

AN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY RE-CREATION IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNET DATING

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This research explored the identity re-creation process as it occurs via the consumption of Internet dating services. Informants were interviewed about how they use their posted dating profiles to explore aspects of their own identities and about the perceived impact that online and offline feedback to these profiles have upon their identities. Informants' responses indicated that individuals can re-create their identities through the use of Internet dating services. Furthermore, online and offline validation of the identities presented in dating profiles seem to have an impact on individuals' beliefs about themselves and their behavior in both online and offline environments.

Postmodern society is marked by constant change, which "infiltrate[s] every sphere of social life. In postmodern culture, fashion is not only clothing; it is bodies, objects, and lifestyles. . ." (Morgado, 1996, p. 44). One such fluid aspect of contemporary life that has been of particular interest to researchers is the way in which individuals go about creating and re-creating their identities (Baudrillard, 1988; Firat, 1994; Morgado, 1996; Turkle, 1995).

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An *identity* is the cognitive and affective understanding of who and what we are (Schouten, 1991, p. 413). According to the symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), part of this understanding of who or what we are is based on "reflexive evaluation" (Solomon, 1983, p. 321), or the way in which we believe that others see us. Our identities are shaped not only by our own self-characterizations but also by our perceptions of the manner in which other individuals in society view us.

Evidence of individuals using their behavior to form and re-form identities has been found in many arenas, including various consumer behavior contexts, such as cosmetic surgery (Schouten, 1991), skydiving (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993), river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993), and participation in fantasy-based (Kozinets, 2002) and natural health food (Thompson & Troester, 2002) consumption communities. In addition to these offline consumer behavior contexts, consumers also use their behavior in online contexts to construct and reconstruct their identities (Tambyah, 1996). Kozinets (1997) and Schau and Muniz (2002) empirically demonstrated that consumers explore and continuously develop identities through participation in online brand communities. Additionally, research by Schau and Gilly (2003) highlighted the fact that consumers use personal website postings not only to learn about themselves but also to communicate aspects of their identities to others.

Although researchers (Kozinets, 1997; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Schau & Muniz, 2002) have suggested the idea that both online and offline feedback from others might have an impact on a person's identity, an explicit examination of the ways in which this feedback affects a person's perceptions of himself/herself is absent from these studies. If identity is truly a social phenomenon as suggested by the symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), then feedback from others would be an important part of the identity creation and re-creation process.

The purpose of our research, then, was to expand the current understanding of the identity re-creation process as it occurs online not only by exploring the ways in which individuals use their web postings to explore aspects of their own identities but also by investigating the impact that online and offline feedback to these web postings have upon these individuals' identities. Using as a framework the concept of possible selves developed by Markus and Nurius (1986), we focus on the consumption of Internet dating services because, within this context, the potential exists for both online and offline interaction with – and feedback from – others. Past research suggests that virtual reality is encased within physical reality such that individuals' online experiences influence their offline identity and vice versa (Hardey, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Turkle, 1995). Following this lead, we assume that identity transcends online and offline boundaries and is

actually a collection of both online and offline categorizations of oneself. Hence, both online and offline feedback were examined in our study.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND A PRIORI THEMES

On Internet dating sites, individuals create profiles of themselves that contain information about their physical appearance, demographic characteristics, and personality traits. The creation of these profiles may actually help individuals explore and re-create their identities. The greater level of anonymity provided by the Internet, as compared to face-to-face encounters, allows individuals to present aspects of their current perceptions of themselves that they would not ordinarily present to other members of society (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). This increased level of anonymity also may allow individuals to include in their Internet dating profiles positive aspects of their identities that they would like to possess or have the potential to possess in the future, yet do not currently possess (Mantovani, 1995; Riva & Galimberti, 1997). If this is the case, then the aspects of the writers' identity that are featured in these profiles may represent the writers' perceptions of what are known as their *hoped-for possible selves*.

POSSIBLE SELVES

According to Markus and Nurius (1986), an individual's identity is composed of many different ideas about the person s/he thinks that s/he is. Each one of these ideas is called a *self-conception*. Self-conceptions can be divided into one of two categories: *now selves*, which describe the self as it presently is perceived by the individual, and *possible selves*, which are images of the self that have not yet been realized but that are hoped for or feared (Markus & Nurius, p. 957).

At any given time, an individual's identity will be composed of some combination of both now selves and possible selves. However, an individual's identity does not remain completely stable over time. Instead, individuals begin to reevaluate their ideas about themselves following a triggering event, such as a change in life status (e.g., a divorce or a move), or when a desire for personal growth arises (e.g., desire to learn more about oneself or to find a potential mate; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Schouten, 1991). Identities are endlessly created and re-created as individuals engage in the continuous, dynamic process of cognitive negotiation and re-negotiation. Markus and Nurius (1986) have shown that possible selves play a key role in this identity re-creation process. Possible selves can be considered "cognitive bridges between the present and the future, specifying how individuals may change from how they are now to what they will become" (Markus & Nurius, p. 961). In this way, possible selves serve to

guide individuals' behavior as they attempt to become more like their positive, hoped-for possible selves (e.g., influential, intellectual, powerful, famous; Wurf & Markus, 1991).

Although individuals' feared possible selves may also serve to guide their behavior as they attempt to avoid becoming more like these negative possible selves (e.g., lonely, chronically ill, destitute), the real key to identity re-creation is the positive, hoped-for possible self because, as Wurf and Markus (1991) note, "self-change and personal growth will not be achieved unless the person also has some indication of what he or she is working towards" (p. 55). In other words, any situation can be viewed in a positive fashion (e.g., passing an examination) or a negative fashion (e.g., not failing an examination). Because of the fact that the goal of identity re-creation is presumably personal improvement, it is the positive, hoped-for possible self – not the negative, feared possible self – that an individual emphasizes and uses his/her behavior to validate during successful identity exploration and re-creation processes (Wurf & Markus).

As individuals continue to engage in behaviors designed to help them realize positive possible selves, they are actively engaged in the process of identity re-creation. Wurf and Markus (1991) hypothesized that the use of possible selves in the re-creation of identity involves a multistep process of development, validation, and redevelopment. First, an individual forms a possible self. Next, the individual uses this possible self to guide his or her behavior in an attempt to realize that hoped-for possible self. If an individual perceives his or her behavior with respect to a hoped-for possible self to be positively evaluated by others, the individual will come to believe that s/he has realized the possible self. In this case, the validation from others allows the individual to alter both the now and the possible self. The formerly hoped-for possible self becomes a now self. The movement or elimination of this former possible self clears the way for the formation of new possible selves. On the other hand, if the behavior with respect to the hoped-for self is negatively evaluated, the individual's possible self will be refuted. After refutation, the individual reevaluates the possible self in light of the fact that it is unlikely that this hoped-for possible self will be realized. At this point, the individual will adjust the possible self into something that is achievable or will substitute one possible self for another possible self. Since a person's identity is a collection of now and possible selves; any change in either a now self or a possible self will cause a change in the identity of this individual. Thus, in both the case of the refutation and validation of possible selves, a person's identity is re-created.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET FOR IDENTITY RE-CREATION

Although individuals can use their behavior in a variety of contexts in order to re-create their identities, the consumption of Internet dating services offers

consumers an interesting arena in which they might explore the potential movement of several hoped-for possible selves into now selves or the potential alteration or removal of several hoped-for possible selves from their identities. In many consumer contexts, an individual's attempts toward achieving a possible self would occur either entirely offline or entirely online. However, the context of Internet dating offers individuals the opportunity not only to explore their possible selves online and offline but also to have those possible selves validated through both online and offline experiences. Although currently it is not known exactly how individuals use this combination of online and offline behavior and feedback to re-create their identities, it seems very likely that the process of identity re-creation may be occurring during the consumption of Internet dating services because individuals are encouraged by the Internet dating services (e.g., LavaLife, Match.com) to periodically "update" their profiles to reflect personal changes that have occurred since they first posted their profiles.

Using the concept of possible selves as a theoretical framework, our study examined the process of identity exploration and re-creation in the context of Internet dating. Our research was guided by the following questions: What motivates individuals to begin the identity exploration and re-creation process by posting personal profiles on Internet dating service websites? To what extent do the profiles that individuals create on an Internet dating website represent current conceptualizations of themselves (i.e., now selves)? To what extent do the profiles that individuals create on an Internet dating website represent conceptualizations of themselves that they would like to possess in the future (i.e., possible selves)? What effect does response in the form of email messages from other users have on an individual's identity? What effect does an offline encounter with other users have on an individual's identity?

METHOD

Our exploratory study was undertaken to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which people portray themselves in Internet dating profiles, whether their sense of themselves changes while they are participating in the activity of Internet dating, and what effect online and offline feedback from other users has upon the identity creation and re-creation process within this context. As one's identity is a complex phenomenon, an ethnographic interview technique was used because it allowed the informants to express themselves freely and to explain their actions (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000; Schouten, 1991).

Informants were adults (6 females, 5 males; 7 heterosexuals, 4 homosexuals; 8 Caucasians, 3 Asians) who were between the ages of 21 and 50 and who had been actively using at least one Internet dating service sometime in the past year. Informants were recruited by networking through friends and colleagues. Face-

to-face interviews were conducted at a location specified by the informant and followed a semistructured format. Specific questions were asked in an effort to direct the interview and obtain imperative pieces of information. The questions that were asked included: How would you describe what was going on in your life at the time you decided to start using Internet dating services? How did you know that the words you used to describe yourself in your profile actually described you? Have your online experiences and/or your offline experiences influenced your subsequent Internet dating behavior/behavior offline? Do you think that you are the same person that you were when you started Internet dating? In addition to these questions, informants were permitted to discuss any additional topics that arose during their interviews.

Each interview lasted between 45-120 minutes and was audio tape-recorded. Upon completion of each interview, interview data were transcribed verbatim. We then read these transcripts several times from start to finish and coded key phrases (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). When all interviews were completed, these phrases were compared and contrasted across all interviews in an effort to create categories that represented important themes in the responses (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). To ensure validity, results were triangulated across researchers (Denzin, 1978).

PRINCIPAL EMERGENT THEMES

MOTIVATIONS FOR IDENTITY EXPLORATION AND RE-CREATION VIA INTERNET DATING SERVICE CONSUMPTION

All informants indicated that their decision to start using Internet dating services was motivated by a triggering event, a desire for personal growth, or a combination of the two. Almost all of the informants mentioned that their decision was driven by some event that had occurred offline, such as a move to a new town or the dissolution of a previous relationship. Ruth's (informants' names appearing in this article are pseudonyms) decision to post her profile on an Internet dating website was actually driven by the dissolution of a relationship that occurred as a result of a move.

I was dating someone when I lived in New York, but I knew he didn't want to leave New York. So, when I moved here, a friend said it was fun to use match.com. I decided to try it. I posted my profile right after I moved here. It was part of moving on.

In addition to triggering events, other informants' decisions to start using Internet dating services were also driven by desires for personal growth. Or, as Ruth so aptly described it, posting a profile on an Internet dating service was an act of "moving on" from one life phase to another. For these informants, this

growth was related to their desire to form a personal relationship with another user.

I'd like to find somebody that basically develops into my best friend. I think that's like most people's ideal relationship.... It's nice to have somebody to share your day's experience with, and, you know, other activities. So, that best friend thing is pretty sincere. [David]

In other cases, informants participated in Internet dating service activities more as a means of learning about themselves than as a way to form a serious, long-term relationship. For instance, Pam primarily used Internet dating services to find out if she still knew how to date after being married to the same man for over 20 years.

I wasn't looking for a heavy relationship. I was just, I knew I just needed some dating experience. So, I was really being overly careful not...I think I was trying not to get involved. So, that may have come across, too, I don't know. So, was I just using him? Probably. But, you know, I was really nice about it. You know, I got some free meals. I was very up front. It all worked out.

THE APPEARANCE OF NOW SELVES IN PROFILES

A common theme that emerged, particularly among informants who were actively seeking offline encounters with other users, was the desire to be what they termed "honest" or "truthful" about themselves in their profiles. To many of these informants, honest, truthful information included those facts about themselves that could be objectively verified (e.g., current physical appearance).

I even said how tall I was and I said my weight and I was honest, you know. I thought, you know, why not? You might as well. [Pam]

So how do you know yourself? I don't know. I know that, if you read [my profile], it says that I am tall and I have hair. Well, I knew that. [Andrew]

Other informants indicated that describing themselves honestly meant including those current characterizations of themselves that they believed their friends and family members had verified or would ultimately support.

I based my profile on my self-understanding. Plus, all my friends will be able to agree with my descriptions. [Susie]

If my mother's called me an arrogant bastard, my brother's called me an arrogant bastard, if everyone I've dated has called me that, then I think it's going to come up and I should put it in my profile. That's my own arrogant perspective on it. [John]

In my profile, I said I was easygoing. I know that this describes me because it's what I'm like and because other people confirm my personality so it just has to be correct. [Mena]

This notion of taking other people's responses into account when creating a profile took an interesting turn in one informant's response. Liz indicated that she was truthful in her profile because she believed that honesty was appealing to other readers. Hence, her decision regarding what truthful information about herself to include in her profile was guided by her desire to appeal to potential mates.

I followed the questions on the profile questionnaire and answered them as honestly as I could. I am not interested in playing games with people and therefore was as brutally honest as I could be when answering the questions on the profile form. For the most part I believe that people like honesty.

THE APPEARANCE OF HOPED-FOR POSSIBLE SELVES IN PROFILES

In addition to being honest, informants admitted to stretching the truth a bit in their profiles. It appears to be the case that people do use their Internet dating profiles to explore aspects of their identities that they currently do not possess but would like to possess in the future.

In my profile I am trying to have something I don't have in real life. If you have it in real life, it's boring. [Sam]

Among the informants who indicated that they used their profiles for identity exploration and re-creation purposes, many mentioned that they felt more comfortable trying out new features of their identities on the Internet as opposed to in the real world because the Internet afforded them some degree of anonymity that the real world did not. Hence, the anonymity of the Internet permitted each informant to include a combination of both now and possible selves in one profile.

I think that I am 80% of my online presence. I have more self-confidence online because it's anonymous. There are no real life fears or paranoia. [Ruth]

This notion of anonymity seemed to be particularly important for those homosexual informants who were not yet out of the closet offline. For some, like Julie, the mere act of posting information about themselves on a homosexual-only dating website allowed them to try out being out, as it were, and to explore this aspect of their identity that they currently did not possess offline.

Since I am not completely out yet, I thought it would be easier to meet someone and really get to know them.... I figured this was a good way to start out slowly and not shock so many people.

For Patrick, another homosexual who was still in the closet, posting information about himself on a homosexual-only dating website allowed him to present a version of himself to others that did not accurately reflect his perceptions of himself at that particular moment. When Patrick posted his profile, he had a negative image of himself that he attributed to being in the closet. Rather than portraying himself in this negative way on the website, he used humor to present a more positive image of himself than he displayed/possessed offline.

When somebody's in the closet, there are strong chances of developing poor self-images.... So, at that point, I was thinking I was ugly. I was thinking that there was little worthwhile in myself.... So, what I was really trying to do is use humor and I was bringing out the best...I basically used my positive characteristics and wrapped it around this [humorous] theme.

Another factor influencing informants' decision to include information about themselves that did not accurately describe the way in which they perceived themselves at the time of the profile posting was their desire to appeal to other users of the Internet dating website. The majority of informants indicated that they tried to put information about themselves in their profiles that they believed other people would like to read or that would get the most attention from other readers. Informants used other people's' profiles to help them determine what to include in their profiles. Some informants referred to other profiles and tried to copy those profiles because they believed that the things that were common across profiles were the most appealing to potential mates, even if the informants knew that this information did not truly describe them at the time of the initial posting.

I put that I liked biking and hiking even though I don't actually do these things because I saw a lot of lesbians had sports stuff in their profiles. I think it worked because I was seen as a well-rounded personality. [Mena]

Based on other people's profiles, I would see how I could incorporate it into my profile. I assumed that if it worked with me, it would work with other people. [Susie]

EFFECT OF EMAILED RESPONSES ON ONE'S IDENTITY

The responses from the majority of the informants suggested that they were surprised, but excited, when their profiles received positive responses from other users. Because the majority of informants indicated that they were having

difficulty, for one reason or another, meeting people in the offline world, they may have anticipated that this pattern would continue to occur in the virtual world as well. So, receiving positive responses seemed to surprise them and to improve their self-image.

Better than expected and fairly well overall. I personally did not believe that anyone would respond and was pleasantly surprised when I began receiving responses. [Liz]

I was sort of just experimenting with the personals. I wasn't taking it totally seriously. So, I think I might have had about 20 responses in total. And they were all very funny, but one worked out and that was better than I expected. [Andrew]

In addition to improving their self-concepts, positive feedback from other users via emailed responses also served to validate the information that informants presented in the profiles. When informants received positive feedback regarding their profiles, this seemed to provide them with the proof that they needed to believe that they actually possessed the characteristics they presented in the profiles. This proof, in turn, motivated the informants to alter their behavior both online, by changing their profiles, as well as offline, by engaging in different activities, in order to maintain these beliefs about themselves. In this way, positive virtual responses had an impact on informants' online and offline identities.

Writing my profile was initially hard for me because I'm not really good about talking about myself, but I'm getting better. I just put down what I enjoyed doing and hoped there was someone out there that would give me a chance at being at least a friend. When I started to get positive responses from others, I went back to my profile and added more information about myself. [Julie]

I think online success motivates you to become more like the fantasy. You start to see yourself as that person, like, I could change if I wanted to. It rubs off on your real life. Like, you want to go back to the gym and work out and get the biceps you told the person you had. [Sam]

EFFECT OF OFFLINE INTERACTIONS ON ONE'S IDENTITY

In addition to online feedback, offline feedback from other users seemed to have an impact on informants' perceptions of themselves. For example, Pam mentioned that she felt "out of control" and had low self-esteem immediately following her divorce. Although she believed that her mood and her self-image would have improved eventually, she attributed the speed with which her outlook

improved to the positive feedback she received from the men she interacted with offline.

I'm a much happier person.... It pushed it along maybe faster than otherwise if I had just kind of not had these experiences. But they were really good confidence builders.

Although David did not describe his experiences as being nearly as positive as Pam's because he had not yet found the serious, long-term relationship he was actively seeking, his responses revealed the fact that he had altered aspects of his identity as a result of his offline Internet dating experiences. He indicated that, before he had started using Internet dating services, he felt that he had trouble approaching women offline because of his extreme shyness. However, after going out on dates and receiving positive feedback from women, he now sees himself as being less shy.

I used to be really shy in meeting somebody, like approaching somebody. But, I mean, like, I'll always talk to anybody and I feel like I'm pretty personable.... So, to me [the Internet] just makes women more approachable. Since I've started meeting these women in person, I don't think my behavior has changed, but I think I'm a little less shy.

As with online feedback, offline feedback, both negative and positive, had an impact on informants' online and offline behavior. For instance, Patrick, who had tried to portray himself as being a humorous, upbeat, confident person in his profile – despite the fact that he felt that he possessed a low self-image at the time of the posting – went back and changed parts of his profile following an offline interaction with another user. That other user informed Patrick that his profile was not successfully communicating his sense of humor, so, in an attempt to maintain the belief that he could be a humorous person, Patrick returned to the Internet dating website and rewrote parts of his profile.

With regard to the profile, the changes I made were based on internal changes from speaking with other people, sometimes from a minor thing that somebody.... I think [the other user] told me that the joke I used to...that I used the words wrong so I changed that. After the first time we met, that's what I kind of updated.

While negative offline feedback encouraged Patrick to alter his online behavior, positive offline feedback encouraged John to alter his offline behavior. Even though John did not put false information about himself in his profile, he intentionally omitted aspects of his identity in an effort to portray himself in a different light. John purposely did not report that he was a high school graduate because he believed that his level of education was an inadequacy and would

hinder his ability to date what he termed "women who wanted a career not just a job." When he interacted offline with some of these career-oriented women who reacted positively to him and told him that he could succeed in college, John enrolled in undergraduate courses in an effort to become more like the person he portrayed himself to be in the profile.

On this one, I put on educational...I didn't report it. I'm only a high school graduate. And I thought that [career-oriented] women never would have dated me had it said that, but, after I met [career-oriented woman]...I'd never dated a professor before. But she encouraged me to go to college. I'm now taking classes at [local university] and I now know what it takes to get an A in classes.

When asked specifically to compare the effect of offline feedback to the effect of online feedback, all informants indicated that offline interactions with other users had a greater impact on their perceptions of themselves and their behavior. However, when asked to describe freely the effect of feedback from other users, in general, the majority of the informants could not readily separate the effect of online feedback from the effect of offline feedback. This inability to distinguish between the two may have been a result of the fact that the majority of the informants met offline most of the individuals they interacted with online. Many informants indicated that they purposely tried to meet in person the individuals they interacted with via email fairly quickly in an effort to avoid forming a strong emotional connection with someone online when there was a chance that bond would not also hold in an offline context. As David explained:

I think it's best to just get it over with because...if you just drag it on, it just ends up being a waste of time if there's no chemistry. So, you know, after a few correspondences I think it's best to just meet.

According to informants like David, both online and offline interactions are important. So, rather than separating the two types of experiences in their minds, it seemed to be the case that informants synthesized the whole range of experiences with other dating-service users, from initial online email correspondences to telephone conversations to offline meetings, as a means of acquiring feedback from other individuals in the process of identity re-creation.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

By and large, informants' responses seemed to support the a priori themes. It does appear to be the case that individuals can re-create their identities through the use of Internet dating services. The ability to use Internet dating services in the identity exploration and re-creation process may provide one explanation

for the continued popularity of these services in spite of their poor performance in terms of matchmaking and long-term relationship formation (Frost & Ariely, 2004). Since individuals living in contemporary, postmodern society are believed to desire opportunities which allow them to constantly re-create their identities (Baudrillard, 1988; Firat, 1994; Morgado, 1996; Turkle, 1995), some of the popularity of Internet dating may be attributed to the fact that this form of dating not only allows individuals to interact with potential friends and/or romantic partners but also allows them to learn more about themselves, both who they are now and who they have the potential to become.

This notion of the use of Internet dating services to re-create one's identity definitely became apparent when informants discussed their motivations for posting profiles on the dating websites. While many informants did indicate that they were actively looking for a romantic partner via the Internet dating service, a latent (Merton, 1968) motivation underlying almost everyone's decisions to begin using Internet dating services was the desire to learn more about themselves. For some, this desire seemed to have been triggered by an event, such as a move to a new town or a divorce, that put them into a state of liminality. During a liminal period, individuals experience a state of ambiguity and suspension in terms of their identity as they end one phase of their lives and make the transition into another (Noble & Walker, 1997). Posting a profile of oneself may have helped to relieve the stress and tension associated with these liminal periods and may have increased the pace of the transition from one phase to the next (Andreasen, 1984).

The concept of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) was applicable to the Internet dating context. By posting profiles of themselves that contained aspects of their identities that they would like to possess but did not currently possess, informants were able to test the identity water, so to speak. Posting anonymous profiles allowed informants to explore safely aspects of their personalities that they may or may not have wanted to explore through overt behavior in the offline world.

The importance of feedback from others in the process of identity creation and re-creation was evident in informants' responses. The symbolic interactionist notion (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) that one's identity is constructed not only of self-characterizations but also of reflexive-characterizations was manifest when informants indicated that they took other people's perspectives into account both when they were describing themselves through the use of now selves and also when they were attempting to appeal to other users through the use of possible selves in their profiles. In turn, the effect of online and offline validation of the identities presented in these profiles seemed to have an impact on informants' beliefs about themselves and their behavior in both online and offline environments. Thus, the process of identity re-creation, as it occurs

through the consumption of Internet dating services, supports the hypothesis of Wurf and Markus (1991) that the re-creation of an identity through the use of possible selves involves a multistep process of development, validation from others, and re-creation as evidenced by changes in one's perception of oneself or in one's behavior. Furthermore, the responses provided by the informants in this study lend support to the idea that identity re-creation can occur through a combination of both offline and online activities.

Although our research supported the notion that individuals can use Internet dating services to explore and re-create their identities in both the online and offline arenas, there are still several unanswered questions that need to be addressed. One issue which remains unexplored is the extent to which these changes in identity endure over time. Although our interview questions referred to other points in time, it is unclear from these data how long the identity re-creation process takes, how enduring are the changes in one's perception of oneself, and how often the identity re-creation process can occur via consumption of Internet dating services. Addressing these issues in a longitudinal study could prove to be a fruitful area of future research.

Additionally, our data did not highlight clearly the differences that may exist between the impact that online feedback and offline feedback have upon individuals' perceptions of themselves. Because most of our informants interacted with other users via a combination of online and offline methods, it was difficult for them to distinguish clearly where the effect of one form of interaction ended and the effect of another form of interaction began. In this way, our data tend to support the notion that identity transcends online and offline boundaries and is actually a collection of both online and offline categorizations of oneself (Hardey 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Turkle 1995). However, in order to uncover any potential differences that do exist between the effects of online and offline feedback and to investigate the specific impact that each type of interaction has during the identity re-creation process, future researchers could compare the responses of individuals who interacted with others exclusively online (e.g., in chat rooms) with those of individuals who interacted with others exclusively offline (e.g., through speed-dating events).

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