "greeting" that appears next to their screen

name when they are signed into the site and available for messaging (for example, a person might be "labyrinth4" or "NASCARlvr" with a headline "philosopher seeks muse" or "mechanic seeks tune-up" and a greeting that says "rock me, baby!" or "waiting for you in the moonlight"). These selections themselves are clearly informative about the ad placer, and allow both the placer and the seeker room for interpreting the self and what is sought. (Additional information on creating a Webpersonals identity is found in **Appendix A**).

Next, each ad placer must answer a few basic demographic questions, the answers to which become part of the sortable database. These include the following pieces of information:

> location (city or zipcode); age; gender, sign of the zodiac, race/ethnicity, height, body type ("slim", "average", "a few extra pounds"), if and how much s/he smokes, if and how much s/he drinks ("doesn't drink", "drinks socially," "drinks regularly"); whether s/he has children and whether s/he wishes for [more] children, level of education, and rough income level.

Seekers are then able to ensure that they only read the ads for people within a certain distance and/or that they are only seeing the ads for the BBWs (big beautiful women) that they seek. In this way, men who fear skinny women or sirens with red hair or who *only* want to meet women at least 10 years older can be sure to prevent a disastrous mismatch. And the same is also true, of course, for women seeking men.

Ad placers are then required to write a short piece of descriptive text about him or herself, emphasizing what he or she is, considers to be important, and seeks in another. One such ad reads:

> I am a fun loving, attractive, full figured woman with brown hair and blue sparkling eyes. I have many interests and al always open to new adventures. I enjoy visiting with friends, going for a Sunday drive or even perhaps a weekend getaway. I like to travel, go to movies or rent one and snuggle on the couch together. I am very affectionate and a romantic. I also enjoy Giants football. I think I'm a good person and would like to share my life with someone special.

Although this format—and indeed the space itself—allows for significantly more self-representation than traditional newspaper ads, it isn't the case that these ads are entirely freestyle. Webpersonals.com lists suggestions for persons writing the

description. Ad placers are instructed to:

Key #1: Have a great opening line.

> *Key #2: Show don't tell.*
>
> *Key #3: Don't use clichés or platitudes.*
>
> *Key #4: Embellish points.*
>
> *Key #5: Be honest.*
>
> *Key #6: Address the right audience.*
>
> *Key #7: Use the right tone.*

These suggestions are then elaborated and examples given so that the individual can create an appropriate ad—much like the others. In fact, the Webpersonals uses 853 words to explain to its ad placers how to write a headline! And for those truly stuck, Webpersonals offers a template that can simply filled in, including a section that helps all persons to reflect their own unique self—according to the formula. This section begins with the following textual guide:

I'm _____, but I think _____.

I'm more than just a _____! I'm also a _____.

And includes the section entitled *"What makes you unique?"*

Most people _____. Not me! I _____.

Don't tell anyone, but I'm a closet _____!

I'm _____ and I would never _____.

(The remainder of the Webpersonals' template and additional draft suggestions are included in **Appendix B**).

Finally, ad placers are asked to answer three questions ("Things I value", "I enjoy in my spare time", and "My idea of romance includes") by selecting options from lists of activities and values. Each question category contains thirty to fifty responses that may be selected and these answers (up to three per question) then become part of the

ad placer's identity. (See **Appendix C** for a full listing of the categories and respective response options).

Compared to the traditional print ads, then, it is clear that the on-line personals afford—and in fact require—that individuals put more effort and more detail into self-descriptions and self-representations. While this neither guarantees a more honest representation or a less strategic one, it is clear that the difference in format itself is significant.

Size (of the ad) Matters... And Format, Too.

The size and format of on-line personals matters, of course, because it shapes that way that individuals can and do represent themselves to potential seekers and mates. In our previous research, we argued that ad placers in newspaper ads used their self-descriptors as meta-level claims about what they know to be valued in larger society. Thus, people described themselves as "loving to walk on the beach" even when virtually landlocked. Similarly, the acronyms and phrases used are designed to stand out—but not too much—within a reasonably narrow framework of attractiveness. The same appears to be true in online ads. On one site (not Webpersonals) where acronyms were used (e.g. 'sense of humor' (SOH) or 'down to earth' (DTE)), it seems clear that the acronyms reflect the popularity of the qualities they refer to, but it is also likely that they encourage listing these qualities.

Similarly, on the Webpersonals site, ad placers are encouraged to respond to the three questions (Things I value, I enjoy in my spare time, My idea of romance includes) by drawing from lists provided for each category. Thus the ad placers are given much more space in which to provide information, but they are also given significant guidance about how a "proper" and successful ad will look. In this way, again, individual ad placers are encouraged to be unique, but are reminded of the social norms and rules in effect, and are encouraged to keep their uniqueness in line with these customs. This suggests our next finding, that ad placers continue to be both aware of and utilizing social norms of what is desirable and good.

Standing Out While Fitting in: the Balance of Uniqueness and Conformity to Norms

Obviously, the use of pre-existing categories can both reflect and reinforce social and cultural patterns. Indeed, it is our distinct impression that they have been chosen by their site managers because of their cultural popularity, but their presence also reminds participants of stereotypic expectations for Americans in general and both genders in particular. Thus, under the heading "My Idea of Romance", we were not surprised to find numerous examples of outdoor activities, including the "moonlight swim" and "walk along the beach", both of which were popular in the print ads. Further exemplars included two of the most common domestic markers from print ads, "cuddling by a roaring fire" and "dinner by candlelight". The growing epidemic of obesity among Americans suggests that these outdoor activities are not quite so common as the ads might suggest, and we also believe that "cuddling by a roaring fire" is used to evoke images of domestic tranquility, in contrast to darts tournaments at the local tavern, NASCAR events, or just endless hours in front of one's own television. This is not to say that the ad placers do not truly enjoy these activities (or at least prefer them over the alternative) or even that they might engage them on occasions: However, we do believe that the selection of these responses is part of the highly complex process of constructing and representing a self.

Another interesting way that ad placers tended to both appeal to and conform to broader social norms appeared in what we call "balance". By this we mean that the responses to the above listed categories (romance, things valued, and free time) suggest that ad placers are selecting their responses strategically so that they appear "balanced" across the various spheres of life. This was true for both men and women, and occurred in the following manner: In our initial coding of the response options, we sorted the options into the various cultural themes that the options appeared to represent. Thus, the options for "Things I Value" could be coded as either "Personal Qualities" or "Social-Style/Ethics". Spare time activities could be coded as "crafts/arts/skills", "outdoors", "intellectual/cultural", or "entertainment/self-indulgent". "My idea of Romance" offered the cultural themes of "indoor", "outdoor", "gift/s", "going out", and "thoughtful acts". In spite of the variance across questions (that is, across the options provided for the three different questions), we were then

able to sort the initial codes into second-level codes, including *naturalness* (interpreted as a version of sincerity and honesty, and indicated by outdoor activities), *domesticity and ethical concerns* (an indication of the importance of *real* rather superficial pursuits), and *sensitivity* (reflected in thoughtful acts and gifts).

We find that both men and women appeared to select their self-descriptors in each of the three categories so that, when they were finished, they had covered the three important elements of self-description. (These categories and the matching response options are listed in **Appendix D**. The full list of Webpersonals options is of course in **Appendix C**). Thus, someone who suggests that they enjoy an outdoor activity in their spare time is more likely to omit the outdoors as a descriptor of their idea of romance and to mention a domestic or sensitive quality. In this way they neither appear to be a maniacal outdoorsperson nor an unrepentant homebody—both characters apparently too extreme to be desirable or too likely to be desired by only a small and select few.

Be Honest!

For anyone seeking a beloved, it is clear that more information is only valuable if it is perceived to be accurate. Given the reputation that the Internet has gathered for misrepresentation (i.e. the risk that a person claiming to be a 28 year-old White male is really either an *eight-year-old* male or a 57 year-old Latina with murderous intentions), it would seem unlikely that this medium would produce more honest representations than newspaper media. However, this is what our data appear to suggest, although there are certainly some caveats we must offer in making this claim.

First, it is important to recognize that these data do not allow us to measure the correspondence between the *purported* traits and interests and the *actual* traits and interests. That is, we aren't able to tell from these data who *really* likes Piña coladas and getting caught in the rain, and who simply claims to have these interests. Our participant observational data suggest that the claims are *generally true* when made on line, but that they might not always mean what they appear to mean. "liking Piña Coladas", for example, might mean that "I do like them but I consider them too extravagant and always drink Old Mil' instead" or it might mean that they really, *really* like Piña Coladas—for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. By reading more creatively into

the ads, it becomes apparent that "self-educated" might mean "worldly and well-read" and it can also mean "dropped out of high school". Similarly, "still believes that the best things in life are free" might mean "has great spiritual vision and lives in delight of the moment", and it might mean "has no money; don't expect gifts". In this way, seeking romance on line might be a little like buying based on TV ads: The clever shopper learns to interpret and anticipate all of the possibilities in each turn of phrase. We are reminded that honesty is not a binary attribute, and that as in all shopping, the buyer must beware.

This creative self-representation (which, again, is not unique to the Internet!) is also an approach suggested cautiously by Webpersonals itself in its directions to ad placers:

> Ultimately, if your ad works ad intended, you'll want to meet your perfect match. I am always amazed by the number of people who forget this and try to lie about their looks or job or what they want or whatever. Obviously this never works, because all is revealed when you meet face to face. …. So, don't be dumb, instead of letting other people down the truth is revealed, be proud of what you have and try to highlight your better aspects in your ad. Or, try being vague instead. Better the mystery of something left unsaid than the harsh realities of a lie exposed. At the very worst, just don't mention things you don't want others to know right away. Another name for walking the fine line between total honesty and a vague but true description is, "Spin control". No one would ever describe themselves as an "88 year old woman who drinks like a fish and could lose a few pounds," however, "experienced woman, full of like [sic], who enjoys the occasional cocktail," may just work. Which ever route you choose, keep in mind that ultimately, you'll have to confront your fears, either when somebody asks about them or when you meet. At that point, honesty is the only option.

Because we do not have participant observation data from research on newspaper personals, we cannot make any real claims about whether one group of ad placers (by which we mean, of course, one ad medium) is more honest than another. We can, however, use the variation in the data to make some inferences about which medium allows greater revelation about the individuals—a small but significant distinction. Drawing on the theories of interpersonal perception (e.g. Jones 1990), it is clear that the relatively homogenous descriptions of newsprint ads tell us less about the writers than the more colorful, if more oblique descriptions online. This stems from E.E. Jones' argument that actions likely to receive social rewards—or at least avoid social

sanction—reveal little about the individual actor. Thus the use of gender consonant descriptors, and descriptors that fit the attractiveness stereotype for one's gender, do not necessarily inform us about that person per se.

Additionally, there is a pragmatic side to the apparent honesty, even beyond that suggested by the Webpersonals recommendation. For those seeking a true and specific match in their partner, they are not only more likely to find them by being honest, but they are also simply *likely to find them*, given the size and scope of Internet personals audiences. Thus persons who might be stigmatized for their weight in a smaller dating community are able to place an ad that allows them to reach only those persons who are interested in a larger or fuller figured man. Similarly, someone who detests NASCAR need not emphasize his financial success in the hopes of getting by in his NASCAR-loving community. Another, more extreme example of this honesty came in the form of ads that violated the Webpersonals rule that only single persons place ads in the Romance site: A number of participants describe themselves as married and seeking 'discreet encounters'. Presumably these listers, too, discovered that the list base is sufficiently large and diverse to allow them to find a partner willing to accept, or at least to ignore, these circumstances.

A Differently Gendered Landscape: Greater Similarity Between Men's and Women's Ads

Perhaps the most striking trend in the data was that which echoed the findings of Lance (1998) by revealing that men's and women's preferences for personality and character might be more similar than they have previously appeared. These results suggest that the Internet will in fact afford social beings a differently gendered landscape, though the results are certainly mixed and complex enough to require further explanation and exploration.

In order to continue our comparison of men's and women's self-descriptions that began in our earlier work on newspaper ads, we compared the types of qualities that men and women purported to have (coded as SELF) and the qualities that they purported to be seeking (OTHER). We did this by categorizing their textual self-description into one of several categories, according to the emphasis placed in the text

by the ad placer. These categories include looks (in which the ad placer emphasized body build or fitness level, hair color, or similar traits); character (in which traits such as "honesty" are referred to), lifestyle (such as "active", "healthy" or mentioning specific hobbies), sex (a rarely used but fairly self-explanatory category), compatibility (a category used only for OTHER in which the ad placer specifically references the desire to have someone fit into his or her life). And additional category of "none" was used for descriptions either missing or including none of these traits. The basic results of this coding are listed below. [More detail on these categories and their content is provided in **Appendix E.**]

TABLE 1. Representations of Self and Other

MEN: SELF (n=48)

Category Number emphasizing

Looks	1
Character	8
Lifestyle	35
None	3
Sex	1
Compatibility	(n/a)

Total = 48

MEN: OTHER (n=48)

Category Number emphasizing

Looks	0
Character	17
Lifestyle	7*
None	6
Sex	0**
Compatibility	18

Total = 48

* Interestingly, all seven of these also emphasized "lifestyle" for self.

** Please note that in one instance "sex" talk was subsumed under compatibility because of the lister's presentation. Thus, sex was put forth as more of a compatibility issues; that is (for example) the issue was not "sex" per se but rather being able to "put up with" a sex drive or foot fetish or similar issue.

WOMEN: SELF (n=34)

Category Number emphasizing

Looks	3
Character	12
Lifestyle	17
None	2
Sex	0
Compatibility	(n/a)

Total = 34

WOMEN: OTHER (n=34)

Category Number emphasizing

Looks	2
Character	22
Lifestyle	6
None	2
Sex	0
Compatibility	2

Total = 34

Although there are a number of interesting conclusions to be drawn from these data, the first is that the content of the online ads varies notably less than the ads examined in our previous newspaper study. Although it is still more common for women to express a desire to encounter a financially secure male than it was for a man to openly seek a financially secure woman (thus following the gendered patterns found in our previous work), we found that in the online ads, for example, both men and women were less likely to emphasize looks either for themselves or for others. And, to the extent that they did, women did so *more* than in print ads, and men did so *less.*

Looks are "Backgrounded". We suggest that this occurs in part because looks are "backgrounded" in the on-line format and made less central to descriptions—ironically, perhaps, by the fact that all ad placers must categorize themselves by height and body type. And, as stated earlier, these traits are then "sortable" so that seekers can choose to only look at ads placed by persons of the desirable height(s) and body type(s). Additionally, ad placers may upload photos to their ad, and thus follow the Webpersonals recommendation to "show, don't tell". While looks certainly play a role (and are also embedded in other qualities, such as "fitness" or "healthy lifestyle"), they play a different role because they are described as a demographic aside and don't need to be included in one's own personal narrative.

This backgrounding of looks has a significant experiential effect as well as the apparent effects upon men's and women's personal descriptions and requests. First, it allows ad placers more freedom to balance the mainstream American views on attractiveness—the contradictory beliefs that "what is beautiful is good" (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster 1972) that it is only what is on the inside that matters. Even though money, beauty, and youth are clearly a part of the trade/negotiation, they are symbolically removed from center stage. Thus persons are free to focus on their other attributes such as their hobbies, values, and inner selves. As a result, this shift has the potential to be empowering to all people (particularly those not rich, young, or beautiful), and more specifically to women who have been systematically reduced to their looks—and of course men who feel reduced to their income or character.

Secondly, though not unrelated to the first, it is possible that this shift in presentation allows the foundation of a relationship on different, less gendered—or at least less unequal—grounds. Admittedly, these data can't say anything about the interactions and patterns that occur in a relationship after the initial self-presentation and interaction occur. However, it does make sense that if the initial grounds of a contract are changed, that some change must also occur in the later patterns. Thus, it is unlikely that a relationship initially framed as less reliant upon looks (or looks and money) will later become dominated by it.

Personality is "it". A second notable similarity in the ads of both men and women is that lifestyle and character appear to be emphasized by both, albeit in slightly different

ways. Compared to women, men make considerable use of lifestyle variables in describing themselves, while women are more likely than men to emphasize their character. This contrasts markedly with our research on print ads in which men, apparently aware of women's interest in this variable, seemed to emphasize their character attributes for review. Both men and women, though, are quite unlikely to focus on their looks in the personal description, which marks quite a change from the previous study. (And if one gender appears to be more focused on the looks of self and other, it is women more than men, also a change from previous studies!). More striking, of course, is the level of similarity in the ads, where the bulk of both men's and women's ads appear to be focused on personality and lifestyle factors, rather than the physical. As we have suggested above, this appears to be tied, at least in part to the backgrounding of the traditionally gendered variables of income, age, and body shape.

However, not quite egalitarian...There are, however, two ways in which the presentations of men and women continue to reproduce the gender stereotypes at the heart of both the looks-for-money trade and gender inequality in general. These include the greater likelihood of men to cite "compatibility" of OTHER as a concern— that is, to express a concern that their female partner fit into their currently existing lifestyle. Out of the 48 responses from men, 18 mentioned this concern. Out of the 34 women, only 2.

A second and more disturbing pattern occurred in the essays where the template was used by female respondents: When given the opportunity to respond to "I'm more than just a _____", a small number of women wrote "woman". No men responded that they were more than just a man, suggesting the ongoing perception of Americans that to be male is sufficient unto itself, but to be female, or "just a female" is to be lacking something more special or important.

More Data = Less Uncertainty

Our final finding is the one drawn largely from the participatory data of the project, although it is certainly suggested by the themes in the data already discussed.[ii] This finding is that the scope and format of online personals provides a significant

reduction of uncertainty for ad placers, a reduction that might be as meaningful for men as it is for women. Because of the vast amount of information that can be provided, as well as the ways in which one can "sort" potential mates by a variety of different categories (e.g. age, body shape, income brackets, education, smoking habits, and so forth), one is much more able to ensure at least a reasonable demographic match prior to even the initial contact and e-mail exchanges. Because searching for romance online violates the cultural assumption that love "happens", the search itself can be seen as carrying a potential social stigma, and certainly the risk of encountering a 'nightmare date' would appear to be heightened. As with any blind date, one wants to avoid ending up with someone either 'beneath your station'—or someone who considers you to be beneath their station—or any number of similar dating nightmare scenarios. Using the on-line dating services becomes like an amazon.com for people, and if one can get beyond the initial lack of romance in the online shopping process, it can have a reasonable—and a human—face.

CONCLUSIONS

The Internet and its use have grown exponentially (literally) in the last ten years. While it was initially associated with technophiles and the young, currently it is increasingly viewed as an accessible resource for all. Not only has there been a proliferation of service providers whose competition has kept the price manageable, the decentered nature of the web has made censorship and centralized control effectively impossible. The result is a wide range of accessible web sites of highly varied nature, and a large range of persons who use them. Research suggests that the people who use the web are geographically and demographically quite diverse, as are their motives for using the web (Loges & Jung 2001; Neff 2000).

Thus, although it is possible, of course, that the differences between print ads and online personals are simply the product of different users engaging the technology (that is, that the decreasing displays of gender difference in men's and women's ads appear simply because these are different and more androgynous individuals who are seeking romance online), this does not appear to be the case. Instead, it appears that persons of all dating and mating ages are signing up online, and there is reasonable

diversity by education, income, and interests, as well. Although the population we investigated appeared to be largely self-labeled as "Caucasian (white)", this is likely an effect of actual geography rather than virtual space, since upstate New York continues to be statistically relatively homogenous, and reviews of ads placed in other locations (for example, Atlanta and New York City) suggest that the online populations are rather racially diverse as well. Additionally, the self-selection explanation is belied by the fact that a good number of the ads do profess to conservative gender and other ideologies, thus suggesting that the ad placers are not so alternative after all.

The data do suggest, then, that the size, scope, and format of online personals can have meaningful effects on the ways that persons can present themselves to others. In addition to the conventions that suggest the use of some cultural references (such as the claim to love walking on the beach), we see that people are asked to describe their bodies (for example) and are given a small range of phrases for doing so. These changes in format have both functional changes, that change what the ad placers do, and content changes, that appear to shape the emphases of the online personal ads. It is the structure of backgrounding demographic information (including age, body shape, and income) that we believe is most significant: Backgrounding appears to release ad placers from a focus on these variables, and thus frees them to emphasize the aspects of themselves that they wish to promote—all of this, of course, while rather ironically making these variables a standard and almost mandatory part of every person's ad.

Although this change in formatting and attractiveness presentation might seem insignificant from a functional or quantitative standpoint, we would like to emphasize the experiential importance of this change. For example, if I sit down to write up a paragraph saying "who I am", when demographic variables are backgrounded, I don't need to struggle with the creation of euphemisms for my age, my height, my weight, income, education, or any other key variable that is likely to cause insecurity. Instead, I can focus on the aspects of me that I've been told since kindergarten are what is supposed to matter—but often don't. I can mention my goals, my interests, my personality, and my character—just exactly, it appears, what these ad placers have done. And while we recognize that these changes in and of themselves may not revolutionize the relations between men and women, we do believe that they represent

a meaningful and somewhat surprising change.

At the same time, these issues get out on the table, through a variety of methods, so participants aren't forced to play an attractiveness roulette. If I fear that I will meet someone only to find out that they fear or are disgusted by my shocking red hair or the gap between my front teeth, these people can be sorted out ahead of time. In this way the approach of online personals allows what we have referred to as a reduction of uncertainty, making this a *reasonably* pleasant as well as potentially successful method for finding a life partner in our increasingly fragmented world.

Additionally and finally, since it appears that the use of the medium will increase in the future, we believe that these changes and their impact will as well. We are persuaded that the social and temporal pressures that currently characterize life in the United States are likely to intensify rather than to abate (Raybeck 2000), and consequently, more people from varied walks of life are increasingly apt to utilize the web to seek companionship ranging from casual to long term relationships. This study suggests that, employed judiciously, personal ads are a good preliminary means to identify promising possibilities. However, as in most walks of life, our study also indicates that pursuit of others via personals should be both tentative and cautious: Caveat prosequere!

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APPENDIX A
Additional information on creating a Webpersonals identity

Webpersonals.com Overview[1]

Your Identity is how other members find you and learn more about you. The information you provide can be seen by other members in the Romance Community. You can create an identity in more than one community, if you choose.

You can change any of the information by clicking on "my identity".

When completed, your Identity will consist of:

- ❖ Headline, Greeting, and Identity Name

- ❖ Your personal description

- ❖ Interest Highlights

- ❖ Text you write about yourself

Your Personal Profile is the first thing members see about you when they complete a search. It includes:

- ❖ Your Identity name

- ❖ Headline or On-line Greeting

- ❖ Your gender, age, location

- ❖ Your personal description

[options]

When do you want your Identity shown to other members [?]

- ❖ Show Identity always (your Identity can be found at all times by other members)

- ❖ Only show Identity when I am online (your Identity can only be found when you're online)

---

[1] Comments in square brackets are added by the authors.

❖ Hide Identity always (other members will not be able to find you)

Astrology Profile

❖ Allow other members to see my astrology profile

❖ Do not allow other members to see my astrology profile

❖ Only allow those on my Hotlist [members I have marked] or those I have given a "carrot" [sent an icon indicating interest] to see my astrology profile

(Note: Astro compatibility analysis is always shown unless you choose to hide your identity [astro compatibility is a percentage assigned to the predicted "hotness" of your pairing with another, predicted largely, it appears, by astrological forecasting based on birthdates].

Headline, Greeting, and Identity Name

Your Identity Headline and On-line greeting are what other members will see first.

Your Identity Name is what other members will use to find you again.

When you are on-line, members can see your Headline and Greeting. When you're not on-line, members will only see your Headline.

Your Identity headline:

Your on-line greeting:

(what others will know you by and search for you by)

Your Identity Name:

16 characters max. (letters, numbers, spaces)

Do not use your real name.

Personal Description

Any changes made to your Personal Description will only affect your profile in the Romance community. If you select "prefer not to say", you will not be found in the search results of members who have selected those criteria as part of their search.

Height: _____ feet _____ inches

Prefer not to say

Body Type [slim, average, fit, muscular, a few extra pounds; full-figured, heavy set]

Smoke [I do not smoke, I'm a social smoker, I'm a regular smoker; I'm trying to quit smoking]

Drink: [I do not drink, I drink socially, I drink regularly]

Ethnic:

Religion:

Interest Highlights

My idea of a fun date:

I like to talk about:

My friends would describe me as:

Describe yourself

What are you looking for in a relationship? Who would be perfect for you? Use the space below to create a personal message that will become part of your identity.

Want tips on getting started [sic], click on ad tips.

Use the ad starter feature if you want help creating a first draft.

What text is not acceptable here at Webpersonals. [sic] Click here to find out.

APPENDIX B

The Webpersonals' essay template and additional draft suggestions

It's not so hard to write a great ad! We can help you.

The trick is to be sure that your ad really shows off your unique and wonderful qualities. Don't waste your time rhyming off statistics! This is your chance to shine!

The following "Personal Interview" is meant to get you thinking about your special qualities. The interviewer will ask you a few questions. Under each question, you'll see several possible answers, each will blank fields for you to fill out. Use as many of the possible answers as you like. Just make sure they're consistent because everything you fill out will appear in your ad.

At the end, the interviewer will write an ad for you based on your responses. However, we recommend that you personalize your ad even more fully once you've had a chance to get a feel for what really works. Have fun with this and don't be reluctant to sing your own praises!

Ready?

I'm _____, but I think _____.

I'm more than just a _____, I'm also _____.

What do you really enjoy?

I love nothing more than _____.

I'm happiest when I'm _____.

My _____ is really important to me.

I spend a lot of time _____, but also like to _____.

What makes you unique?

Most people _____. Not me! I _____.

Don't tell anyone, but I'm a closet _____.

I'm _____ and would never _____.

What are you looking for?

The _____ of my dreams would be _____ and _____.

I really like _____ in a person.

I'm looking for _____.

Where do you hope all this will end up?

Basically, I'm hoping to find _____.

Let's _____ and see what happens!

(optional) True Love! This is where you describe your version of true love and include it in your profile.

When I first _____ your _____, I knew we had _____.

You were so _____.

It was wonderful, the way you _____.

To show how much you mean to me, I _____.

That's when we knew _____.

APPENDIX C
Full listing of the Webpersonals categories and response options.

My idea of romance includes:

A country drive

A drive-in movie

A horse drawn carriage ride

Moonlight swim

Picnic

A secret location

A singing telegram

A surprise at work

A trail of flower petals

A walk along the beach

A walk in the park/forest

A weekend getaway

Celebrating special dates

Champagne on ice

Chivalry/gallantry

Cuddling by a roaring fire

Dinner by candlelight

Dressing up for dinner

Flowers for no reason

Going to the opera

Going to the theater

Holding hands

Listening to music

Love letters

Love notes in special places

Love poems

Ordering in food

Random acts of kindness

Serenading my partner

Slow dancing

Snuggling by the TV

Special deliveries

Stargazing

Surprise gifts

Watching a sunrise/sunset

Things that I value:

A curious mind

A religious upbringing

A sense of humor

A sense of justice

A strong work ethic

An entrepreneurial spirit

Being a good listener

Being non-judgemental

Common sense

Compassion

Education/high intellect

Following a healthy lifestyle

Generosity

Good manners

Having a zest for life

Integrity

Knowing what you want from life

Loyalty

Non-materialism

Open communication

Open-mindedness

Openness

Optimism

Patriotism

Pragmatism

Putting your family first

Respect for animals

Respect for other cultures

Respect for the environment

Self-knowledge/awareness

Sensitivity

Showing affection freely

Social consciousness

Spirituality

Taking life as it comes

The ability to laugh at yourself

Thoughtfulness

I Enjoy in my Sparetime [sic]:

Arranging flowers

Arts and crafts

Autobiographies

Baking

Best-selling novels

Bird watching

Board games

Camping

Cards

Chatting on the web

Collecting

Cooking

Darts

Doing absolutely nothing

Fishing

Gardening

Golf

Horseback riding

Hunting

Listening to music

Meditation

My pet

Mystery novels

Non-fiction

Painting

Photography

Playing a musical instrument

Pottery/sculpting

Praying

Rock climbing

Rollerblading

Romance novels

Sailing

Shopping

Sleeping

Snowboarding

Spending time alone

Sunbathing

Surfing

Surfing the web

Traveling

Visiting a park

Volunteering

Watching sports

Windsurfing

Woodworking

Working out

Writing poetry

APPENDIX D
Initial codes and categories for the "values",
"spare time" and "romance" response options.

Things that I value

Personal Qualities

A curious mind

A sense of humor

An entrepreneurial spirit

Being a good listener

Common sense

Education/high intellect

Generosity

Having a zest for life

Knowing what you want from life

Optimism

Pragmatism

Self-knowledge

Awareness

Showing affection freely

The ability to laugh at yourself

Thoughtfulness

Social Style/Ethics

A religious upbringing

Following a healthy lifestyle

Good manners

Non-materialism

Open communication

Patriotism

Putting your family first

Respect for animals

Respect for other cultures

Respect for the environment

Spirituality

Taking life as it comes

A sense of justice

A strong work ethic

Being non-judgmental

Compassion

Integrity

Loyalty

Open-mindedness

Openness

Sensitivity

Social consciousness

I enjoy in My Spare Time

Crafts/Arts/Skills

Arranging flowers

Arts and crafts

Baking

Collecting

Cooking

Darts

Painting

Photography

Playing a musical instrument

Pottery/sculpting

Woodworking

Outdoors

Bird watching

Camping

Fishing

Gardening

Golf

Horseback riding

Hunting

Rock climbing

Rollerblading

Sailing

Snowboarding

Sunbathing

Surfing

Visiting a park

Windsurfing

Intellectual/Cultural

Autobiographies

Best-selling novels

Meditation

Mystery novels

Non-fiction

Praying

Traveling

Volunteering

Writing poetry

Entertainment/Self-indulgence

Board games

Cards

Chatting on the Web

Doing absolutely nothing

Listening to music

My pet

Sleeping

Spending time alone

Surfing the Web

Watching sports

Working out

My Idea of Romance Includes

Indoor

Champagne on ice

Cuddling by a roaring fire

Dinner by candlelight

Listening to music

Ordering in food

Snuggling by the TV

Outdoor

A horse drawn carriage

Moonlight swim

Picnic

A walk along the beach

A walk in the park/forest

Stargazing

Watching a sunrise/sunset

Gifts

A singing telegram

A surprise at work

A trail of flower petals

Flowers for no reason

Love notes in special places

Special deliveries

Surprise gifts

Going out

A country drive

A drive-in movie

A secret location

A weekend getaway

Going to the opera

Going to the theater

Slow dancing

Thoughtful Acts

Celebrating special dates

Chivalry/gallantry

Dressing up for dinner

Holding hands

Love letters

Love poems

Random acts of kindness

Serenading my partner

APPENDIX E
Coding Scheme for SELF and OTHER representations.

The following codes were used to categorize ad placers' descriptions of themselves and the desired others. In descriptions where more than one type of code would apply, the dominant code was used.

LOOKS: included discussion of height, weight, hair and eye color, body shape, size or style, as well as more subjective attributes/attributions as "sexy", "attractive", and "looks young".

CHARACTER: included statements about how the person is (or for the other, should be) such as honesty, fidelity, being compassionate, oriented toward God, "willing to look deeper and discover the spirit within", or being NOT "self-centered and egotistical".

LIFESTYLE: includes the things that the person likes to do ("love horses, outdoors, gardening, cooking/baking and country music. Love fires, inside and outside".) as well as the pace of life ("like the quiet life" or "possibly "work hard/play hard");

NONE: meant either a dearth of information or no clear emphasis.

SEX: we had only one ad placer for whom this was clearly the dominant concern (and he acknowledged being married, against the singles-only rule of Webpersonals).

COMPATIBILITY: While obviously only relevant to the other, meant emphasizing the extent to which the other fits in the ad placer's life".

NOTES

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[i] For comparative purposes, we also examined two sites of a more specialized nature, one for full-figured women and their admirers (Large-Encounters.com), and one devoted to sexual encounters (AdultFriendFinder.com). Since the data from these sites largely parallels that of the more general sites, they will be referred to only anecdotally here

[ii] This is also the topic of one of the few refereed articles we were able to find on internet personals: Parrott et al. 1997 use uncertainly reduction theory to investigate the ways in which persons solicit and communicate information in initial interactions.