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A Rhetorician's Guide to Love: Online Dating Profiles as Remediated Commonplace Books

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Abstract

This project considers ways online daters "write themselves" into the role of dater and offers grounding of this rhetorical work with direct comparisons to historic commonplace books. Despite the promise of interactive, dynamic online spaces to provide full and malleable online dating ads, Match.com profiles offer relatively little agency for identity creation and performance and are actually remarkably close to "old media" practices for writing identity. Paying particular attention to template design and linguistic and visual commonplaces that inform genre expectations for gendered identity performances in this space, this rhetorical analysis focuses on the author's online dating profile. The piece first situates commonplace books as textual identity production and then posits Match.com as a remediation of the gendered commonplace book practice wherein modern daters negotiate tensions between master narratives concerning gender performances and the desire to transcend limiting normative heterosexual gender roles. Specifically, when comparing these remediated dating commonplace books to their Victorian era predecessors, I consider dependence on limited, normative views of gender, the use of scripts and visual and linguistic commonplaces, the public nature of a privately crafted identity performance, and the focus on future, desired roles and identities rather than present identities. The piece offers an insider look at the Match.com community and focuses specifically on the power of Match.com design templates and site conventions to shape and limit daters' identity representations via the use of pull-down menus and linguistic and visual cues reinforcing normative heterosexual gender roles for dating.

Keywords: Identity; Gender; New media; Commonplace books

Logging onto Match.com to write my own online dating profile, I was not interested in getting to know myself better or figuring out what I wanted in a date. I felt fairly confident that I knew who I was and whom I was searching for, but time spent writing for and through the Match.com space forced me to rephrase, and in some cases rethink, the identity I wanted to display. Mimicking others' profiles, I carefully crafted my own screen handle, chose flattering yet realistic photos, and produced text that I hoped was both true and appealing. I felt a tension between being unique and fitting in, between being myself and being who I thought I and others wanted me to be as an online dater. Although dating—online and off—has been and perhaps should be likened to therapy (Whitty & Carr, 2006) and an exercise in self-awareness, I was unprepared for the power the templates and the other online daters would have on scripting my own online dater identity. For me, and other online daters, this seemingly neutral technological tool for finding

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love actually wields great power in forwarding specific scripts for possible identities and gender roles. These models for normative gender performances, embedded within the templates and design options provided in the virtual space, clearly posit right and wrong ways to perform dater based on larger cultural narratives of Western masculinity and femininity. In this piece, then, I provide a rhetorical analysis of my own profile, along with observations made while participating in the Match.com space, and in so doing focus on ways site design and user conventions force users into prescribed identities and embodiments online and how such performances tend to bias normative heterosexuality. Despite the promise of dating sites and other online spaces to allow endless options for identity construction and representation, such spaces often relay implicit messages that normative roles, in this case for gender, are the only ones that are actually acceptable. In this way, online dating profiles like Match.com resemble generations-old identity production literacy practices, particularly the gendered act of commonplace bookkeeping popular with women and girls in the Victorian era. Like commonplace books, dating profiles are most often constructed in private but intended for public consumption or performance, depend on popular media for writing one's identity and therefore fosters normative ideas while promising a space for authentic identity creation, and focus on a future, desired self rather than representing a current identity. The textual identity construction taking place in online dating spaces is the latest iteration of identities created through composition and thus positions Match.com profiles as a remediation of the commonplace book practice taken up by girls generations ago. While girls once sought to create future identities via commonplace book by selecting, gathering, and recombining materials from magazines, newspapers and other mass-produced texts, online dating profiles ask users to create themselves as future lovers and partners by negotiating design templates, pull-down menus, and cultural scripts made up of visual and linguistic commonplaces.

Match.com is the leading online dating site in the United States and ranks 96th in traffic among all US websites, according to the web tracking site Alexa.com (2012). Match.com was launched in 1995 and boasts 15–20 million estimated members (onlinedatingmagazine.com, 2011) with 79% of those members completing at least some college and the majority, and 51%, between the ages of 30 and 49. According to the company's own research, the site's users are "disproportionately Caucasian, and they tend to be childless, moderately educated women over the age of 35 who browse from home." I am an average Match.com user.

As a feminist researcher, I feel it is important to understand and reveal my own positionality and how that position impacts my reading of Match.com as an artifact and a rhetorical practice. Like other feminist scholars, I continue to believe that the personal is truly political and that our lived experiences shape who we are and the questions we ask in our research. Feminist theory is often rooted in individual experience, and one way to explore texts and spaces is to speak from within them. New media spaces particularly seem to demand this sort of insider status from researchers (Almjeld & Blair, 2012). To understand the at once highly visible and also highly private process of online dating, I agree with Dànielle DeVoss, "no one method of data is enough—we need narratives and stories, quantitative and qualitative research" (2007, p. 28). My analysis, thus, focuses on the story of my own online dating profile as well as observations made from within the dating space as an entry point for a discussion of technologically mediated courtship rituals and the way these "new" spaces for performing dater really aren't that new after all. This analysis is also a continuation of work from scholars like Michele White (2006) who employs a variety of critical, theoretical, and methodological choices to trouble online spaces. White's work in *The Body and the Screen* engaged several methodologies and theoretical standpoints, including film theory, psychoanalytics, and feminist approaches, in various online spaces in a "commitment to employing critical theory in order to understand texts and an interest in developing hybrid critical models that can assist in analyzing specific Internet and computer settings" (2006, p. 6). This sort of approach underscores the importance of local context when studying online spaces as seen in this analysis and focus on online dating profiles as part of the rhetorical canon of women's rhetorics and through the critical lens of identity construction via discourse and critical approaches to the supposed neutrality of technologies.

1. Writing identities

I kept journals as a kid and a fake gradebook when I was playing teacher. For a time I filled the reporters' notebooks my dad brought home from the small daily where he worked with scribblings from my interviews with childhood celebrities. As long as I can remember I was, along the lines of David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" (1985), writing myself into my future jobs, whether it was journalist or faculty member. Mimicking the discourse of a professional community seems natural, but inventing my personal self in discourse felt less so. Writing oneself into a role or given identity is not a new concept (Buckler & Leeper, 1991; Ivanic, 1998; Bartholomae, 1985; Dacome, 2005).