

[DOI: 10.20472/IAC.2016.022.065](https://doi.org/10.20472/IAC.2016.022.065)

JOSEPH WILLIAMS
Texas A&M University at Qatar, Qatar

PROFILES AS PROSTHESES: EXTENDED NORMS AND IDENTITIES EXPLORED IN RELATION TO ONLINE DATING

Abstract:

Especially over the past ten years, it has become acceptable to date via the internet as well, online dating being defined as meeting online for the purpose of internet romance and chatting, face-to-face contact, romantic or sexual relationships. Through an exploration of prosthesis, analysis of online dating norming, and construction of online identity, the validity and effects of online dating profiles as prosthesis is addressed and answered.

First, a selection of leading philosophy will be explored in relation to societal norms and norming. Second, examination will be duly given to the construction of identity specifically for the purpose of online dating. The paper's third move will address the topic of misinformation. Finally, the paper ends with implications that attempt to answer why an online dating profile is indeed a modern prosthesis.

Keywords:

prosthesis, Foucault, identity, norming

Introduction

It is a banal fact that life has changed permanently for the vast majority of the world since the adoption and incorporation of the World Wide Web. As we also know, the internet has changed life in a mélange of aspects from commerce to publishing to job hunting and far and beyond. Especially over the past ten years, it has become acceptable to date via the internet as well, online dating being defined as meeting online for the purpose of internet romance and chatting, face-to-face contact, romantic or sexual relationships. At first, there was a great deal of trepidation for making romantic liaisons or meeting life partners online in the 1990s, but it is normal to question new societal norms. Eventually anxiety gave way to acquiescence, but it has now become a norm to the point that online dating is a booming industry. “According to estimates, 16 million Americans report having used online dating services, 3 million of whom have entered long-term relationships with their online dating partners, including marriage (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). In fact, seeking partners can easily extend from a town or village to a specific state to a specific town or village on the opposite side of the world. Muslims find Muslims suitable for marriage, Hindus find Hindus of the same caste, and there is a dating service to cater to every virtue, whim, fancy, or fetish for the right price; if indeed the price is right, then the next logical step is to create, compile, construct an online identity – a profile.

Why has online dating become so acceptable and far-reaching? “The multi-billion dollar industry in Internet dating and matching services attests to the popularity of cyberdating. This popularity may be attributable to the Internet’s flexible accessibility, creative opportunities, and perhaps most importantly, anonymity and new freedoms attending that anonymity” (Wang & Lu, 2007). In many instances, people are simply busy making a living, developing a career, and in spite of the intricate networks of global technology, they often find it difficult to locate the person or persons that could become a significant other. In other situations, location is the harbinger of finding a date: I personally know of several western ex-patriots who are interested in finding like-minded dates of the same religion; therefore, they cast the (inter)net to find suitability and compatibility. There are countless numbers of other cases that justify or rationalize the idea of finding romantic or sexual partners online, which can be addressed in a future paper. Ultimately, many societies have deemed it normal to seek out romantic partners or liaisons on the internet, be it match.com, e-harmony.com, gaydar, or hundreds of others.

A Paradigm Shift in Dating Norms

In clothing, interracial tolerance, daily communication, technology, and ultimately, in most facets of life, societal norms, like the English lexicon, evolve constantly. Norm shifting occurs everywhere: In his monumental book Discipline & Punish, Michel Foucault explores transient shifts in French societal norms in how the prisoner “should” be punished, how the model citizen “should” act, and how discipline “should” be enforced on

the public at large. Likewise, Edward Said's Orientalism explores shifts in norms over centuries in how "superior" western peoples have viewed "inferior" Asian cultures such as in the Middle East, the Subcontinent, and Far East; as well as how this is evolving to something less egocentric and condescending. To that end, researchers are interested in both the causes and long-term effects of online dating norms. Will this influence the longevity of marriage? Will quality of marriage alter? Are there simply too many choices – is there a deluge of choice on the dating menu – for a lasting relationship? What are repercussions of pre-online dating ritual norms in 2010 vs. online dating rituals (or lack thereof)?

In a sense, the online dating arena is somewhat akin to Foucault's concept of the Panopticon, in which the user never knows who is watching behind an "offline" user status, or who is perusing the user's hobbies and interests, scrutinizing the meta-message of a flippant description, or pilfering through the user's photo album. "Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere" (Foucault, 1977, p. 195). Some users check their profiles for messages hourly, seeking out sure signs of surveillance or interest. For example, gaydar allows users to view the "tracks" of users who have perused a profile...that is, unless the user selects the "hide tracks" option. People simply behave differently when their photos have been liked, their profile has been added as a favorite, or they receive some other positive or negative reinforcement. The whole point is to hook members of the dating audience so that they will want to take some sort of action, make a decision to proceed in some manner, be it for a fling, a date, or simple chat time to get to know each other better.

When considering the idea of societal norms, Foucault and Georges Canguilhem have explored them extensively. In his introduction to Canguilhem's book The Normal and the Pathological, Foucault writes, "Forming concepts is one way of living, not of killing life; it is showing, among these millions of living beings who inform their environment and are informed from it outwards, an innovation which will be judged trifling or substantial as you will: a very particular type of information" (Canguilhem, 1991, p 21). Although Canguilhem specifically addresses biological norms, his concepts can be extended and applied to societal norms, too. He quotes French psychiatrist Henri Ey:

"The normal man is not a mean correlative to a social concept, it is not a judgment of reality but rather a judgment of value; it is a limiting notion which defines a being's maximum psychic capacity. There is no upper limit to normality" (Canguilhem, 1991, p. 119).

Later, while defining "normal", Canguilhem writes that "normal is that which is met with in the majority of cases of a determined kind, or that which constitutes either the average or standard of a measurable characteristic." With the millions of people who practice it globally, online dating has become a "normal" dating venue. There are those who have not warmed to this new norm, but this could be said about many evolving norms in

society – racial equality in the workplace, gay marriage rights, and freedom of / from religion. Clearly in 2010, online dating is considered less-threatening than it was previously, as it can be seen by the millions of user profiles, and it challenges our precepts of how one should pursue the discovery of a significant other. In short, enough people have experienced online dating themselves or through the lives of friends and family, and enough people have met this medium with a level of success to proclaim it has a normal dating practice.

Online dating has become a million-dollar industry in our present day due in part to “safe” anonymity of the internet, the global permeability of online communication, the asynchronous nature of sending and receiving messages, and the freedom of extending outside of the user’s social circle. “The invention of the Internet does not merely give a new tool for information collection and circulation; it creates a virtual world that awakens and develops new dimensions of human interactions, revises the sense of authenticity, and excites new imaginations” (Wang & Lu, 2007). Anonymity of the internet allows users to break from social constraints and perhaps shift secondary characteristics of personality into the forefront: With this new frontier, a man can ask a woman out on a date or vice-versa, neither of whom feeling too threatened, since the playground can simply exist as a virtual one until both parties decide to meet. Dating practices have changed because society and technology have changed. Not long ago, most people lived in the same town or city all of their lives, expected to choose their other half from a cast that had grown up around them, with them. Families knew each other, and reputations preceded dating prospects. Life was slower, too. Although chatting is synchronous, the initial exchange of messages tends to be asynchronous, which allows the sender / receiver to scrutinize message details, intended nuances, clever word plays, elimination of unwanted clichés, all of which are intended to make each party more desirable. Online dating has also encouraged users to break from their own social circles, thereby circumnavigating around possible socially awkward moments, such as not liking a blind date that happens to be good friends with the user’s own friends. “Online dating provides people with significant freedom to make contact with new people without being accountable to their existing social networks” (Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008). Ultimately, if the online date doesn’t work out, there isn’t much social harm, and the unwanted date can be rejected, ignored, or dismissed with a clinical arc of the blade without social repercussions.

As societal norms shift, behavioral norms shift, too. User behavior on the internet – and its often-profound distinction between the user’s online behavior vs. offline behavior – is a hot topic. Dr. John Suler mentions precisely six factors that create an “online disinhibition effect,” namely dissociative anonymity, physical invisibility (with the absence of a functioning web cam), asynchronicity of sending and receiving messages, solipsistic introjections (absence of face-to-face cues encourages the receiver to imagine the sender’s voice and intonation as desired), dissociative imagination (seeing the internet as a make believe play world), and minimization of authority (Suler, 2004, p. 321). Due to

these six factors, users, whether exhibiting benign disinhibition or toxic disinhibition (positive or negative lack of inhibition respectively), feel more empowered and less restrained than ever before to cyberdate. Online dating allows people to search for specific traits in specific people at a specific location – the searching opportunities are endless and inexhaustible: If the person doesn't like anyone in one town, s/he can always cast the net larger and wider, depending on how far s/he intends to pursue.

Cyberdating has also indirectly encouraged a shift in sexual norms. Now more than ever, it is easy to arrange a date for a sexual encounter. While one side may view this as increased promiscuity, the other side could see this as enhanced sexual liberation. "Many people believe [sexual experimentation online] may potentially have positive, even therapeutic impact. For example, disinhibition, the reduction of inhibitions while online, may allow a sexually inhibited person to practice new, healthier behaviors that can then be transferred to real life (Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy, & Maheu, 2002). Coquettish flirtation can easily escalate to something altogether bolder under an assumed name. Moreover, websites such as squirt.com and manjam specifically cater to online users who want a no-frills, no-strings sexual liaison – something that would be unheard of a few decades ago. This shift in relaxing sexual norms is due to the internet's 24-hour accessibility as well as discretion of the nature of the internet – whether a person is single or married, an "upstanding" Christian or a member on a societal group's fringes, the people involved in the liaison can be as private (or public) as they desire. Another example of the expression of sexuality is frank chat talk. Chatrooms provide a cloak of anonymity as well as an outlet for sexual exploration. Fetishes of every creed are freely discussed online, games and toys are discovered and explored.

Just as norming occurs elsewhere, it occurs online, too. Specific jargon refers to all kinds of activity that is prolific and available on the internet. For example, an assortment of terms that can be explored or used for specific purposes on gaydar's website includes watersports, top / bottom / versatile, cut / uncut, and twinks / bears / jocks / bearchasers / chubbies among others. As terminology circulates amongst various web groups and dating sites, the concepts behind those terms, however dark and forbidden they might be, permeate society in general until they break through our psyche and ultimately, a new norm is born. Taboos are discussed until they reach a common banality, and all of a sudden, there are new sexual norms all over again.

Norms of special interest groups morph, too. 1920s feminism gave way to 1960s feminism, which brought the feminist diaspora we have presently. Norms of queer society have changed radically since the Stonewall Riots marked the beginning Gay Rights Movement 40 years ago. African American norms have changed dramatically since the Martin Luther King, Jr. era. It is only natural that the norms for cyborgs change, too – what it means to be a cyborg, what is 'normal' for a cyborg. Norms reflect specific times on a continuum, and now more than ever, online dating profiles are a prosthetic norm, an

unnatural extension of what our society is becoming and where it is headed; without them, we may not be considered as 'advanced' or savvy in the dating game as we could be otherwise.

Dating Identities

Like a prosthetic limb, the online dating profile is both an extension of the user and what partially comprises the user. "By providing access to millions of profiles and allowing for direct comparisons among them, dating in an online context can render self-presentational goals highly salient" (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). For some users of online dating websites, checking, enhancing, and updating their profiles becomes part of their daily routine. This other often feels as though part of him is missing, less-abled, when the profile has been compromised and hacked into, when it is not working properly, when it is missing. She may feel as though she is missing out, as though she is lacking an integral part of herself, her character. The search for the other's other is put on momentary hold until another profile is created. Real-world identity may even be briefly questioned as online identity is momentarily lost.

Identity is thoroughly explored, indirectly and / or directly, through the creation of an online dating profile. The creator must ask, "What AM I really like?" and "What qualities DO I want to reveal?" as well as "What image do I want to portray?" Ellison et al. discuss E.T. Higgins' three domains of the self: The *actual self* is a realistic, factual representation of an individual; the *ideal self* contains unrealistic if not romanticized qualities of the individual; and the *ought self* shows qualities that the individual should possess. Is the actual self the only one of the three that is accurate? If a user writes in his profile that he likes to paraglide, but he has only paraglided one time four years ago and he did this in tandem with an expert, is this an example of the actual, ideal, or ought self? The listing of the term "paraglider" in a dating profile is fairly impressive and implies fearlessness, masculinity, athleticism, and a considerable amount of risk-taking, all of which attract a considerable portion of the dating market. Perhaps the user's profile is a hybrid of all three in order to create the marketable "authentic" self.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes the phenomenon of the phantom limb in his piece Phenomenology of Perception, where pages 92-94 specifically mention the union of the psychic and the physiological. "Anosognosia and the phantom limb lend themselves neither to a physiological nor a psychological explanation, nor yet to a mixture of the two. We are imprisoned in the categories of the objective world, in which there is no middle term between presence and absence." Can we not say the same about the virtual representation of ourselves? The profile, too, is the presence of our representation, providing the illusion that we are available anytime and anyplace. We can be present with our appearing offline, or we can be absent with our status online but engaged in some activity far away from the computer. Regardless of whether or not the user is present or absent in front of the laptop, the spectacle remains.

Online dating profiles are a virtual extension of the self. It is an ideal version of ourselves: Visual rhetoric is carefully engineered so that others see exactly what we want them to see, the rest of which, namely unflattering qualities or marital status, may be obscured. In their discussion of self-presentation and self-disclosure, Ellison et al. quote Rowatt et al.: “When individuals expect to meet a potential dating partner for the first time, they will alter their self-presentational behavior in accordance with the values desired by the prospective date. In the next line, they also quote Schlenker & Pontari: “Even when interacting with strangers, individuals tend to engage in self-enhancement” (p. 417). Ultimately, we want to be liked, and we want to be desired. If we see that something isn’t attracting or enticing, we alter it. A short description of likes and dislikes may change to something lengthier without proper response; if they are too long, users cut them shorter and make them broader. Users of online profiles also have developed schemata for photograph stylistics: Men in athletic gear featured in blurred shots are possibly scanned photos from years before. Women who are photographed sitting down or in close-ups often intend to mask their body shape. Both may serve as examples of intentional miscommunication.

Each online arena provides insight into a user’s identity. “Different modalities of online communication (e.g., e-mail, chat, video) and different environments (e.g., social, vocational, fantasy) may facilitate diverse expressions of self” (Suler, 2004, p. 325). As two online users interact within the confines of various online media, more facets of identity surface, and with the prospect of a face-to-face encounter, it is more likely that each member is honest, revealing the “true” self. “If participants aspire to an intimate relationship, their desire to feel understood by their interaction partners will motivate self-disclosures that are open and honest as opposed to deceptive” (Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J., 2006, p. 417). There is clearly more at stake in a face-to-face meeting as opposed to a strictly online relationship; therefore, users tend to provide more accurate details of their identities outside of the internet.

Actual self, ideal self, ought self: The virtual self incorporates facets from all of these. Vital in our present day, the virtual self is a bonafide extension of who we are and who we believe ourselves to be. Helping us procure, parse, and select character traits that define nuances of our complicated selves, the virtual self grows in importance as we rely on these selves to fulfill the task of procuring a partner. We reveal these technological prostheses to others as we review and consider others’ virtual selves, having created a new dimension where “unreal” can quickly become “real”.

Conclusion

This paper argues that an online dating profile, though unconventional, is a valid example of the working definition of the modern-day prosthesis. It is clearly a prosthesis of the virtual world, attached to us by an artificial means, providing us with opportunities that we otherwise would be unable to accomplish. As these vessels permit us to seek romantic

partners or long-term relationships, they also allow us to challenge and slowly change societal norms as well as facets of our own identities. Although profiles are still in early stages of development, they are clearly extensions to our own selves. The future could propose other iterations. "New developments in Internet technology are adding new communicational capabilities to the internet, such as visuality and even a simulated sense of tactility (Wang & Lu, 2007, p. 13).

As definitions evolve, societal norms further incorporate online dating, and identities continue to morph and be explored, it is evident that the profile will represent us in more and more life facets, just as the concept of profile-as-prosthesis further establishes itself.

References

- Barraket, J., & Henry-Waring, M.S. (2008). Getting it on(line): Sociological perspectives on e-dating. *Journal of Sociology*, 44, 149-165.
- Brym, R., & Lenton, R. (2001). Love Online: A Report on Digital Dating in Canada. *msn.ca*, 1-54.
- Canguilhem, G. (1991). *The Normal and the Pathological*. New York: Zone Books.
- Cooper, A., Morahan-Martin, J., Mathy, R.M., & Maheu, M. (2002). Toward an Increased Understanding of User Demographics in Online Sexual Activities. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 28:2, 105-129.
- Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing Impressions Online: Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11, 415-441.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of a Prison*. New York: Random House.
- Hall, J., Park, N., Song, H., & Cody, M. (2010). Strategic misrepresentation in online dating: The effects of gender, self-monitoring, and personality traits. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27, 117-135.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Prosthesis. (n.d.). In *Encyclopedia Britannica online*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/479532/prosthesis>
- Prosthesis. (n.d.). In Longman's Online Dictionary. Retrieved from <http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/prosthesis>
- Prosthesis. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prosthesis>
- Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 7, 321-326.
- Thomson, R. G. (1997.) *Extraordinary bodies: figuring physical disability in American culture and literature*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Toma, C., Hancock, J., & Ellison, N. (2008). Separating Fact From Fiction: An Examination of Deceptive Self-Presentation in Online Dating Profiles. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34, 1023-1036.
- Wang, H., & Lu, X. (2007). Cyberdating: Misinformation and (Dis)trust in Online Interaction. *Informing Science Journal*, 10, 1-15.