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"Maybe we should assume that they're on Match.com with totally unrealistic expectations precisely because they can't function in the normal dating world": negotiating the stigma of online dating on Edatereview.com

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"MAYBE WE SHOULD ASSUME THAT THEY'RE ON MATCH.COM WITH

TOTALLY UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS PRECISELY BECAUSE THEY

CAN'T FUNCTION IN THE NORMAL DATING WORLD": NEGOTIATING

THE STIGMA OF ONLINE DATING ON EDATEREVIEW.COM

by

Shana Kopaczewski

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in Communication Studies
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

December 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Kristine Fitch

ABSTRACT

While more and more people choose to give online dating a try and the representations of online dating in popular culture are increasing, a stigma associated with the act of going online to find love still lingers.   The purpose of this dissertation is to look at people who use online dating services in order to explore how this group of people makes meaning from their experience with online dating, particularly how they negotiate the stigma of online dating. Using Goffman's theories on self-presentation and stigma, 200 recent posts to a website called eDateReview.com were inductively analyzed in order to answer two questions: (1) what rules for e-dating are present in the discourse on eDateReview, and (2) how do posters to the site engage issues of stigma in online dating? Analysis found five prominent guidelines for online dating emerged: (1) be honest in your presentation of self; (2) be honest with yourself about your successes and/or failures; (3) to be successful you have to put in the effort; (4) keep an open mind; (5) accept your own limitations. In regard to online daters' approach to stigma, the ideas that stigma is cumulative, there is a hierarchy at work when managing stigmas and a general language of distrust towards online dating emerged. Findings indicate that an increased use of technology is changing how people find and manage personal relationships. These changes are met with both skepticism and distrust creating a need for online daters to redefine through discourse what it means to be an online dater. Through the discourse on eDateReview.com online daters attempt to reaffirm a positive identity for themselves that they can present to others in order to maintain a consistent self image in light of the stigma associated with online dating.

Abstract Approved: _____

Thesis Supervisor

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Title and Department

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Date

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Shana Kopaczewski

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the
thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in
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you could have said (and let's be honest, most times you actually did say) "I told you so." While it is cold here in your shadow, you are the wind beneath my wings.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

> Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories. Social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there. The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought. When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his "social identity" … as well as structural ones like "occupation." (Goffman, 1963)

In Goffman's 1963 book *Stigma,* he conceptualizes stigma as violating society's expectation for what is "ordinary and natural" for members of particular groups. Those people who hold less desirable attributes outside what is expected are said to have a stigmatized or tainted identity. Goffman purports that people with such tainted identities must take special care in how they present themselves to others. They must constantly determine what of the undesirable attribute to disclose or hide and how to manage their presentations in certain situations and in the presence of certain others. The idea of stigma is the foundation of this study. In modern society the expectation for what is ordinary and natural in regard to heterosexual adults is that they will find a mate and start a family. Those people of a certain age who have not yet found a mate and started a family have the less desirable attribute of being single. However, there is an equally ingrained expectation of what is an ordinary and natural way for a single person to find a mate with whom to start a family. Online daters are seen as violating the expectation for dating practices by meeting potential partners online, and so they maintain a doubly tainted identity. The idea of tainted identity in this research refers to the stigma of online partner pursuit. This dissertation will seek to explore how online daters manage their presentations of self through their posts on eDateReview.com, a discussion board set up to offer reviews of online dating services by those who have used the

services.

According to DePaulo and Morris (2005) to be single in contemporary American society entails facing prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping. American culture places great emphasis on sexual partnership as the ideal peer relationship and adheres to an ideology where marriage and family are the required state of being, such that remaining single (i.e. not married and not living with a romantic partner) signifies deviance.   In a society where falling in love is seen as a transcendent experience and a rite of passage from youth to adulthood,

> single people are presumed to be leading sadder and less exciting lives than people who are coupled. People who have not made the journey to adulthood that romantic love entails are by definition less mature than people who have. Locked out of the life of couples, singles are also likely to be regarded as lonely and deprived of adventures and fun. (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, p. 60)

Reynolds and Taylor (2004) argue that there is a prevalent discourse in Western societies that people should find love, date, marry, have children, and grow old together. Single people fail to meet this cultural expectation. I plan to explore how singles manage this deviant status and the social implications it entails. The use of the Internet to facilitate meeting romantic partners and mate selection is a relatively new phenomenon which is changing the public discourse of dating and mate selection. From a communication perspective it is important to understand how people navigate their identity in light of this changing discourse, particularly how they manage any potential stigma associated with deviating from traditional relational norms and expectations. The Internet impacts many aspects of human interaction and this study seeks to expand an academic understanding of the Internet's impact on identity and relationship formation through the discourse of online daters.

As society grows increasingly dependent upon the Internet, singles increasingly seek romantic relationships online. According to Hollander (2004) 16.6 million people visited matchmaking websites in September 2002 alone. The popularity of online dating raises issues of identity where the labels of "single" and "Internet dater" combine. The scope of this project is limited to looking at online daters, and it is important to clarify the concept of an online dater. There are a number of people who use the Internet to facilitate interactions with other people for a number of reasons. For the purpose of this study an online dater is someone who participates in an online dating service geared toward aiding singles in their search for long-term romantic partners. Through participation in sites such as eharmony and match.com it can be assumed that online daters are single people looking to meet and eventually date other single people in order to not be single anymore. This discounts social networking sites such as facebook and friendster, where the primary function is to maintain established friendships and meet new friends. Though there are instances where these sites facilitate a dating relationship, this is not the primary goal in most cases, and for this dissertation they would not be considered online daters. An online dater is also distinct from those who use the Internet specifically to meet partners for erotic chat, or to "hook up", or have sex offline. Again, there may be instances of users on dating sites that are hoping to "hook up", but that is not the primary expressed function of the online dating sites studied here and one can presume that most online daters participating in these sites have an agenda that goes beyond a casual sexual encounter.

This study explores the impression management of online daters in the online space of eDateReview.com. This website is an online forum for users of online dating sites to rate such sites on a scale from one to five, and to post comments or questions regarding the dating sites. In this space "real people" can

voice their own experience and read the experiences of others. eDateReview is a unique site because people who post disclose the fact that they have used online dating services, presumably to find a romantic partner, and then have to manage the impression they give to viewers of the site.

In this dissertation I argue that the phenomenon of online dating represents a shift from the traditional means of mate selection typically viewed as natural, and that while the phenomenon is growing in popularity there continues to be a stigma associated with online dating. Thus people who use online dating will discursively attempt to negotiate that stigma in their presentations of self. In order to describe and establish societal expectations of what is ordinary and natural, I will briefly describe current personal relationship research, to show that a bias toward face to face interaction creates an expectation for face to face social interactions. I will then discuss the changing nature of courtship and dating to illustrate how such changes both reflect and affect meanings assigned to dating decisions. Again this establishes the expectations of how dating should occur and explicates that society's reaction to changes in those expectations are often met with negative assumptions about the people who veer from tradition. Because I am not only exploring an online discourse, but am also looking at a group of people who go online to seek personal relationships, the next section will look at computer mediated communication (CMC). First I will look at CMC as a general area of research followed by a look at online dating research more specifically. This section will examine how research frames the differences and limitations of online dating, further illustrating the fact that the decision to date online is stigmatized behavior among scholars as well as among the lay public. Finally, Goffman's theory of impression management and stigma will be used as a framework to

explore how users of online dating services negotiate their presentations of self in light of the stigma attached to their decision to use such services.

<div align="center">Personal Relationship Research</div>

Current personal relationship research has primarily focused on face to face interaction creating a gap in understanding the situation of online relationships. Relationship research predominantly centers on face to face relationships and the relational processes involved in those face to face interactions. According to Wood and Duck (1995), current personal relationship research has concentrated on relationships such as friendship, courtship, and marriage, and relational processes such as self-disclosure, conflict, and social exchange frameworks that occur within those relationships. Thus, relational research focusing on online relationships and the processes at work in online interactions remains a significant gap (Lea & Spears, 1995). The research on face to face relationships produces rules and expectations for relationships that may not be exactly applicable to Internet dating. Online relationships may be formed and operate in unique ways, but there is an important connection between online dating and the face to face interaction that follows. As conceptualized in this study, online dating is the act of utilizing online dating services to meet potential dating partners. Online dating is therefore a precursor to face to face dating which plays an important role in setting expectations for the initial face to face interaction. The following section outlines face to face relationship research.

Lea and Spears (1995) discuss relational research about physical proximity and appearance. Research has demonstrated the importance of physical proximity and appearance in attraction and mate selection (Rubenstein, 2005). This physical aspect of attraction may also operate online. For example, the ability to post pictures on many dating sites as well as the routine use of textual descriptors of physical appearance, such as height and body type, suggest that

appearance is no less important in online spaces than in face to face relationships. As such, the presentation of one's physical appearance online may have a great impact on the initial meeting. If the virtual image of a person does not match their image in person, the discrepancy may influence the other person's reaction.

In discussing the role of proximity in mate selection and attraction, it is important to also mention that there is a growing body of research being done on long-distance relationships (LDRs). What constitutes an LDR varies but as Rohlfing (1995) states, the criteria are typically related to distance and ability to meet face to face. Research on long-distance relationships has focused primarily on how relationships are sustained when participants are separated geographically, and what impact that separation has on the relationship in terms of satisfaction, intimacy, and commitment (Rohlfing, 1995). This study is only interested in the initial formation of relationships through online dating, rather than the more developed relationships to which LDR research pertains.

Research on personal relationships also emphasizes the importance of spoken interaction, because key components for relational building and maintenance, such as paralinguistic cues, can only occur through talking (Clark & Reis, 1988; Hornstein, 1985). Given the textual nature of early interactions in online dating, traditional paralinguistic cues are not available for constructing meaning. This again impacts the adjustment from an online relationship to a face to face one, as communicative nuances may impact how messages are received and interpreted. However, there is also research which shows that there are ways to communicate affinity messages in textual rather than vocal form (Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005). Lea and Spears (1995) state that the focus of most relationship research produces findings supporting the primacy of face-to-face relationships over those which occur through online interaction, but this is likely because the research was largely produced before Internet dating was

prevalent, and simply means more research is needed to examine the nature of personal relationships online, particularly the adjustment that relationships go through when they move from online to offline. As the Internet becomes an ever larger presence in dating practices, it is important to remember that dating and mate selection are not static rituals in American society, and the advent of Internet dating may be one of the next steps in the evolution of courtship. The following section examines the evolution of dating and courtship more closely.

<u>The Changing Nature of Courtship</u>

The changing nature of courtship and dating illustrates how such changes both reflect and affect meanings assigned to dating decisions. According to Ingoldsby, (2003) courtship as a relational stage in America started with the Puritans, who distrusted singlehood and saw marriage as necessary for successful living. In this period, courtships were brief and were essentially engagements agreed upon by the suitor and the father of the woman he was interested in. The foundation for such marriages was mostly economic, and ideas of love and personal fulfillment were secondary at best, but slowly growing in importance. It was during this time that courtship rituals became formal, including engagement announcements, rings, and wedding ceremonies (Ingoldsby, 2003). In the mid 1800's, the Industrial Revolution had a large impact on courtship and mate selection as social networks and people's relational needs and expectations changed in urban settings. The Victorian era saw a greater emphasis on love and very rigid rituals for courtship, whereby parents kept close watch over the couple and almost all interactions were chaperoned (Ingoldsby, 2003). Bailey (1988) argues that in twentieth century America, courtship gradually evolved into dating as couples moved from chaperoned in-house meetings to "going out," meeting in public away from the control of parents. Bailey also argues that the growth of magazines and books

which gave advice on dating and courtship slowly changed the cultural ideas of what dating should be, and what was considered appropriate behavior for a dating couple.   Bailey (1988) examined articles and columns in 29 mass circulated magazines, etiquette books, and text books published from 1900 to 1960 and argued that the shifting analogies and metaphors used in these publications changed how the culture understood dating and influenced the meaning of an individual's dating acts and decisions. "Advice columns and etiquette books emphasized that these were the manners of any 'well-bred' person- and conversely implied that deviations revealed a lack of breeding" (Bailey, 1988).   Mass media such as radio and film further changed the language of courtship, popularizing relational metaphors such as "love at first sight," "true love," "forever love," and in doing so changed the way dating was understood. Romantic love became the goal and expectation of dating. This love could overcome any barrier, would lead to marriage and family and last forever if one could find it (Merrill, 1959).

Though the nature of dating is a changing one it is important to note that dating scripts and expectations for date interactions have remained relatively stable since the 1950's (Laner & Ventrone, 2000; Rose & Frieze, 1989; Rose and Frieze, 1993). Despite claims towards more egalitarian attitudes in young adults, dating scripts continue to reflect traditional practices such as emphasizing traditional dominant/subordinate relationship between the sexes (Laner & Ventrone, 2000). Dating scripts include the ideas that men are expected to ask for and plan the date, drive, pay, and initiate physical contact while women are expected to wait to be asked for a date, be concerned about appearance, keep the conversation going, and reject physical contact (Rose & Frieze, 1993). In the age of the Internet, cultural discourse about dating, and online dating in particular, may both reflect and shape a changing understanding of dating and meanings

derived from dating decisions.

While the means of meeting potential mates is shifting, there is still an expectation in the U.S. that people will date before they marry, creating a tension between social expectations and cultural means for meeting those expectations. Merskin and Huberlie (1996) argue that modern times have changed strategies for finding mates: Urbanization, industrialization, the changing nature of family and religion, all contribute to a society where traditional methods of finding mates such as match makers and arranged marriages are unworkable. Merskin and Huberlie suggest that these changes make mate finding more difficult, and force people to find new ways to seek potential partners. They propose media dependency theory as a way of conceptualizing a move to personal ads as an accepted means of finding a mate:

> Media dependency can be defined as "a relationship in which the capacity of individuals to attain their goals is contingent upon the information resources of the media system." The basic propositions of the theory are that people in all societies need information to make numerous decisions about political affairs; to obtain food, shelter, and transportation; and to find a mate. (Merskin & Huberlie, 1996)

The migration of personal ads from alternative papers into mainstream newspapers is a reflection of society's growing need for and acceptance of personal ads as a solution to dating difficulties brought about by changes in modern culture (Merskin & Huberlie, 1996). One could also say that with the growing ubiquity of computers and the Internet in contemporary society, the online personal ad is another move to utilize media as a resource for goal attainment in an evolving society. E-dating[1] has become part of a cultural

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[1] According to Madden and Lenhart (2006) online dating behaviors include: 1)flirting online, 2)going to an online dating site, 3)asking someone for a date online, 4)going online to get information about offline places to meet potential dating partners such as a nightclub, 5)being introduced to a potential date by a third party using e-mail or instant messaging, 6)participating in an online group where you hope to meet people to date, 7)searching for information about people you have dated in the past or will be meeting for a date, 8)maintaining a long distance relationship, or 9)breaking up with someone online. Though there are many

discourse about dating, and the implications of the decision to e-date for individuals as well as couples' identities have not been explored. Given the current popularity of using computers to facilitate dating, research on the phenomenon is increasing, and it is important to look at the ways computer-mediated communication (CMC) and more specifically online dating are conceptualized and discussed by scholars. The following sections give an overview of this literature.

<div align="center">Computer-Mediated Communication</div>

Before exploring eDateReview.com, it is useful to take a closer look at the historical context of how computer technology came to hold such influence in interpersonal interaction the general state of computer-mediated communication (CMC) research. "The Internet is but the latest in a series of technological advances that have changed the world in fundamental ways" (Bargh & McKenna, 2004, p. 575). It seems with each new technology over the last 200 years there has been a concern about what impact it will have on community, and the Internet is certainly no exception (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). The telegraph was the first technology which allowed messages to travel faster than people and it was greeted with both great optimism and fear. The potential to communicate over great distance in short time frames was a power that could be used for good or bad. Bargh and McKenna draw comparisons between the Internet users of today and the telegraph operators of the mid-1800's in that operators tended to talk "online" and form relationships with each other when business was light (2004). The telephone opened communication by allowing anyone to talk point to point over distance, rather than only a few trained

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ways the Internet can be used to facilitate dating, this research is primarily concerned only with those people who have participated in an online dating service. References to "online dating" or "e-dating" therefore refer to the use of online dating services to meet potential partners for dating.

operators, which ended up strengthening ties between family and friends otherwise too distant to visit often, but despite this connective property, people continued to speculate that the telephone would ultimately have a negative effect on family and other relationships (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). The radio was the next big communication technology, and with it came the ability to communicate without being hardwired from point to point. Again this breakthrough was seen as both freeing and frightening. Television was the last big communication technology prior to the Internet. Bargh and McKenna (2004) argue that while people speculated and feared the impact other communication technologies would have on community ties and relationships, television had the greatest real impact as it allowed families to stay home for their entertainment rather than going out, and it is this actual effect of a technology on community ties that set up a concern for the impact the Internet would have on relationships, as time spent online is often not time spent with family and friends despite its usefulness in the formation and/or maintenance of relationships over long distances. As with previous technologies, the emerging ubiquity of the Internet has been met with both optimism and skepticism. According to research from the PEW Internet and American Life Project:

> The internet has become increasingly important to users in their everyday lives. The proportion of Americans online on a typical day grew from 36% of the entire adult population in January 2002 to 44% in December 2005. The number of adults who said they logged on at least once a day from home rose from 27% of American adults in January 2002 to 35% in late 2005. And for many of those users, the internet has become a crucial source of information-- Pew Internet & American Life Project show that fully 45% of internet users, or about 60 million Americans, say that the internet helped them make big decisions or negotiate their way through major episodes in their lives in the previous two years. (Horrigan & Raine, 2006, p. 1)

The convenience of the Internet for facilitating tasks such as shopping, buying a home, furthering job training, and gaining information about health issues has

increased the use and acceptance of the technology. There is however a lingering skepticism regarding the Internet's role in interpersonal relationships, particularly when it relates to meeting people online. As presented in another PEW report, research shows that a large number of people, 74% of 10 million single Internet users, claim they have used the Internet to facilitate romantic interests, and despite the large number of people going online to look for love, 66% of Internet users agreed with the statement that going online to date was dangerous, and 57% believed that many people who use online dating sites lie about their marital status (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). These findings echo the arguments made by Bargh and McKenna (2004) that new developments in technology are often met by fears regarding the impact that technology will have on communities.

As the Internet has become increasingly prevalent in schools, homes, and workplaces, it has become an important mode of communication, but the Internet of today is different than the earliest form of the technology. The Internet began in the US Defense Department as a means of data sharing, linking computers rather than people, though it was not long before the technology was tweaked to allow for e-mail between users. The technology became ever more popular as a means of interacting with others and building relationships. The technology continued to develop and now includes instant messaging, discussion boards, chat rooms, multi-user dimensions, multiple-player online games, blogs, online dating sites, etc. and allows users to utilize not only text, but sound, pictures, and video to communicate. As the technology improves and expands, the possibilities for meeting and interacting with others online improves and expands as well (Whitty & Carr, 2006).

Research regarding CMC is growing, but still represents an area where considerable research is needed, specifically in the area of personal relationships

facilitated by CMC (Lea & Spears, 1995). CMC research has often focused on groups, as demonstrated by several meta-analyses reviewing research on CMC and groups (McLeod, 1992; Rains, 2005; Walther & Anderson, 1994). In many cases research that examines group interaction online is focused on support groups (Barkhi, 2005; Bass, McClendon, Brennan, & McCarthy, 1998; Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001; VanLear, Sheehan, Withers, & Walker, 2005) or task related groups for organizational purposes (Becker-Beck, Wintermantel, & Borg, 2005; Zornoza, Ripoll, & Peiró, 2002). Another substantial area of CMC research looks at the ways computers and technology have been used in education to facilitate distance learning (Anderson, 1996; Bricout, 2001; Fung, 2004; Johnson & Huff, 2000). Looking at CMC from these perspectives furthers an understanding of how CMC can be utilized for specific purposes when it is less convenient or too expensive to gather in person.

Another area of CMC research that is particularly relevant to this project is the area of online reviews. Because eDateReview.com is explicitly established as a consumer review site for online dating services, it is important to look at research pertaining to the phenomenon of online reviews. According to Sher and Lee (2009), "the use of the Internet as a channel for expressing opinions on products has become an important marketing tool to compete for consumer attention and visits" p. 137. Chatterjee (2001) maintains that online reviews can be categorized as word-of-mouth (WOM) information on products and services. Typically WOM information is a highly influential communication channel, especially in a society where advertisements are met with increasing skepticism (Chatterjee, 2001; Sher & Lee, 2009). However Chatterjee goes on to note that because in online WOM information sources are relatively unknown, and the recipient of the information cannot assess similarity, expertise, and accessibility to determine credibility, online WOM information can only be regarded as weak

tie information which is less convincing than strong tie information. Regardless of the strong or weak tie associated with online reviews, businesses recognize the value in providing consumers an online venue to voice their opinions and may even offer incentives for consumers who contribute (Tedeschi, 1999). For the scope of this dissertation however, the focus lies less on the review aspects of the site and more on the presentations of self that occur in the midst of the online reviews. The question of whether eDateReview.com is an advertising tool set up to serve the corporate interests of various online dating sites is less a concern than the discourse for which the site provides a forum.

Another area of CMC research that is relevant to edateReview.com is that of online advice giving. As it will be discussed later in chapter three, the posts on eDateReview.com veer from simply reviewing online dating sites into a much broader discussion of online dating, part of which could be considered advice giving. Research on advice giving has typically focused on spoken or face to face encounters such as interactions in medical encounters(Sarrangi & Clark, 2002), student counseling (He, 1994), or even call in radio talk shows (Hutchby, 1995). Advice columns such as *Dear Abby* have also been an area of research interest which focuses on the specific format of question-and-answer style advice columns. These columns offer readers practical advice on specific issues that may be of concern (Currie, 2001). However with the growing use of the Internet, there has also been an increase in research on online advice giving and seeking. While some research has looked very specifically at online advice columns which focus on the question-and-answer format (Locher, 2006), other research has looked at advice given through discussion boards, which is much closer to the format offered at eDateReview.com. Armstrong and Powell (2009) studied the use of online discussion boards as a space for people living with long-term health conditions to both offer and seek advice, support, and information. The study

found that Internet discussion boards serve as a cheap and interactive way to satisfy a need to be in contact with their peers. Given this understanding of online discussion boards as a need fulfilling form of communicating with similar others, one could draw the conclusion that posters and visitors to eDateReview.com may see participation on the site as a way to connect to other online daters, which may explain why the posts so often offer much more information about the posters and their experiences than a typical service review. It is also important to note here that the site eDateReview.com does not easily facilitate offline interactions between users. That is to say posters give and get very little contact information for other posters. There is no direct chat or e-mail capability attached to other users on the site. The only way to communicate is through the public posts, so the presentations of self are not intended to solicit communication or offline interaction. They are not trying to attract potential partners, but rather as indicated in the literature of discussion boards, merely trying to fulfill a need to interact online with other online daters simply for information, support and advice. This lends a sense of authenticity to the information posted, as there would be very little benefit in creating an idealized or false presentation of self.

Nonetheless, research exploring the discourses that occur in online forums where the participants are not regular members of a site, nor members of a group looking to accomplish a shared task, is still an under explored area of relationship research. CMC can be used for fleeting and casual contact with others, and on sites like eDateReview, those connections are preserved and displayed for an extended period of time. This longevity makes a brief interaction more permanent and accessible than the typical face-to-face interaction. Looking at a site like eDateReview offers an opportunity to explore not just how people use CMC, but also a chance to explore discourse about how

people who use CMC for online dating understand personal relationships and identity.

<div align="center">Relational CMC</div>

Beyond task and group functions, CMC has also been looked at as a strictly social phenomenon, and it is important to consider the ways CMC has become a unique method for meeting and interacting with others purely for social purposes. Approaches to social and relational aspects of CMC have looked at personal e-mail in the workplace (Rice & Love, 1987; Finholt & Sproull, 1990), MOO's (Multi-User Dimensions, Object Oriented) and MUD's (Multi-User Dimensions) (Curtis, 1992, Reid, 1995; Utz, 2000), as well as online dating and romantic relationships (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Merkle & Richardson, 2000; Smaill, 2004; Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & Brown McCabe, 2005). One area gaining research priority in relational CMC is the social networking websites such as Facebook and Myspace (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Stutzman, 2006; Tufecki, 2008; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Social networking sites are defined as, "a category of Web sites with profiles, semi-persistent public commentary on the profile, and a traversable publicly articulated social network displayed in relation to the profile" (Tufecki, 2008, p. 22). These social networking sites represent a unique space for people to create a presentation of self, maintain and create social ties, and gather information about others (Walther et al, 2008).

There is significant discussion in this research about whether or not relationships can form and function outside face-to-face interaction, and about the differences between CMC and FtF interactions, and particularly in the case of social networking sites, issues of privacy and the connection between online and offline social environments. The impact of online dating is typically conceptualized as an individual one, however, and there is little research on the

social implications of online dating. The research here will look to build on current research of CMC as a social phenomenon particularly as it relates to online dating and personal ads, with focus on the ways people talk about online dating.

Research on Online Dating

Online dating research has typically taken two approaches: studies that analyze online personal ads, and studies that compare interacting online to other romantic interactions. Lea and Spears (1995) state that most relational research shows a bias for face-to-face interactions and relationships, and that there is a need to conceptualize a different way of looking at online relationships in light of this bias. The assumption is that online dating is different and outside the "normal" means of meeting people. This assumption implies that if someone turns to online dating services, they have probably done so only after failing at other, more traditional means of finding a mate.

Online Personal Ads

> The innovative "rationality" of the personals lies in the notion that the specification of attributes and interests possessed and looked for can be a short cut to finding a compatible person. (Hollander, 2004, p. 69)

Hardey (2002) contends that online dating takes some of the effort out of locating potential partners. With online dating, thousands of potential applicants are at your fingertips. One need not get all dressed up, go out, and risk face-to-face rejection; nor is the possible range for selection limited to the people one happens to have personal contact with. Some researchers assert that the concept of online dating reflects a consumer approach to dating (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1991; Smaill, 2004). Adelman and Ahuvia argue that online dating is part of a larger consumerist movement which has made dating a mass communication trend. The authors call this the marriage market, and claim that these services operate

under the marketing principles of searching, matching, and transacting. Ultimately they conclude that this market approach changes the nature of dating on a larger scale, as people feel more like applicants in an interview than people looking to connect romantically (Adelman & Ahuvia, 1991). Similarly, Smaill (2004) argues that online dating agencies feed into a larger consumer ideology which already exists, and that such services seek to interpellate self-actualizing and enterprising individuals with narratives of choice and "making the most of life" through romantic interactions. Smaill also argues that these online dating sites equate failure to find someone with failure to be a competent consumer, as well as failing to "make the most of life."

<div align="center">Relationships Online</div>

There has been a concentration of research attempting to pinpoint just how online interaction is different than in face to face situations, and the impact that difference may have on the formation of relationships online. Walther (1995) looked at the difference in relational communication between face-to-face groups and computer-mediated communication groups. He expected to find that aspects of relational communication such as immediacy, affection, composure, and relaxation would be higher among face-to-face groups initially, but given time would level out until computer-mediated groups matched face-to-face interactions on those measures. Instead, he found that computer mediated groups rated as high or higher than face to face ones from the beginning, and that in groups where the levels where similar to start, computer mediated groups surpassed face-to-face groups over time. McQuillen (2003) called this phenomenon hyperpersonal communication, and posited that it may occur as compensation for the lack of immediacy in online forms of communication. Conceptually, hyperpersonal communication may impact how people present themselves in personal ads, increasing the number and intimacy

of disclosures, and also the degree to which people looking at ads interpret the information as being adequately or inadequately revealing about the other.

McQuillen also states that computer-mediated communication can foster idealized perception of potential partners because of the limited number of cues one has to base his or her perception of others. An online dater may identify strongly with another's group affiliation, e.g. Democrat, Catholic, non-smoker, and make assumptions based on that information, causing him or her to idealize the other and see the other as "the perfect person." Additionally, users may over-attribute personality based on cues such as spelling or grammar (McQuillen, 2003). Hancock and Dunham (2001) state that this over-attribution based on stereotypes is exaggerated by the lack of other available cues in a computer mediated context, as well as the idea that there is more control over what is disclosed via computer. The issue of over attributing based on limited information and control over presentation becomes important in the area of personal ads because it supports the idea that the way one presents him/herself in a personal ad may be assessed differently by a reader than if they were in a face-to-face interaction, with other kinds of information available. However, it may well be that this form of stereotyping online does not function differently than impressions that are formed in face-to-face interactions based on limited information. Hancock and Dunham (2001) go on to say that there is no research available saying that the intensified impression of initial computer interactions would impact the relationship over time.

Another prevalent theory associated with online relationships is the social identification/deindividuation (SIDE) model. This model is based in self-categorization theory and social identity research (Lea & Spears, 1995). Essentially this theory holds that the individual is made up of many categories they consider part of who they are, and each of those categories have

characteristics assigned to them. The theory goes on to state that based on context, a person will exhibit the characteristics associated with the appropriate category, so that an individual does not exist in a group, but rather the group (as a set of characteristics and expectations) resides in the individual (Whitty & Carr, 2006). The SIDE model purports that the lack of traditional social cues in computer-mediated communication does not mean there are a lack of cues, but rather cues are given based on social categories which are easily conveyed online (Spears & Lea, 1992). Similar to the idea of over-attribution asserted by both McQuillen (2003) and Hancock and Dunham (2001), the lack of cues which allow for individuation online may increase the importance of a salient social identity (Whitty & Carr, 2006).

These factors of online communication - restricted nonverbal cues, the potential for misperception, over attribution, and misrepresentation - clearly have an effect on how people interpret information about others. These factors also clearly affect how people present themselves online. Lea and Spears (1995) argue that the nature of online communication increases the users' ability to more carefully manage the impression they give. Internet users have a high level of control over what information is shared, and due to the drafting and editing capabilities available on computers, people can monitor and amend what they say and how they say it before anyone else sees the communication. Online interaction in multiple forms whether it is e-mail or personal ads, can be seen as strategic communication through which people purposefully choose what information is and is not included for a desired result. Though the medium for interaction may be different, and as a result there may be some unique qualities of online communication, online communication is still communication and remains governed by many of the same rules. Even online people have to present themselves in coherent, convincing, and attractive ways, which is the

same goal in face to face interactions. However, researchers approach online

dating from a discourse of difference and limitation, creating a gap in the online

dating research.

Perceptions of Online Dating

Although Internet dating has become part of the cultural landscape

through representation in films and television (e.g. *Must Love Dogs, you've Got*

Mail, Log in for Love), there is still a discourse of stigma attached to the practice of

online dating. A 2003 *New York Times* article discusses the idea that online dating

is starting to lose its stigma as "losers.com" (Harmon), while an editorial posted

in an online magazine dedicated to Internet dating is titled "Overcoming the

Stigma of Online Dating- What Are We Embarrassed For?" (Lawrence, 2004). On

the Online Dating News Blog a contributor posted this comment:

> Even though more than 120,000 people are married a year as a result of
> online dating, a stigma still clearly exists with mainstream society. I think
> you will find the stigma stronger in people who are married (but didn't
> meet via online dating) and those who have never used an online dating
> service. Ironically, at any given place of work, a large number of single
> workers are probably doing online dating, but would never admit it !
> (Tracy, 2007, para. 5)

Researchers also recognize that there is a stigma associated with online

dating, creating a potentially negative impression for those who use internet

dating services. According to Smaill (2004) there is a stigma attached to using

personal ads that began with print ads and extended to internet personal ads.

Personal ads represent a breach of norms because they involve moving a

traditionally personal and private practice into the public sphere. It is this

crossover which makes people uncomfortable and leery of the process. Goodwin

(1990) further supports this idea of stigma and states that it is not just the process

that is distrusted, but the people that use personal ads as well. Goodwin states

that there is an assumption that "because an individual goes to a dating agency

he or she is in some way 'different' – perhaps particularly socially inept or inadequate on some other dimension" (p. 424). Goodwin's study compared members of an international dating agency (not online) with a group of students who did not participate in a dating agency. He found some significant differences in dating skills and assertion between the two groups and ultimately concluded that people who use dating agencies were in fact less socially competent. This study was conducted before the Internet and therefore, did not look at online dating services, but 31 percent of American adults, 63 million people, claim they know someone who has used a dating website. (Madden & Lenhart, 2006) Goodwin's research remains relevant in light of the move to online dating services. Goodwin's findings raise the question of whether online daters are different than non online daters. Additionally, Goodwin's assertion that people assume those who use dating agencies are somehow socially inept should be re-examined.

The stigma of e-dating remains despite the growing number of people who participate in online dating agencies. Going online to find romantic partners is seen as a last resort and the act of someone who is not normal. According to a PEW Internet and American Life report 29% of Internet users believe that online daters are "in dire dating straits." (Madden & Lenhart, 2006) In a 2007 article Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer studied narratives of 202 online daters and found that one of the major themes reported by online daters was a negative response from offline social networks.

> Participants' messages focused on the way offline family and friends seemed to think people online were 'psychos and serial killers.' One participant mentioned, 'My friends and family thought that he was some weirdo from the net that was going to erase me from the face of the earth.'… These participants mentioned that family and friends thought it was 'impossible' to really know someone over the Internet. One participant shared, 'I think there is a huge stigma attached to meeting

people online. Non-computer users don't think it is possible to meet a normal person on the net.' (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007)

Part of the lingering stigma of online dating could be attributed to the conflation of online dating with going online to initiate a sexual encounter. Albright (2008) notes that research of online sex seekers has focused in part on its negative aspects, such as the danger level involved, and the categorization of online sex seekers as addicts. The popular show *To Catch a Predator* exposes the ease with which people may use the Internet to set up illicit and illegal rendezvous and by focusing on such negative encounters it gives a biased view of the dangers of meeting people online. When online dating leads to sexual relationships and some users of online dating sites are sex seekers, it is easy to see how these concepts may become blurred and equally stigmatized.

The increasing use of online dating in conjunction with lingering social opinions that online dating is for "psychos and serial killers" makes an inquiry into the discourse of online daters ever more salient. Online dating is a stigmatized practice in which people knowingly choose to participate, and on a site like eDateReview.com, they also choose to claim and discuss that stigmatized identity. By studying eDateReview.com it may be possible to better understand how people make sense of their choice to participate in a tainted practice and further, how they maintain a positive identity when explaining that choice to others.

There are a myriad of online dating sites available today, each hoping to offer something unique to a growing number of singles willing to pay for the chance to find love. EHarmony offers Dr. Neil Warren's personality profile and matchmaking ability to ensure lasting love and compatibility. JDate offers a base of Jewish singles looking to find love, while GayDate.com caters to gay and lesbian singles. Online dating sites promise to fill a void people have been

unable to fill by themselves offline. As with offline spaces, however, people have varied success and experience with these websites, which may or may not lead to them finding a significant other.

There is little information about how people who use online dating sources negotiate the discourse of difference and limitation associated with online dating. The image of online dating constructed in talk is one of failure and inadequacy, despite its clear popularity as a means to find a mate. This constructed image has the potential to stigmatize those who date over the Internet, a stigma which must be managed in online discourse as well as in other forms of interaction. Goffman's approach to impression management and the management of stigmatized identities in particular, provide a useful framework for exploring these issues.

<u>Impression Management</u>

> …(W)hen an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey (Goffman, 1959, p. 4).

The idea of impression management has been studied at length by communication scholars, based on the theoretical legacy established by sociologist Erving Goffman (1959). Goffman conceptualized the presentation of one's identity to others as a performance. People have an idea of who they are and how they want to be seen by others in any given context, so they perform in specific ways to establish a desired character to an audience. Any given performance may be successful in establishing, maintaining, and enhancing the desired image, or may be unsuccessful, which results in loss of face, or the presentation of an undesired face. Goffman's work falls somewhere between social science and cultural anthropology. His work is largely based in

observation of action and interaction. In the case of eDateReview.com, the idea

of impression management is relevant, albeit altered. For Goffman, whose work

predated the onset of the Internet, the idea of impression management was

conceptualized in primarily face to face encounters and relied on some degree of

interaction which Goffman defines as "the reciprocal influence of individuals

upon one another's action when in one another's immediate physical presence"

(1959, p.15). With the Internet there is clearly no immediate physical contact

between participants, and the nature of the website eDateReview.com in

particular does not rely on back and forth exchanges between posters though

those exchanges do occur; however, Goffman's general concept of the

presentation of self is still useful in discussing the impression management of

posters to websites and has been used to discuss other websites such as Facebook

(Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008) which also have

limited interaction and no direct face to face contact. In fact Tufecki (2008)

argues that the nature of the web changes the spatial constraint of the audience

so crucial to Goffman's theory stating:

> As Goffman (1959) explored, self-presentation is a conscious, interactive
> act that requires both an awareness of and participation from the
> audience. However, in technologically mediated sociality, the audience
> has been obscured. We can no longer see who is looking, nor, sometimes,
> can we even make an educated guess. If one is in a street corner, a
> classroom, the beach, or a bar, the audience is limited by walls, doors, and
> distance. Although it is possible that there may be unexpected members
> within the audience, the presence of others is much more transparent than
> it is on the Web. (p.22)

Even though the Web changes the sense users have of the audience, the presence

of an audience is still assumed. This can be seen through the formation of shared

rules of interaction in online spaces. "Netiquette" as an example of a broad set of

boundaries for online behavior demonstrates the importance of acknowledging

the audience when posting online or interacting over the Internet (Hardey 2004).

There is still some interchange with an implied audience that has a reciprocal influence on behavior despite not being in physical proximity to one another.

Goffman (1963) builds on his impression management theory with a theory of stigma, a tainted identity which is viewed by others as discrediting, which requires unique impression management strategies depending on the nature of the stigma. Stigma is the "situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance (1963, page#)." Control over information and expression of the stigma is particularly important in this perspective. Goffman points out that there are different types of stigmatized identities, some of which are visibly obvious, as in the case of physical disfigurement. Others are not as obvious, which Goffman calls "blemishes of individual character." The latter category includes flaws in character from a known record and includes addiction, unemployment, and homosexuality. Goffman even uses the example of a single woman who passes as married in order to avoid being discredited, supporting the observation that being single is culturally problematic, particularly for women.

One way that stigmatized persons manage their identity is through controlling what information about their stigma is disclosed and how it is disclosed. Based on the discourse of difference related to online dating present in personal relationships literature, and the association of the term *stigma* with the practice of online dating, there is clearly a negative identity associated with online dating. At the same time, there is also a great deal of control over that information, as it is not a visible stigma. Online dating is in fact a practice that can be concealed from others in most circumstances.

eDateReview is a website where online daters disclose the fact that they have used online dating services, thus providing a rich text which may offer insights into how online daters negotiate their tainted identity According to

Goffman, any interaction is an opportunity for identity management, such that

the postings on eDateReview can be viewed as presentations of self. The

research here will examine whether, how, and to what extent online dating is

discursively constructed as deficient and limited. Looking at the "expressions

given and expressions given off" (Goffman, 1959, p. 4) on this site can help

address questions about how online daters present themselves, and how they

manage the stigma attached to the identity of online dater.

Goffman distinguishes between expressions given and expressions given

off, stating:

> The first involves verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses
> admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are
> known to attach to these symbols. This is communication in the
> traditional and narrow sense. The second involves a wide range of action
> that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being
> that the action was performed for reasons other than the information
> conveyed in this way (1959, p. 2)

Goffman goes on to say that both expressions given and expressions given off

can be intentionally misleading in order for the person to convey a desired effect.

Both will therefore be examined in this study.

Research Questions

- What constitutive rules (meanings) for e-dating are present in the discourse on eDateReview?
- How do people on this site present their identities as users of e-dating web sites?
- How do e-daters construct a desirable face in this space?
- How, if at all, do e-daters express the constructed stigma of e-dating?
- If stigma is expressed on this site, how do e-daters manage it?
- How do people posting on eDateReview reproduce or resist the stigma of online dating?

Organization of the Study

This thesis is organized into four additional chapters. Chapter two outlines the methodology for data collection. The method for this study is textual analysis based in grounded theory. Chapters three and four contain the results obtained in the analysis. Chapter three focuses on how posters to edateReview.com construct the experience of online dating. This includes discussion of rules and norms for online dating which also reflect rules and norms for dating more generally. In chapter three the tension between online dating and more traditional forms of dating is introduced. This tension contributes to the stigma associated with online dating; resulting from an attempt to understand what it means to move away from more traditional dating practices.   This sets the stage for chapter four which discusses more specifically how posters manage the stigma of online dating. Finally chapter five discusses the results and addresses the strengths, limitations, and future directions.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

<u>The Research Site</u>

eDateReview advertises itself as a site where people can compare

experiences using different dating sites. It is a consumer awareness site in many

ways. eDateReview.com's homepage states:

> If you're looking for online dating services, you've come to the right place. No other site on the web offers a comprehensive listing of online dating services complete with reviews from *real people*.
>
> No longer do you have to waste your time joining dating service after dating service, only to discover that you spent a lot of time joining the wrong service. The reviews at eDateReview.com will help you find the best online dating services without all the legwork.
>
> Unlike other directories of online dating services, our reviews are written by *real people* like you who have used the services and want to share their experiences with others. ([Emphasis in original] eDateReview.com, March 15, 2006)

eDateReview.com is an important site for study, however, because it is more

than just a consumer information page. There are really two levels of discourse

in the space. The first is the actual reviews of online dating sites, which is the

explicit purpose of the site. Although this is not the level of discourse I will be

examining, it is important to note that this is a primary form of posting. This

level is exemplified by John, who was unhappy with eHarmony's practice of

releasing matches only when it was time for him to renew his membership.

> I will talk to e-Harmony on Monday and try to get it resolved. The bottom line is that they do not conduct themselves in a responsible manner for a business and I think that what they are doing is unethical for a business (it's all about the money, right?)" (John, April 29th, 2006).

This level of discourse focuses primarily on the services provided

and the poster's satisfaction with those services. The second level of

discourse is the discourse of self and other which occurs in reviews of e-

dating sites, as a quite different kind of commentary on the quality of the

service offered on particular sites:

> Basically websites such as these attract undesirables from the dating scene: the unattractive, the overweight, single parents, the emotionally unstable, etc. So in other words, online personals attract people looking for something that they can't have-people whose stock value on the dating scene is higher than theirs. Let's face it-everybody wants to hook up with what they perceive to be a winner. Everyone wants that trophy piece. A loser doesn't seek to hook up with another loser...LOL FACT: Most people lead BORING lives and they look for someone who's going to inject some EXCITEMENT into it, so they come here, hoping to snag that guy/girl of their dreams that probably wouldn't date them in real life. So you ante up your hard-earned dollars hoping that a person who normally wouldn't look at your ugly behind would give you a shot, because you're a "good" person. Yeah right. (Dennis, February 23,2006)

In this quote, the discourse about the services provided by "websites such as

these" is framed in terms of how Dennis views other people who use these sites.

The first line explicitly states that people who use online dating sites are

"undesirables". The list of descriptors that follows elaborates on the kinds of

people who are undesirable romantic partners: people who do not fit

conventional beauty standards, people who do not play traditional family roles,

and people who do not follow norms for showing or expressing emotion. Dennis

goes on to say that people using these sites are setting their standards too high,

and he clearly equates value with looks, rather than social value or other non-

physical characteristics. This quote clearly implies that people who use online

dating sites are using them because of their undesirable status.

eDateReview.com is thus an ideal site to study stigma. Discussions

related to the stigma of online dating probably occur outside of this website,

however, where and how a researcher might capture those discussions is not

clear. eDateReview.com is a place where people are actively engaged in the

process of managing their self-presentations as people who use online dating

services. This site allows direct access to the process in question without making participants self-conscious about being studied.

The earliest reviews on eDateReview start in fall of 2003, though no specific date is posted for when the site was started. The postings have been archived, allowing access to all postings for any given dating site. According to eDateReview.com "the primary goal of our website is to help people find the best personals and dating sites and avoid the worst." The site lists message boards for general dating sites, Christian sites, gay sites, and Jewish sites, black dating, Ivy League dating, speed dating sites, United States dating, and Canada dating. The most popular sites reviewed are eHarmony, Lavalife, Match.com, and Yahoo! Personals.

It is important to note that eDateReview is not a site for online personals or dating. Rather, it is a site of rich discourse *about* online dating. In this discourse, participants' explanations for their reactions to the online dating sites allow for discussions of why they think they succeeded or failed to accomplish their relational goals. Yahoo Personals offers a point of comparison between eDateReview and a typical online dating site. On a site like Yahoo personals, posters present themselves as potential partners for other posters. The Yahoo ads are formatted in such a way that several categories of information are requested of the person submitting the ad. These categories include information such as job, education, income, family status etc. Each of the categories offers participants a specified and predetermined set of options within that category. In addition to the information categories requested about the placer of the ad, there is also a place for the person to write a personal description, as well as categorical information in which the placer of the ad can specify the desired traits of a person he/she might be interested in dating. Finally, posters can upload photos. Users can browse the ads by searching for a male/female in a particular

location, and Yahoo will provide a list of available personals matching the search criteria.

In contrast, eDateReview.com simply asks posters to indicate their name, sex, location, and e-mail address. Then they ask for a star rating of the particular dating service the person wants to review, and provide a text box for the written review. Reviews are then sorted by dating site and presented in succession to viewers. The stated goal is not for viewers to learn more about the poster him/herself, as it is on Yahoo, but rather to learn more about the sites that are reviewed.

<div align="center">Data Collection and Analysis</div>

After following the website for over a year, I became well acquainted with the site. Reading through many postings led to specific questions concerning instances of identification and affiliation. According to Goffman, when dealing with stigmatized identities, people attempting to manage stigma have different approaches to identifying themselves and the degree to which they affiliate with others who share their stigmatized identity. In Goffman's terms, through expressions *given* one may claim a stigmatized identity, and express an affiliation with the stigmatized group, or potentially disassociate one's self from a stigmatized group. Through expressions *given off*, one can attempt to control how others perceive him/her as a member of the stigmatized group, or sustain a convincing performance as someone who is not stigmatized. Another example can show the distinction between these elements of impression management:

> Anyways, I am not bad looking, I am in shape, but I chose to not have my picture up at first for professional reasons. hoping that other individuals chose the same, I would communicate with others who waited to have their picture up. Every single one turned out to be obese and butt ugly. Then though I feel like an ass, to close the match, so I just stop communicating. I really read the profile to see if they are decent people, but I am not going to base my chemistry decision on a profile. But I feel

like those men who don't display their pictures are deceiving me and what else would they deceive me on? (Katherine, 2006)

The expressions *given* by Katherine include her claim that she is attractive, but chose not to post a picture for "professional reasons". She states she went out with others that did not have pictures, only to find that the people she encountered, unlike herself, were not attractive. The expression *given off* is that Katherine is more desirable than other people who do not post a picture. She never says explicitly that such is the case, but the implication of "I am not bad looking, I am in shape" is that she is different, and thus better than the other "obese and butt ugly" people who do not post pictures. Katherine's discourse about herself both justifies her decision not to post a picture, and differentiates her from other non-picture-posters with whom she would not like to be identified. Therefore, this instance shows that one strategy for managing the stigma on this site is to differentiate one's self from other e-daters. This strategy demonstrates that there is a system of classification for people who use online dating services. Identifying oneself as an e-dater might have multiple meanings depending on how certain e-dating behaviors are understood, and the meanings associated with those behaviors. Someone can say they are an e-dater, but that they post a picture, which means something different than if they don't post a picture.

This research utilized textual analysis, as interest is centered on the text of eDateReview.com rather than the community or group this website serves. It is important to note here that this study is based on text which accounts how people assess actions rather than observance of the actions themselves. Where Goffman might have likely observed the behaviors first-hand, I focused on how people discussed various dating behaviors. This resulted in a more subjective than objective project. Because the research questions are focused on notions of

rules, stigma, and self presentation, I concentrated on emergent themes to address those issues. Approximately 200 posts from three of the most popularly reviewed dating services, eHarmony.com, Match.com, and Yahoo! Personals, were utilized as the data for this study. The first 66 reviews for each of these respective dating services oriented toward impression management were loaded into Atlas-Ti, a software program designed to facilitate the analysis of qualitative data. Reviews oriented toward impression management were defined as any review in which the poster explicitly described his/her self, made comment on other people they encountered through online dating, or made any general observations on dating and relationships beyond a direct comment on the service. Posts focused solely on the services provided by the various dating sites were excluded. Atlas-Ti is based on grounded theory methodology, which is an analytic approach based on constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Constant comparison is a process through which the researcher is continually comparing each coded instance with previously coded instances. The software allows researchers to open code the data, organize the text into categories, and create comments, memos, and visual data displays while working with the text.

Inductive Analysis

This study utilized an inductive approach to analyzing the data taken from eDateReview.com. Inductive analysis involves reading through the data and creating codes and categories. Components of inductive analysis include open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and memo writing. The process of inductive analysis begins with open coding. Open coding is when the researcher reads the data and simultaneously generates categories in which to place data segments (Glaser 1965). According to Elo and Kyngas (2007) open coding often starts with making notes and headings in the text while reading it. In this study, this step was accomplished through the use of Atlas Ti, as the author read

through the data; the computer program was used to create code headings and place quotes from the text into the generated categories.

The next step in the process is axial coding. Strauss and Corbin define axial coding as "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories" (1990, p.96). Kendall (1999) summarizes the process by saying that while open coding breaks the data apart, axial coding puts it back together by making new connections between categories and subcategories.

Selective coding is the final coding category and this category revolves around distinguishing a core category of analysis and making connections between that core category and other categories for the purpose of generating theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Finally memo writing is a notation of ideas about codes and the relationship between codes that are written down as they come to the researcher, and are, "always conceptual in intent. They do not just report data, but tie different pieces of data together in a cluster, or they show that a particular piece of data is an instance of a general concept" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 69). Again Atlas Ti facilitated the memo writing process by allowing the researcher to record and organize memos during the data analysis The researcher decides what pieces of data belong together in any given code through the process of constant comparison. According to Glaser (1965) the constant comparative method of analysis is,

> designed to aid analysts with these abilities in generating a theory which is integrated, consistent, plausible, close to the data, and in a form which is clear enough to be readily, if only partially, operationalized for testing in quantitative research. Depending as it does on the skills and sensitivities of the analyst, the constant comparative method is *not* designed (as methods of quantitative analysis are) to guarantee that two analysts working independently with the same data will achieve the same results; it *is* designed to allow, with discipline, for some of the vagueness and flexibility which aid the creative generation of theory. (pp. 437-438)

Glaser goes on to say that analysis begins with the researcher coding each incident from the data into many categories for analysis, but adds that before new incidents are added to any category, they are compared to the other incidents already housed in that category. This continual process of comparison builds a relationship between data collection and analysis that is not present in other approaches to research which favor separating collection and analysis (Glaser, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Suddaby, 2006). Furthermore, the process of comparing each new piece of data with previous pieces ensures that the researcher remains tied to the data while seeking to construct more general theories of meaning.

This project utilized an inductive analysis strategy to explore a system of meaning through text available on eDateReview, and thereby come to a deeper understanding of this growing and important form of courtship in the U.S. today. Understanding how stigma is managed online provides insight into how potential romantic partners manage stigma more generally. Because this is a study of a public Internet site in which there is no expectation of privacy, no Human Subjects review was required.

CHAPTER THREE: CONSTRUCTING THE ONLINE DATING EXPERIENCE

Before beginning the analysis on how posters to eDateReview.com manage the stigma of online dating, it is important to look at how the online dating experience is discussed in general. The discussion of online dating reflects the posters views on dating more generally, setting up a specific set of expectations for this new form of finding romantic partners. Through the discourse of online dating, one can see the struggle to adjust to a changing mode of dating. As discussed in chapter one, dating is a fluid concept, and as society changes, so to does the nature of dating. However with changes in the dating ritual there is often a period of uncertainty reflected in social discourse about what it means to participate in non-traditional forms of dating. This chapter begins to explore this negotiation between past and present which contributes to the stigma of online dating discussed more in chapter four. Perhaps one of the most significant points of observation in the discourse of eDateReview.com is the way posters convey and enforce rules associated with online dating, many of which relate to how people present themselves and interpret the presentation of others on the dating sites themselves. The rules for online dating discussed here seem to be internalized by the posters as indicated by the frequency, and at times voracity, of the discourse related to them. Based on the text I discovered five prominent guidelines for online dating that emerged in the analysis of the posts to eDateReview.com: 1) be honest in your presentation of self; 2) be honest with yourself about your successes and/or failures; 3) to be successful you have to put in the effort; 4) keep an open mind; 5) accept your own limitations.

<u>Be Honest in Your Presentation of Self</u>

The first guideline for online dating is to be honest in your online self presentation. While some authors have discussed the Internet as a space where

people can play with identity and how they present themselves to others online (Bailey, 2001; Hardey, 2002; Morse, 2001; Nakamura, 2001; Poster, 2006; Stone, 2001; Turkle, 2001), online dating is a virtual situation predicated on a potential for offline encounters. The expectation of face-to-face interaction changes how identity is approached in online settings. Though Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, and Brown-McCabe (2005) argue that Internet dating allows people to explore possible selves on and off-line, Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino (2006) state that people who post online personals with greater expectations of face-to-face interaction are more honest in their self disclosure. These somewhat conflicting findings show that there is a potential in online dating to play with self presentation, but also that the promise of face-to-face encounters may mitigate that potential.

Hardey (2002) explored issues of embodiment in online dating sites and argued that the disembodied anonymity of the Internet acts as a foundation for building trust that will translate into an offline relationship, rather than the construction of fantasy selves. "While the Internet may facilitate, at least in the early stages of dating, a lightening of corporeal constraints, the desires of users to physically meet a suitable partner illustrates the limitations of virtual relations which never attain the thickness of the flesh" (Hardey, 2002, p. 582). The potential for people who use online dating to present themselves not only physically, but in other aspects of identity in a way that is not an accurate presentation of the offline self is harshly guarded against through the discourse of posters who strongly disparage those who are not honest and encourage others to maintain an honest portrayal of self.

> I can't tell you how many times I have met men that were 10 years older, 50 pounds heavier and several inches shorter than advertised. I would never be so rude as to disappear; I would suck it up and stay for the cup of coffee, but I'm not surprised that some people would be angered by the deceit and just bolt. If someone lies about their age and/or appearance, it spells insecurity right off the bat. If I can't recognize the man I'm supposed

to be meeting (even after seeing eight photos of him), then call me shallow. Lesson to everyone: POST RECENT ACCURATE PHOTOS!!!!! You'll save yourself and others aggravation. (Jan, 2007)[2]

In this post, Jan states that a dishonest profile is deceitful and reveals the insecurity of the person who feels the need to lie about their age or appearance. Jan goes on to explicitly warn others to post recent and accurate pictures or risk aggravating all involved. This particular post demonstrates a very strict and problematic definition of what is an honest presentation of self. It is not enough to make sure you post pictures that are really you, but they must accurately represent you at this exact moment in time so that one will definitely "recognize the man I'm supposed to be meeting." Additionally there is no allowance for the fact that a person might feel a picture presents something about their identity other than physical appearance. For instance one might post a picture of him/herself standing on the Great Wall from the dream trip through Asia he/she went on a couple years back because it represents a love of adventure and travel, and if that person has changed in physical appearance over the last two years, according to Jan's approach to honesty, that person is insecure and deceitful.

I post recent photos, including full body pics. I'm not gorgeous, but I have nothing to hide. I am honest in my profile and I don't use a long list of adjectives to describe myself. No one is all of those things. Besides, if you really are compassionate, handsome, healthy, stable, honest, understanding, dependable, funny, active, handy, hard-working, loyal, secure, and a good listener -- then how is it that you're divorced? Don't tell us you're handsome......post your great photo and let it stand. Don't tell me you're funny......say something funny in your profile and let the reader decide. . . . and pleeeeeze don't post three photos of your motorcycle and one of you wearing sunglasses and a beanie. (Rebecca, 2007)

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[2]   In order to maintain the integrity of the text posted on eDateReview.com, quotes are copied as they appear, including any spelling or grammatical errors.

In referencing quotes from eDateReview.com, the poster's self identified name and the date the review was posted will be cited.

Again this poster explicitly notes her choice to post full body pics because she "has nothing to hide." This would indicate that someone who chooses not to post does have something to hide. Towards the end of the quote, Rebecca takes the position that words are meaningless unless they are supported. Don't say you are handsome, post a photo. Don't say you are funny, be funny. This position acknowledges the ease with which one can create an identity online that is less than honest, and she urges others to prove in some way that they are in fact being honest in their self presentation. Also, the incredulity at a divorcee having multiple positive qualities such as good looks, sense of humor, and loyalty indicates an immediate bias against those who have had unsuccessful marriages in the past. Divorce is yet another stigma in the world of dating. This strong guarding of honesty in your presentation of self can be seen as a reaction to a medium of communication where people do not necessarily trust that what you see is what you get. This can directly be juxtaposed with more traditional means of dating where people express that offline dating offers a more "real" interaction. As Randy (2007) posts,

> Let's focus on REALITY here. This is dating. Indeed, this is Internet Dating. What do you really expect? Dating is difficult enough as it is. Internet dating is more difficult. People are simply not as attractive as you imagine them to be based upon their self-selected photos or the carefully-edited and somewhat predictable "profiles."

Here it is easy to see that the push to be honest in one's profile is related to the ability of people online to present inflated presentations of self, presentations that would not happen in face to face interactions.

<u>Be Honest About Your Successes and/or Failures</u>

The second rule that emerges in regard to online dating is the idea that you

should be honest with yourself about why you are succeeding or failing to

succeed.

> I am not a psychologist, but if you are not given many suitable matches, or do not find quality dates in a few months, then you may need to sit down and figure out why (without blaming others). Take a long hard look at yourself and your profile, and get a second opinion. You may need to go back to the drawing board and reinvent yourself (without making yourself into someone you are not). After a couple of months new matches only trickle in as new people sign up. Don't be afraid to close your account and reopen another for a fresh start and an improved look, as you may get very different matches the next time around. (Anonymous, 2007)

Here Anonymous suggests that if you are not happy with your dating

progress, you should not blame others, but look to yourself. You may be the

problem, not the other people online. And if you are the problem, you should

"reinvent" yourself to attract more matches. This seems to be a contradictory

message to the "present yourself honestly" rule. Note that Anonymous is careful

to explicitly warn against "making yourself into someone you are not", but still

advocates giving yourself "an improved look." This becomes a no win situation

for someone who wants to be honest about him/herself, but finds that few people

are interested in him/her if they are.

> If you're mad about your own lack of success on match.com or yahoo don't take it out on others. Try to figure out why you failed in the first place. If you're a woman who's failed on these dating sites the reason's in the mirror. The reason you had to sign up to match.com in the first place is because you don't have any idea as how to attract a man. Then your poor courting skills and bizzar expectations shined through in your emails, profile, and phone conversations. (Halo, 2007)

Here Halo takes being honest with yourself to the next level. There is

an explicit statement that if a woman fails on these dating sites it is her fault. She

is necessarily undesirable first, because she could not find a man outside of

match.com, and second, because even online the "poor courting skills and bizzar

expectations" were evident in her interactions. It is noteworthy to acknowledge

this post very clearly attacks one's positive identity. As discussed previously,

online dating can be protective of one's identity, because it allows for so many

outside forces to blame for failing to find love. The arguments that you are not

going to settle, that people are dishonest in their profiles, and that you only meet

undesirables do not hold up if you accept Anonymous' argument that you are

the undesirable one.

<p style="text-align:center;">Be Willing to Put in the Effort for Success</p>

The next guideline that is apparent in the posts on eDateReview.com

states that in order to be successful you have to be willing to put in some effort.

> This brings up a point. I specifically opened myself up to meeting women from areas outside of mine because I already know the type of women that live in my area. I know many excellent women here, but they are married or unavailable. Most of the rest are either very young, are divorced with kids, or don't possess either the educational, intellectual or personality traits that I look for. I have read many reviews on here where people complained because matches were more than a few miles away. Wake up! Your success or failure comes from your ability to present yourself to others. It comes in your wit, intellect and honesty about who you are, and what you are looking for. If everyone found everything they were looking for in their own backyard, there would be no need for airplanes, passports and travel magazines. If you want to find something, you have to be willing to seek it out. (Code3pro, 2007)

As Code3pro states, there are a number of reviews that complain about the

matches they received from the services, or the quality of the potential partners,

but there is a counterpoint discourse also exemplified by this post which argues

that one can not expect the online dating service to do the work, that to succeed

in finding a suitable partner, you have to be able to use the service to effectively

present yourself to others and put in the effort to go through any number of

profiles in order to find the few that might lead to a more significant face to face relationship.

> You spend upwards $50 to send out a few emails, and have less than a 1% chance of finding something meaningful. If you actually want to get online dating to work, you have to put tons of effort into using the service. Or, you have to get lucky. (Who are these ppl, 2007)

Though several posts such as this one simply argue that you have to be willing to put the money and effort into being in that small percentage of people who do find something meaningful through online dating services, other posters vehemently speak against lazy love seekers.

> Seeking your "true love" indeed, right, using the fast way? Give me a friggin' break. Finding that "true love" takes time, and a hell of a lot of searching through the "pile". You should be ashamed for even thinking that a website alone can do the work for you (Lynn, 2007)

Again the careful guarding of the ideas that love is not something that comes easy, or that someone can do the work for you seems to be a direct reaction to the shift away from more traditional dating. There is a fear expressed here that love itself becomes devalued when people try to "use the fast way."

The area of putting in effort was one area where there was a noteworthy difference in the posts for ehamony vs. match or yahoo. With Eharmony there was a much greater occurrence of people expressing an expectation that the service would match them with their ideal mate and that they were paying for a specific result not an opportunity to find the result. This says something about the way eharmony is promoting its service and connects to this idea that participants are paying for a product, love.

> I have been a member for nearly a year and a half, and am disappointed with several shortcomings I have noticed with eHarmony's "system." Part of this is due to the way they market themselves as a place to find "true love." It sets an unbelievably high standard in my opinion, and I am extremely dissatisfied with its lack of results. My experience has given me

no reason to believe their compatibility matching system is scientifically valid. (John, 2007)

Posters for all three online dating services generally expressed some expectations that using the online dating sites would facilitate interactions with potential partners; they are paying for a service, but with eharmony's reviewers that went further to the point that eharmony failed to match them with their perfect match, not just facilitate the interactions.

<u>Keep an Open Mind, but Accept Your Limitations</u>

Finally, there is a dynamic interplay between the last two rules found in the posts. On one hand users are told to keep an open mind, be open to looking outside of what they would normally find attractive "Keep an open mind...the guy or girl of your dreams may not have the color hair you were thinking, or be as tall, short, thin, big...(you get the idea)". At the same time, there is a discourse of accepting your own limitations and not clinging to unrealistic expectations.

> I begin to wonder what the women on this site are looking for. I have found a few that I feel have "unrealistic expectations," for instance a legal secretary, 42 with two kids, who was only looking for men making 100K or more. Yeah, that's gonna happen Hon, let me know how that works out for you. (Bob, 2007)

If it is important to keep an open mind and cast a wide net, then it shouldn't be an "unrealistic expectation" for a 42 year old mother of two to seek a man who makes a lot of money. There seems to be some concern that people who date online are unrealistic about their potential as a mate and are too selective; i.e. they should know their place, what they can attain, but still be open to anyone who shows interest and not be offended when people who are out of their league do not respond. Basically the message is you should be open to anyone even if they are lower than your standard, but you should not expect someone to be open to you if you are below their standard. This discourse seems

to guard some ethereal social pecking order to make sure people match up with who they are "supposed to" match up with and keep a social balance.

> Let's face it, if your goal is to date the elite 2%, then your dating skills and everything else needs to be up to par. The truth is you're only capable of attracting someone who's life, skills, thoughts, and situation is the same as yours. I've looked through plenty of womens' profiles, and I've seen to profiles of women who want to date the cream of the crop. Many of these women have had their profiles online since the early part of the decade. When you look at their pictures and read their about me statement you'll see and feel this idea of them being entitled to some man of greatness. They have no idea that there are plenty of other women who have MORE to OFFER to these guys of glorious ambition. As they speak of their hopes to have men with ambition, they're doing nothing to mirror the same thing in their own life. I dare to hope these womens' excuse isn't because their a women, and women can't be leaders but the woman behind the great leader. Why, aren't those days forever gone? Prehaps, they only use the womens' rights spill when it's to their advantage.
>
> They must adapt to the correct way of thinking, learn the proper courting and attraction skills, then rethink as to who they're trying to attract, then go for it. Don't come here and tell us the people online suck. (Halo, 2007)

In this post it is clear the poster not only believes that "you're only capable of attracting someone who's life, skills, thoughts, and situation is the same as yours," but goes further by trying to dictate that belief to others. He explicitly directs these women who have less to offer to learn "proper courting and attraction skills." Because this directive is aimed at women who apparently aspire to meet men whose ambition and greatness does not mirror their own, one can conclude that proper courting and attraction includes attracting someone whose greatness does mirror one's own, aspire only to someone who is on a similar level not above it. Here the poster attempts to guard the social balance by chiding the women who in his perception are holding out because they feel "entitled to a man of greatness" despite their own lack of greatness.

> Do I lament this fact? Not really. I don't really want any man who thinks it is all about the physical anyway. But what I find amazing, is that they do not think I have the right to prefer somebody who is in shape (as I am), owns their own home (as I do), has degrees (as I do), etc. If I accept my

> own limitations in the marketplace (most notably my age) and deal with it, I would expect my matches to do the same! (Kris, 2007)

Kris' post indicates that she has certain standards for the men that she dates, but has had negative responses from people who do not think she has a "right" to those preferences. It bears mentioning also that she clearly outlines that the standards she has are based in her own perceived worth. There is an impetus compelling her to justify her standards by noting that she is not looking for anything she can not provide the other person. She argues that she is staying within her limitations, but that others, specifically men her age, are setting standards that are not accepting of their limitations.

> I'm not being picky either by only winking "hot" chicks. I'm pretty open minded on body type and if they have kids. That really torques me...a supposed 30+ year old with an ex and kids who doesn't jump at the chance to meet a guy actually winking her!!! (Dave, 2007)

Here it is clear that Dave believes that people who are over 30 with an ex and kids should "jump at the chance" to meet a man who shows interest in them. To "jump at the chance" implies that these people do not have an abundance of chances and therefore should be more open to those that give them a chance, regardless of who that person is. Similarly using the word "actually" to qualify the act of winking at this person indicates some disbelief or improbability that someone would show interest in someone who is over thirty with kids. Dave's post lead's one to believe that people in certain situations have diminished options for potential partners and therefore should forfeit the right to be selective in who they date and take any man who shows interest.

> I have recently be talking to a couple of guys who are more in my league. How ever they have rejected me too. O.K why am I not good enough for a 50+ man who is divorced with 7 children under 18? I am not really looking for a man with that much baggage but I wanted to be open minded and not judge as everyone is telling me to do. (Samantha, 2007)

This post demonstrates again the idea that this person assumes she should be "good enough" for a 50+ man who is divorced with children because he is more in her league. She states that normally she would not consider these men, that she would judge them, and she seems to be confused as to why they would reject her. In saying that she is dating guys "more" in her league and using the inclusive "too" one can assume that she was rejected by others who were out of her league. She seems to have been able to justify why someone out of her league would reject her, and tried dating someone she thought was more attainable even though they may not be what she wants. This person complied with what everyone was telling her to do and tried to keep open minded and not judge, leading her to men who were more in her league, essentially readjusting her standards in hopes of finding a successful match. The failure of this shift in standards has caused her to question why she is not good enough for these men.

The rule about knowing your place becomes evident in another post specifically chastising those who would overstep the boundary of an acceptable match.

> many people are not able to admit to themselves that they are excessively overweight. If you have a few extra pounds or a couple extra inches, that's not overweight in my book, but if you are 60 pounds overweight, isn't that EXCESSIVE? If you have already lost 80 pounds, and you still have 50 to go, isn't that EXCESSIVE? If your weight is way out of proportion to your height, isn't that EXCESSIVE? I firmly believe there is someone for everyone, regardless of your body type, and I can be friends with anyone, no matter what their appearance. However, as far as a potential mate goes, I do think physical attraction does play a part. I'm not a physically large guy, and I plainly stated this fact in my profile, but it didn't stop excessively overweight women from requesting communication with me. I mean no offense to the plus-sized ladies out there, but I've never been attracted, in a romantic way, to women who are bigger than I am, or who lie about their appearance, or who send me photos of themselves when they were 10 years younger and 40 pounds lighter. (Will, March 31st, 2006)

In this quote there is a move to first say that people should recognize they are overweight or they are kidding themselves, and not kidding anyone else. The message is, own up to your body type, and the limitations it incurs regarding who you can date. Then Will states that he is not physically large, but that "didn't stop" overweight women from trying to contact him. That is an interesting discursive move which operates on the assumption that smaller guys can not or would not be attracted to larger women, and emphasizes the distaste for women who would dare cross the weight line, essentially stating bigger women should know their place. Will's message is an example of how the discourse on this site functions to reinforce rules about who should or can pair with whom.

The discourse on this site about knowing one's place and dating within your social level seems to go beyond setting rules for online dating, and into the rules of dating and attraction more generally. It may be that when people try online dating they are hoping to find something they have not found in face to face interactions- a love connection, but there is both a hope and a fear attached to that idea. The hope is that perhaps the rules do change when one goes online, that one will be exposed to so many more people, and have a chance to weed through people who are not compatible, and approach people that one might not meet or find approachable in face to face settings, and ultimately find someone who is a dream partner. The fear is then, that if the rules do change, and people can attain their dream partners, one will in turn, not be his/her dream's ideal partner, and even if one does not set his/her sights very high, the people he/she feels are on the same level, will be looking for a level up. By encouraging the expectation that one would be open to people of all levels, but not look for someone who is above his/her own level, it protects the poster's own interest in finding the most attractive partner he/she can within his/her own level. The

discourse on this website then works to use people's perception of self against them. A woman reading this post may think she is not the type of person who expects something from a partner she can not herself provide so she makes sure to check her own standards and evaluate her own level as others may perceive it, and just like Kris's earlier post, will feel the need to justify her own standards to others before complaining thereby perpetuating the expectation.

> I can tell you from personal expierience that I will date a man that's out of my norm if he has a great personallity. True he does have to be over 6ft but that's only because I am tall with out the heels, and I want to be able to were heels without towering over my man. Other wise it's all about his personality as is with most women. So when dating you should keep in mind that while you might have a negative view about women and don't know why you are single, the women feel the same way. Just don't give up, try to open yourself up more, and make sure that your actions show that you are indeed a good man and not just a booty hound and you will be more successful in the dating world plus you'll also meet some truly amazing women that you might not have given the time to before. Oh also if you are not looking for a relationship and just want something causual don't waste your money on these sights. Women that are on here actually want to start setteling down and get married! So best of luck to you!! (Still Single, 2007)

The rules that posters to eDateReview.com enforce reflect an attempt to control how others perceive them as online daters through expressions given off. By posting on this site and discussing their online dating, posters have given expressions identifying themselves as members of a group stigmatized by online partner pursuit. However, they attempt to manage how others perceive them within this group through expressions given off. The rules discussed in this chapter demonstrate an attempt to control the behavior of online daters. Establishing and enforcing these rules has the effect of keeping other peoples' attempts to manage their self presentation in check. The rules set limits to how far one can go in an attempt to appear less stigmatized. Posters to eDateReview whose strategy of self presentation is to demonstrate that they are better than other online daters benefit from controlling the ability of others to present

equally positive selves. By effectively controlling the expressions given off by online daters in their profiles, they can better maintain a position of superiority in their own expressions given off.

CHAPTER FOUR: MANAGING THE STIGMA OF ONLINE DATING

As seen in chapter three, many of the posts on eDateReview.com express discomfort with the move away from more traditional means of dating toward online dating. In trying to regulate online dating they are expressing and protecting that which they hold to be important in the process of face to face interaction. It is this disconnect between what people see as important in more traditional dating rituals and what is possible with online dating that contributes to the stigma associated with online dating and those who are online daters. The discourse on eDateReview revealed several strategies posters used to manage the stigma of online dating. The following sections present three primary findings. 1) Stigma is cumulative. 2) There is a hierarchy at work when managing stigma. 3) A general discourse of distrust pervades the discussion of online dating which acts to further stigmatize the process and those who use it, while at the same time helping posters distance themselves from that stigma. Taken together, these discourse patterns function to identify the people one meets online as the problem, not online dating itself.

<div align="center">Cumulative Nature of Stigma</div>

Within the posts on EdateReview.com, there is a discourse of stigma that is indirectly related to online dating. Rather than stigmatizing online dating directly, one pattern of discourse is to stigmatize people who date online, and this often happens through identifying others as being obviously undesirable because they belong to other stigmatized groups (e.g. fat, unattractive, unwed parent, unemployed, dishonest etc.) In this discourse, online dating is not necessarily problematic in itself; instead, people who use online dating are problematic for any variety of other reasons. Posters can separate themselves from undesirable others despite having turned to online dating sites to find a potential partner.

>"Site is full of FAT girls that do not have FULL figure photo or have photos 1+ year old where they had 50 or more pounds less. And of course they LIE. I had quite a few matches where at question (in profile) "how your friends describe you" they say physically fit and at date there is a 200+ pounds fatty that eats like hungry lion (of course she pays her meal). I would say 5 out of 10 girls are FATTIES, 3 out of 10 are DECOYS, and 2 out of 10 are nice busy girls that want to find somebody reasonable." (Mark, 2007)

Posts such as this one from Mark invoke the stigma attached to people who are overweight by declaring that "fatties" lie and are not "nice busy girls that want to find someone reasonable." This sets up excess weight as a seriously flawed trait common among women who use this dating site. In categorizing overweight women as liars and in a separate group from nice busy girls, Mark effectively positions weight as an indicator of character. This derogation of overweight women not only strengthens an already problematic association between weight and negative character traits, but it also reinforces the perceived need for women to present themselves as "physically fit" through interaction or the pictures they post. There seems to be a paradox for women who are overweight. They can openly own their weight and be discarded as unattractive, or they can try to downplay their weight and be seen as dishonest.

The second issue addressed in Mark's post is that of decoys. Mark defines a decoy as a profile set up by eHarmony of a good looking girl with a good job that strings a man along and then closes communication before meeting. EHarmony specifically uses a "guided communication" process that starts with sending someone you are interested in close-ended multiple choice questions like "How organized are you?" The receiver of the question would be given four or five predetermined responses to the question and asked to choose one. After exchanging responses to the close-ended questions if the parties are still interested they move into the "must have/can't stand" level of communication. At this level partners exchange information about the traits they must have in a

partner or can't stand, such as "I must have a partner with a sharp sense of humor." After this level, partners transition into open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are chosen from a list or generated by the person asking the question and receivers are able to write out a more in-depth response. An example of an open-ended question would be, "describe a perfect date with someone if time and money was not an issue". Finally, after progressing through all of those stages you have the opportunity for open communication. Open communication is characterized by sending messages back and forth through an internal and anonymous e-mail system, and is considered the last phase before exchanging contact information and setting up a "real world" meeting or phone call. By closing communication one of the parties involved would block the other person from being able to send messages through the internal system, thus ending any further interaction. Mark's belief is that eHarmony creates profiles of attractive women who go through the guided communication process but block further communication before exchanging offline contact information. This leads Mark to the conclusion that these women are not "real" women, but rather fabricated by eHarmony in order to keep men signed up and paying money. Here the stigmatizing statements characterize the people Mark has encountered through online dating or eHarmony itself rather than the practice of going online to find a date.

The derogation of people who use online dating reinforces already established stigmas. By emphasizing those stigmatized traits of people who use online dating the practice is indirectly stigmatized as well. However, the way people on this site tend to list various stigmas in a description indicates that there is a cumulative effect associated with stigma. Belonging to one stigmatized group is better than belonging to two groups and so on.

As I work my way down the food chain, the people are less and less attractive. I start matching them more and more, but they match me less and less. And pretty soon I might have to contend with some ugly, obese single mom of two. (no mutuality, 2007)

In no mutuality's post, it is the combination of ugly, obese, and single mom that categorizes the bottom of the dating chain. The implication is that someone who is overweight but attractive without kids would be further up on the dating chain. The dating food chain as characterized by no mutuality's post seems to refer to a pecking order at play in date selection. One starts out "at the top" with the people he/she finds most attractive. In no mutuality's terms, "the top" is comprised of the people who "match" the most aspects of an ideal partner. Invariably the people who match No Mutuality's ideal do not see No Mutuality as their ideal (he matches them less). So one moves to the next ring in the chain to a level of potential partners who match only most of one's ideals and so on. The lower one goes on the chain, the less likely the potential partner is to match up with one's desires in a mate. However, the lower you go, the better the chance the other person will be interested in what you have to offer. In No Mutuality's words, they match you less and less but you match them more and more. For no mutuality the lowest possible match would be an ugly, obese, single mom.

Similarly, another quote states "forget about meeting a young beauty. You don't stand a chance. You will end up with one of the overweight, angry 35-45 year old divorced stretch mark hags and or warthogs on match...ha ha ha." Instead of using one disqualifying trait, this poster gives an extended list of traits deemed undesirable, lending to the idea that it is the combination of all these different traits which creates the most objectionable profile. Presumably a young beauty would be the ideal, but realistically young beauties are out of reach so one may have to consider an older divorcee who is not attractive. Separately

traits such as weight, age, marital status, and appearance, may be viewed as more acceptable. In combination however they create a profile so unattractive that it is laughable to think about actually dating a person whose profile has all of those traits.

> News flash: 21-25 year old "model types" aren't looking to date someone who reminds them of their FATHER. "Thinning in the front and could stand to lose a little weight" translates to fat and bald. Given that most men who say they're 5'9" are actually 5'6", add short to fat and bald. Woo-hoo, who wouldn't want that??? (Paula, 2007)

In this post, the reviewer's use of the phrase "add short to fat and bald" very clearly indicates that adding additional undesirable traits contributes to the overall undesirability of the profile. Fat and bald together is bad, but *short*, fat, and bald is even worse. This post also notes a perceived dishonesty in portraying one's self online. As stated, to categorize one's self as thinning in front is a code for bald, and could stand to lose a little weight means fat. It would seem any attempt to make concessions about one's appearance is immediately called into question, and interpreted in its most negative extreme. Who draws the line between "thinning" and "bald" is not clear. There is more to be said about the assumption of a worst case scenario. There is an assumption that there is an automatic negative discrepancy between what people will claim and the reality behind the claim. In real estate, to say a house is quaint means it is small. People come to read the flaw in the euphemism. The same appears to occur in online dating. When someone attempts to claim a flaw in a nice sounding way, draws additional attention to the flaw. Thinning in front can not mean simply thinning in front, it must mean bald. Unless the flaw is egregious, there would be no need to mention it at all, so those people who attempt to acknowledge potential flaws stick out even more. This creates a paradox. How

can one be "honest" if every description is read as dishonest? The quote here would support the idea that honesty is unattainable and there is a silencing mechanism at play in the derogation of one who tries to accurately describe one's appearance but is perceived as trying to puff up their profile.

By reinforcing the idea that people who go online to date are flawed based on an accumulation of various stigmas unrelated to online dating, it allows the posters to present a more positive identity even while admitting that they have tried online dating. They can tacitly – by virtue of their familiarity with the kinds of people they have met online - admit that they are in the same group of people that they are disparaging on eDateReview.com, but maintain that they are still better than those other people because the only thing they have in common is the use of online dating services. They can differentiate themselves as the least tainted members of the online dating community because they do not belong to other stigmatized groups.

<div align="center">Hierarchy of Stigma</div>

Additionally, the relative frequency with which certain stigmas are noted would also indicate that there is a hierarchy of stigmas relating to dateable partners. Throughout the reading of reviews for all three online dating services, EHarmony.com, Match.com, and Yahoo! Personals, there were certain characteristics that were noted consistently as defects or flaws that would taint one's dating potential. This repetition prompted the author to look more closely at which traits were most frequently cited. Weight was overwhelmingly the trait most commonly cited as a defect. This included any varied indicators of being overweight such as fat, big, heavy obese, etc. Weight was followed by general unattractiveness, ugly, not good looking. The third and fourth most common flaws were age, specifically comments about being old or too old, and a general category of personality flaws that included comments from mental stability to

being "creepy". Finally, marital and family status included comments on divorce, children, unwed parents etc. Table 4.1, below, reflects the number of times these traits were cited by different reviewers. This does not include multiple mentions of the same trait in one review. It also only reflects the number of times the trait was cited as a negative characteristic of people encountered through online dating services.

Characteristic	Number of posts	Percentage of total posts
Weight	45	22.5%
Attractiveness	24	12%
Age	21	10.5%
Personality flaws	21	10.5%
Marital/family status	11	5.5%

Table 4.1 Traits Cited By Reviewers as Flawed (numbers are out of 200 posts analyzed for this study)

Many of the same traits were conversely discussed as general descriptors and points of positive self disclosure for the reviewers. "I am an attractive, successful, very young looking, fit woman with a post graduate degree." Those instances are not included in the chart below, but further contribute to the notion that certain traits are clearly picked out as being important criteria for determining one's potential as a romantic partner.

Certain traits are consistently demeaned as undesirable, with weight noted almost twice as many times as the next most common trait. And though the discourse on these sites seem to stigmatize online dating, as stated "online

dater" is not an identity that is explicitly and specifically demonized. The frequency with which certain traits are maligned in posts may reflect where they stand on a hierarchy of stigmatized traits.

> The scame site I have re-named, E-ugly will NOT get my money. If you are a girl/guy, professional, fit, intelligent, successful, fun, and NORMAL do not waste your time and $ on this site...It is for WEIRDOS. (Lisa, 2007)

First, this quote very obviously defines a "weirdo" as someone who is not professional, fit, intelligent, successful, fun or normal. Second, this quote makes it clear that if one is "normal", one should not waste his/her time and money on this site. The justification for avoiding this site is not that online dating is abnormal, but rather the people one will meet on this site are abnormal. This perpetuates the idea that the process of online dating is not in question. The problem lies in the quality of people one will meet online. This emphasis on the people and not the process supports the idea that it is worse to be the "weirdo" than the online dater. If a normal person could meet other normal people online, that would be worth the time and money, but since "E-ugly" is for weirdoes, normal people should avoid this service. The poster in this instance draws a line implying that if a normal person uses the site or continues to use the site they risk becoming a weirdo, or at least being perceived as a weirdo. The poster encourages people who see themselves as normal, or perhaps more importantly those who wish to avoid being seen as a weirdo, to stop online dating. The impetus is less about being an online dater, and more about being associated with the weirdoes who use online dating. By saying the site is for weirdoes, if someone professional, fit, intelligent, successful, and fun chooses to utilize the service, he/she joins the ranks of the weird. Perhaps the choice of a "normal" person to use a site filled with weirdoes makes them weird because a "normal" person should not be interested in meeting or dating weird people. In making

this distinction, this post also serves to reinforce the idea that people should date

within their own level or risk being perceived by others as less than normal.

There is a hierarchy reinforced in this post that it is worse to be seen as weird

than be seen as an online dater, though there seems to be a conflation of weird

and online dater at work as well.

Posters on eDateReview reconcile their identity as someone who dates

online by explicitly disassociating themselves from other stigmatized identities,

not disassociating themselves from online dating.

> My final verdict: the majority of men on this site aren't that interested in
> really meeting a nice girl in person- unless the nice girl is attached to a
> nice big rack.I am a regular, honest, educated, self sufficient woman who
> is not gorgeous but not ugly either, and I can't find a man! Perhaps I am
> too picky? No, just not gonna settle. (Teachergirl, 2007)

In this quote not only is the reviewer attempting to disassociate herself from

certain stigmatized identities in stating that she is regular, honest, educated, self

sufficient and average in appearance, but she is attempting to justify why she has

not found a man. She begins by asserting the majority of men on the dating site

are not interested in finding a "nice girl" in person. Presumably the reviewer is

such a nice girl. She later goes on to say that she is not too picky, but she is not

going to "settle" which seems to indicate there have been men she has rejected

based on her own standards. This contradicts the earlier statement indicating

that most men are not interested in meeting a girl like her. Between the two

statements one can infer it is not most men, but rather most men that meet her

criteria that have not been interested in meeting a girl like her. The idea of

settling, and lowering one's standards is one that comes up quite often in the

reviews on eDateReview.com.

> I am a reasonable atlethic guy (5'11") who works out many times a week,
> makes very good money, drives very nice car, hase highest education

> etc...... So I am not a crazy, fat, unreasonable... I have very demanding job, and really don't have time spending in night clubs, bars etc..... That is why I joined eHarmony. (Mark, 2007)

In this post, the reviewer is once again explicitly disassociating himself from stigmatized identities both by affirming positive identity traits like working out, having money, a nice car, and an education, and negating possible negative traits such as, crazy, fat, and unreasonable. He further goes on to state that the only reason he tried online dating is because his job does not afford him the time to go to clubs etc. where one may meet others face-to-face. This is an important strategy that not only supports the idea that stigma is cumulative and hierarchical, but that motivation for using online dating is a meaningful indicator of worth and identity, as well as another hierarchical distinction. He wouldn't choose to date online if he had time to meet potential partners in other ways. He is single because he is too busy to go to clubs and bars, NOT because he is undesirable. Therefore people who go online to date because they are "crazy, fat, unreasonable" etc. are worse than someone who goes online to date because he/she "have very demanding job and really don't have time spending in night clubs, bars etc." This sentiment is supported in other posts, where reviewers justify their decision to use online dating because of extenuating circumstances, and not because of their own desirability.

> I am 55, 5'7", 125 lbs, long brown hair and big brown eyes, educated. I love islands and live on one. Can't find a man in the area. (He doesn't have to be "educated" as long as we click intellectually.) Hard to do when there is only about 10,000 residents in all within a 20 mile radius! Less than half are men and only 1.8% of my age group (50-65) are not married. My experience has been that the men are already spoken for by the time they are separated or widowed. Good reason to try net dating. (Deborah, 2006)

Here we have a similar distinction being drawn where this reviewer shares positive information about herself and justifies the online dating because of a

limited pool of potential partners in her area and age group. According to this poster a "good reason" to try net dating is when you have limited access to potential partners, which implies that there are also bad reasons for dating online. Presumably when there is the potential to meet someone face to face then someone does not have a good reason to date online, which calls into the question the person's choice.

The emphasis on the cumulative nature of stigma, that is the less stigmas attached to my identity the better, as well as the hierarchy of stigmas, or the idea that some stigmas are worse than others, sets up a convenient provision for managing one's own identity in light of one's participation in a stigmatized practice. Essentially, people can say that though they have tried online dating, online dating is the only dark mark on their identity, and online dating itself is really not that bad as dark marks go.

<div align="center">Language of Distrust</div>

The posters use a language of distrust when talking about online dating, which serves to reinforce the stigma of online dating and the people who use online dating services. Words such as "con" "scam" "decoy" "Liar" "dishonest" "prey" etc. sets up online dating as a means of dating that is not to be trusted This language clearly reflects a distrust of the move from more traditional ways of dating to online dating, but this skepticism also works to help online daters manage their identity as someone who has tried online dating or continues to use online dating.

One major source of distrust expressed on eDateReview.com is the people who are presenting themselves through profiles on the various dating sites.

> I hope we can all agree that the puffing up on these profiles is done by both men and women. I don't bother lying or posting old pictures because if somebody isn't interested in the real me it won't work anyway. But it is clear that not everybody shares this opinion. You would be amazed by the

times that I have shown up to find the man about ten years older than he represented. Men who describe themselves as "about average" can be 50-60 lbs overweight. One man said he went to the gym 5x a week. I am fairly certain the last time he went to the gym was when he joined. I am not looking for a perfect physical specimen so please don't misrepresent. (Kris, 2007)

In this example the poster explicitly notes that both men and women "puff up" their profiles. The poster then goes on to give examples of times where the men she was meeting had misrepresented their appearance on their profiles. Again she separates herself by pointing out her own honesty in saying she does not "bother lying or posting old pictures," not because it is dishonest, but because the person has to be interested in the "real" her for the relationship to work. In saying she does not "bother" lying, it implies that lying is a waste of time, presumably because the "real" her would eventually be exposed.

It also appears that almost all of the ones with multiple photos post two or three pics when they were ten years younger, and save the current one for last. It can be quite a shock: pretty, not bad, not bad, aaaaiiiiee!!! They are certainly being somewhat dishonest here, and many are probably lying about their age, as well. Additionally, an "average" body type means 20 lbs. overweight, so stay away from anything other than slender or athletic/toned (unless you're a chubby-chaser). (Steve, 2007)

Here even the inclusion of multiple photos, some of which are more flattering than others is regarded as dishonest. Perhaps even more significant in this post is the comment stating "many are probably lying about their age as well." This indicates that once there is a perceived deception, the entire presentation is called into question. In both of these examples the citation of a discrepancy between the presentation and the perception of the accuracy of the presentation goes beyond whether or not the person matches their profile and moves into a much harsher attribution of willful deception on the part of the person posting the

profile, which acts as another way of discrediting the people who use online dating.

Besides claims that people using the various online dating sites are not honest, there is also an expressed skepticism about meeting people online. A preference for meeting people face to face and having an initial interaction offline is evident in the following post.

> The logical extension is exactly what people in my circle experience with online dating, and from the commentary on these review sites, so do many others: Online interactions come off as stilted, one dimensional or fake and in some cases, escalate way out of the acceptable bounds of social behaviour of any value system. How does this relate to what happens at a first date? The truncated data gathered online and through email feeds more into personal bias and judgements than to forming a multidimensional picture of another person. That insufficient data often cannot withstand the reality check of the infamous 'first three dates'. The requirement to release the internally built imagined 'person' and actually be open to 'seeing' the real person is often too anxiety provoking. (Amanda, 2007)

Here it is evident that Amanda does not believe online interactions compare to those held in person. The impression that online interactions are "stilted, one dimensional or fake" belies a preference for a face to face interaction that would be by comparison flowing, multidimensional and real. There is a danger in uniformly categorizing online interactions as "fake" and other face to face interactions as "real". Perhaps an online performance of self is perceived as less believable, but is every bit as real as a face to face performance. It is that perception of believability which seems to contribute to a tainted perception of meeting people online.

Finally, posters on eDateReview.com are suspicious of the various dating sites themselves. One poster describes eHarmony.com as, "Just a slick con preying on the vulnerabilities of single people in these disconnected times. It's

yet another slickly packaged con." The term vulnerable and its derivations come up a few times in reference to people looking for love online or in general. The language of victimization seems to reinforce a distrust of the online dating process, beginning with the online dating services. "I think eharmony allows abusive men to target vulnerable, trusting women and use their supposed Chrisitianity as a prop to gain a woman's trust"(Kim, 2007). "It's business, and it's all in the name of money at the cost of those who are naive enough to buy into it. You can never blame the consumer in this case". (Chris, 2007) "Although Match (for one) takes full advantage of milking every penny possible from you before you realize after spending countless hours/days/months on the sight you are probably fighting a loosing battle" (Brad 2007). Expressing online dating experiences in terms of being vulnerable, being naive, and being taken advantage of, sets up a predator/ prey dynamic that happens between online daters, or online daters and online dating sites. Additionally the use of the term "con" carries the implication that people who use online dating sites are being duped, tricked, fooled or otherwise outwitted by the various dating sites. This language implies that people who use these sites have not chosen to do so freely. This not only paints a weak picture of people who use online dating, but it also justifies the reasons for turning to online dating as being out of the person's own control, which helps posters maintain a distance from those who choose to online date, the justification for making the decision to online date again plays an important role in determining the level of stigma associated with the act of online dating.

If online dating can't be trusted for any number of reasons, it explains why they are still single, why they have failed. It is not because they are flawed, it is because the system is inherently flawed. The language of dishonesty acts to stigmatize online dating more generally while it affords an individual an external

explanation for why they failed to find a romantic other. This may tie back to the idea of stigma hierarchy, in that it is better to associate oneself with online dating and be able to blame being single on that than to look at one's self and own what else might be flawed, or face that one belongs to other stigmatized groups. Online dater again proves to be the least damaging of possible stigmatized identities.

This site is as much about the stigma of being single as it is about the stigma of online dating. Stigmatizing online dating and the people who use online dating sites turns out to be a win-win for single people. If single people go online to find a mate, and find someone, then the fact that they used the site becomes secondary to the fact that they successfully found a romantic other. Their identity as a desirable person is reaffirmed and outweighs the fact that they used online dating because they can attempt to justify the use of online dating with statements such as, "I just didn't have time to go out and find someone," "I was tired of the bar scene," "My friends convinced me to do it" etc. The end justifies the means.

> We were married exactly 5 months after we met, and my life is truely complete and amazing. Imagine the joy I would have missed out on if I had not taken the chance to join the personals and take the first steps to meeting mr. right! Thanks yahoo! (Renata, 2007)

This poster "took a chance" that paid off, making her life "complete" by finding Mr. Right. Here the choice to date online is clearly justified because of the success she had in finding a partner. The alternative would have been to be single and incomplete and missing out on the joyfulness of being with her partner. This post demonstrates the importance of finding a partner, perpetuating the idea that to be single is to be incomplete, expressing the need to

find that special someone through whatever means necessary, in this case online dating.

If however they fail and they can lean on an established skepticism about online dating and the people who use online dating sites, they have a built in scapegoat for any failures. A positive identity remains intact because they can position themselves as the normal person in an abnormal situation forced to deal with abnormal people.

> Who knows why I am on here anymore. The unrealistic expectations people have. This is a website for dreamers. Most of the women on here are ridiculous. I, along with many other males, have good jobs, are good looking, and probably all have characteristics that would appeal to women who are on the search for a good man, however, that is in the real world. (Mr. Happy, 2007)

They fail not because they are undesirable, but because the system failed them, or they were unwilling to lower their standards, or "everyone else" online is damaged in some way. Offline they have to consider the possibility that they are not a desirable partner, online they have a built in defense mechanism for maintaining a positive identity in their single status, and it benefits them to support and reinforce the idea that online dating is for flawed people if they can successfully set themselves apart from that idea.

As discussed in Chapter Three, these attempts to manage personal stigma by reinforcing the cumulative nature of stigma, hierarchies of stigmas, and overall distrust in the system are all expressions given off in an attempt to control how they are perceived as members of this stigmatized group of online daters. The rules established in Chapter three attempt to control the expressions given off by other online daters, effectively forcing them to claim affiliation with other stigmatized groups. Then as discussed in this chapter, posters set in motion a system of valuing stigmas which allows them to differentiate

themselves from other online daters, effectively controlling their performance as a more desirable member of a stigmatized group. The discourse on eDateReview serves to establish and maintain control over one's ability to manage their stigma at the expense of others' ability to do the same.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

I began this research with an interest in looking at how people discuss their online dating experience. In particular I was interested in how they negotiated the stigma associated with online dating that was evident in both popular press outlets and academic research. Having come across the website eDateReview.com, I found a rich source of text written by online daters about online dating. This offered a unique opportunity to look at a potentially sensitive subject in a naturally occurring environment. Glaser (1965) states that when it comes to studying topics that are sensitive, such as those involving stigma, often the only way to get accurate information is to casually observe what is going on or read some sort of documentation that the subjects have written. The researcher needs to either gain the trust of the participants or accomplish "clandestine" research. Glaser goes on to argue that qualitative methods such as the constant comparative method are ideal for analyzing such data.

This research began with a general foundation in Goffman's theory of self presentation with a focus on his work with stigma. Goffman's theory informed the assumption that the posts on eDateReview.com were in fact acts of self presentation and that one could find in these acts attempts to manage identity. In the case of online dating, identity management is unique because of the potential stigma posters face by disclosing that they are users of online dating sites. According to Goffman, one of the main strategies for managing stigma is controlling the disclosure of the stigma. Online dating falls into a category of stigma that is not visible, and therefore easily controlled. People who date online are not marked as online daters until they choose to disclose that information. In the case of eDateReview.com, most posters disclose that they have participated

in online dating sites, which sets up a unique opportunity to explore how they manage their self presentation after choosing to identify themselves as online daters. In this chapter I will review my primary findings, discuss the implications of my analysis, and address limitations.

<div align="center">Primary Findings</div>

The primary findings can be divided into two categories, 1) guidelines for online dating, and 2) strategies for managing stigma. The guidelines for online dating as discussed in chapter three are 1) be honest about your presentation of self, 2) be honest with yourself about your successes and failures, 3) to be successful you have to put in effort, 4) keep an open mind, and 5) accept your own limitations. The Internet affords users the ability to play with their presentations of self because there is a lack of face to face accountability. Online daters recognize that they may be engaging with someone who is not being honest, and the discourse on eDateReview.com shows a strong policing of honesty in online personal ads. This focus on honest self presentations online serves to counteract the freedom of identity on the Internet. The posts on eDateReview.com demonstrate how online daters use discourse in order to emphasize and enforce the value of authenticity.

The next guideline for online dating is to be honest about your successes and/or failures. As discussed in chapter four, there is a great deal of blame for dating failure that gets passed to other online daters, the online dating sites, or online dating itself. The emphasis placed on owning up to one's failures undermines that practice. In fact it serves as an affront to others positive self presentation.

The third guideline is that you have to be willing to put in the effort to be successful. Posts that explicitly or implicitly monitor how much effort people should put into love opens up a discourse about the nature of love and finding

love. A backlash against the idea that going online will make love easy to find seems to say that love is not or should not be easy to find, and it should not be a quick process. This discourse which says that you need to work to find love goes against the discourse of the online dating sites that try to sell their services by saying they will do the work for you.

Guideline number four states that online daters need to keep an open mind and be open to looking at potential partners that are outside of what they would normally find attractive. Guideline number five is accepting your own limitations, not trying to look at potential partners that are more attractive. These two guidelines speak to a person's expectations for a romantic partner. As noted in chapter three it is the relationship between these two guidelines that merits discussion. On one hand online daters are told to be open to others, and not so picky about who they date. On the other hand people who are perceived as trying to date someone who is out of their league are chastised. The message these conflicting guidelines sends is that you should be open to anyone even if they are lower than your standard, but you should not expect someone to be open to you if you are below their standard. This discourse reinforces a system to make sure people match up with who they are "supposed to" match up with and keep a social balance. People should know their limitations and be open to dating within those limitations.

The second general category of findings is strategies used to manage stigma. 1) Stigma is cumulative, 2) There is a hierarchy at work when managing stigma, 3) There is a general discourse of distrust. The first strategy in managing the stigma of online dating is to establish that there is a cumulative effect related to stigma. This strategy is best seen in posts which deride and vilify those who use online dating sites not because they are online daters, but because they belong to any number of other stigmatized groups. The more stigmatized

groups one is identified with, the less desirable that person is. These combinations of stigmas associated with online daters tangentially might increase the perception that online dating is for losers, but the effect of stigmatizing the people who use online dating rather than the practice itself allows people to admit that they participate in the practice, while distancing themselves from the stigma of other online daters.

The second strategy for managing stigma is establishing that there is a hierarchy to stigmas, that some stigmas are worse than others. Throughout the posts there are several traits that are demonized again and again, with weight being the most consistently discussed. The constant portrayal of some stigmas as particularly egregious works to diminish the stigma associated with online dating in comparison.

By stressing both a cumulative effect of stigma as well as a hierarchy of stigmas, posters to eDateReview.com discursively shift the tarnish of online dating from the practice to the people. Then if they can effectively present themselves as attractive and viable dating partners, the act of online dating need not reflect poorly on their identity or contradict their perception of a positive self identity.

Finally there is a general discourse of distrust associated with online dating expressed on eDateReview.com. Posters repeatedly talk about people who lie in their profiles or misrepresent themselves. As mentioned in chapter three, there is a close guarding of honesty in one's presentation online. The discourse about honesty perpetuates the idea that one should approach online daters with some skepticism. In addition to a distrust of people who use online dating, there is also a distrust of online dating as a viable way to meet a romantic partner. Posters convey the perception that online dating is at its core less real than face to face interaction. This contributes to the perception that there is

something flawed with online dating. Finally there is a distrust of the dating services themselves. Several posts use terms like con or scam when talking about the dating sites. This adds to an idea that people who go online to date are helpless to resist the allure these dating sites have propagated.

The general language of distrust surrounding online dating aids in the management of stigma in a couple of ways. First, to say that online dating sites prey upon singles paints online daters as victims to a larger scheme, meaning they can not be held accountable for the decision to go online to find a partner. The second way that it helps manage stigma is less about online dating and more about being single. In setting up a distrust of online dating and the people who use online dating, posters create a scapegoat for their failure to find a romantic partner. Posters can say they are still single not because they are undesirable, but because online dating is an inherently flawed way to find a romantic partner. In this instance, it is better to admit that one is an online dater than an undesirable partner. Being single in this society is a stigmatized identity (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004). Online dating offers single people a way to disassociate from one tainted category, but in order to do so, they must join a second tainted category. The discourse on eDateReview.com proves to be means for online daters not only to manage their identity as online daters, but also to manage their identity as singles. Ultimately when one finds love, they can presumably move on from both stigmas. Then the question becomes how the couple chooses to manage the stigma of having met online.

<div align="center">Implications</div>

This study of eDateReview.com has implications for several areas of research. It contributes to bodies of literature on dating, stigma, and computer mediated communication. Dating literature acknowledges that dating is a changing concept within a society impacted largely by social constraints and

expectations (Bailey, 1988; Ingoldsby, 2003; Merskin & Huberlie, 1996). The advent of online dating represents a current change in the nature of dating. The discourse on eDateReview.com reflects the tension between the realities of dating in a computer driven society, and the already established norms and expectations for dating that do not include the Internet. This study contributes to an understanding of this tension and sheds light on the resistance to change that manifests in the construction of online dating as a potentially tainted dating practice. As evidenced in the posts on eDateReview.com there is a good deal of distrust attached to the practice of online dating potentially as a reflection of dating norms which traditionally held that people would find dating partners through a more trusted network of friends and family. There needs to be more research on online dating as it compares/contrasts to more traditional face to face dating. Understanding just what is lost and gained by engaging in a new way of dating may lessen the skepticism surrounding online dating.

This dissertation supports the idea that online dating is both a unique process as well as a process that reflects dating in general. Online dating is unique because the medium is unique. The Internet allows single people the ability to seek out eligible partners in a way that suits modern life. They can find potential partners without having to lean on friends, family, and other traditional institutions like churches. The process can be liberating in that they become the master of their own romantic destiny. There is the flexibility of being able to browse profiles late at night before going to bed or over lunch, the ability to follow what interests you in a partner rather than relying on the judgment of someone else, and the potential to be exposed to people who are outside what is available to you. If someone wants to search nationwide, they have that ability. If they want to meet someone who shares a particular niche-type interest, they can search for that too.

While the Internet opens dating possibilities, at the end of the day, it still just sets up a relationship that has to happen in real life. So regardless of the ability for people to present idealized versions of themselves online, they must account for those presentations at the initial face to face encounter. This is why the rules of online dating are more closely monitored in relation to honesty. Based on the discourse of eDateReview.com there is a perception that information about people gained online is somehow less credible than the information we gain in a face to face setting. Despite the fact that people can lie about their personal information as easily face to face as they can in a profile, and they can wear that push up bra or hairpiece to give an inaccurate picture of what they look like, there continues to be a bias against information received online that is not as prevalent when people interact in person. Perhaps this is because people think they will be able to tell when someone is lying if they can see them, or they think that it is more difficult for people to lie to someone's face. Regardless of the reasons, Goffman argues that anytime people interact they are playing a part, crafting an image that they wish others to accept as true. The act of self presentation is no more real or true in one medium over another, though the bias continues. So even though some would claim that meeting people online is not "real" or that there is a danger in meeting someone who has not been properly vetted by family and friends, in actuality, meeting someone online is very similar to meeting someone at a bar while you are with friends, or the new guy at church. There will still be a first date, the pretenses of putting one's best foot forward will fall away eventually, and ultimately you will have to figure out if there is the possibility of a more serious relationship. Online dating reflects the technological changes of the current time. The technology isn't going to go away as more and more people are supplementing their face to face interactions with online ones. The reluctance to accept online dating as

legitimate and the willingness to cling to the idea that there is something suspicious about the system and the people who use it will lessen over time as people come to realize that there is not much lost, but much gained in the practice.

Another area enhanced by this research is that of stigma. This research supports the idea that even those who engage in online dating see it as a stigmatized practice and further explicates that stigma is likely a reaction to the changing nature of dating in general. This research also contributes to an understanding of how people manage a positive self presentation in light of exposing themselves as members of a stigmatized group. In the discourse on eDateReview.com it is clear that posters attempt to negate their own potential stigma by differentiating themselves from other more stigmatized users. This practice for managing stigma is certainly not unique to online dating. Raising oneself by putting down others is a common way to maintain a positive self identity. What is new in online dating appears to be the additional layer of deriding participation in the system of online dating as a stigmatizing factor. The posters to eDateReveiw.com explain their failures by faulting the system and the people who participate in the system while at the same time reinforce the system through their own participation in online dating and their willingness to discuss their experience in an open forum. There is a paradox in the fact that posters' attempts to negate their personal stigma as online daters actually in some ways reinforced the stigma of online dating. That paradox sheds new light on the management of stigma and will be an area that calls for further inquiry.

Another possible area for future research is the connection between the stigmas of online dating and singleness. This research shows that there is a relationship between one's identity as a single person and their choice to go online for dating. After having found a romantic partner the nature of the stigma

of both singleness and online dating changes, and so too the strategies for managing the stigma would change.

Finally the research on computer mediated communication (CMC) benefits from this study. This study expands the current research on how social relationships are impacted by computer mediated communication, but perhaps more importantly, it raises questions about how online dating as a form of CMC compares to other forms on online social forums such as facebook. Facebook is a social networking site where people link to other people they know by becoming "friends." Facebook allows people to create a profile page that includes pictures, personal information (relationship status, birthday, hometown etc), various applications for games, and videos. One of the primary features of a facebook page is called "the wall" which is a space where other people in the network can post comment, reply to other people's comments, remark on pictures applications and so forth. The primary purpose of facebook is to connect to friends and family members, even over long distances. While the primary relationships maintained by facebook are existing platonic and romantic relationships, that is not the only use. Much like online dating services, people can make their profile public and searchable, allowing people they do not know to find them and see their profile, and start interactions. In talking to my students, I have learned that more than a few of them had started relationships with people they met through facebook. Often this occurs when someone in a friend's network sees their picture on the friend's page and initiates an interaction. Similarly, a friend of a friend or someone who goes to the same school might see a person they are attracted to in a face to face setting and, after only a brief interaction, go try to find the person on facebook as a way of checking the person out before there is any major interaction. Even then the first step in a more substantial interaction may occur through "friending" the person

on facebook. This research demonstrates a level of distrust in online dating, but do social networking sites face a similar sense of distrust?   There does not seem to be the same distrust of those who actively participate on facebook. In fact there seems to be an assumption that people in college have facebook pages, that facebook has become a norm. Additionally, there is an interactive nature to a person's home page. Friends can not only make comments for all to see, but they can also "tag" photos of the person, so that if I post a picture of you on my home page and tag you on it (label your photo and link it to you), then people who view your site can access the picture on my page. This blended approach to presenting one's self may be seen as more honest and true than a presentation created only by the person him/herself. If friends and family paint a picture that reinforces the self presentation that might make viewers believe the presentation is accurate. Similarly the idea that people are in a "network" and know people that you know, may add perceived credibility to the people you meet through facebook. Even in relationships that start offline are impacted by social technologies like facebook. There is so much information about a person available online that people go into a dating relationship feeling like the know something about the other person. So even when people begin relationships face to face, the glut of information that can be found online may still cause similar reactions experienced when relationships start online. Googling or friending someone after you meet can raise your expectations, cause you to make assumptions about the person based on their online groups and activities, and lead to disappointment when the person fails to live up to these imagined qualities.

There is also a stigma associated with online dating, but meeting and interacting with people on social networking sites seems to be less stigmatized. Perhaps this is due to the fact that many people are on facebook, not just those

who are looking to meet people. If people are not using the site to explicitly and only find a romantic partner, then the site may not just be for tainted persons. Also there may be an assumption that if "everyone" does it, it must be normal. Further exploration of perceptions of social networking online versus online dating would be constructive.

<div align="center">Limitations</div>

There are three primary limitations that I will discuss regarding this study. 1) The possibility of flaming; 2) A potentially skewed sample; 3) The breadth of sources used in analysis. First, flaming is defined as "aggressive or hostile communication occurring via computer-mediated channels" (O'Sullivan & Flanigan, 2003, p. 70). Research has approached flaming as a problematic form of communication in online spaces stemming from a lack of immediacy which reduces social constraint and the impact of social norms typically adhered to in face to face interactions (O'Sullivan & Flanigan, 2003). Taking this into account, the often very harsh posts on eDateReview.com can be considered examples of flaming, and therefore represent an exaggerated reaction or presentation of the reaction to online dating. The possibility of flaming means that the posts on eDateReview may be distorted simply because they were expressed in an online forum. This also raises the question of the motives for the people posting to this site which leads to the second limitation.

The sample of posts I analyzed on eDateReview.com could be skewed because those who wrote comments were looking for a relatively anonymous forum in which to vent frustrations with online dating, again resulting in amplified hostilities and a particular way of talking about those frustrations. It is possible that the posters to this site were motivated by a particularly terrible date or experience which prompted them to find a venue for venting their frustrations. Posting a scathing review on eDateReview may help express

negative emotions in a way people do not feel is necessary when they experience positive emotions. The need to vent could create a biased sample where negative experiences are disproportionately represented compared to more positive experiences.

The third limitation for this research is the breadth of sources used in the analysis. I chose to focus on one source of text for this analysis. While that source proved to be a very rich resource, there may have been some use in looking at other texts related to online dating. These might include doing interviews, looking at popular press publications, or even finding additional websites and message boards. Given the potential for flaming on a website like eDateReview.com and the potential of a skewed sample, I might have gotten a wider array of responses if I included other sources of information in my analysis. Additional research may address these concerns.

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