

## **Assignment 6 – People Markets**

### *Part 1 – Signaling in the Online Dating World*

In the online dating world, a person's profile functions as the primary source of signals used to attract potential mates. Photos are used to signal strong qualities while downplaying weak ones. People with attractive bodies may signal with revealing photos while others show a more artistic photo that demonstrates their creative side. A black-and-white photo of a person's shadow signals something much different than a picture of someone doing a keg stand.

Topical essays that a person writes for a profile signal specific qualities about the person. Responses to questions like "What is your favorite book?" serve as channels to signal information about one's wit, charm, humor, status, strength, sexuality, and values. Essays also signal about inclusion or associates with certain subcultures. Taste in music, travel, sports, and hobbies all serve as signals about how one sees one's position in society.

### *Part 2 – Questions*

The cost of writing a profile includes time spent on essays, money for subscriptions, and the possibility of exposing oneself to problematic people. Furthermore, these costs are not one time; they recur throughout the lifetime of participation in the site. The time spent on profiles can be large. It can take a long time to write a profile that puts one in the best light. As one's life changes so must the profile in order to attract the people that meet one's dynamic criteria. Fees are required even when a profile does not yield any fitting leads. Over the course of a subscription, this could amount to hundreds of dollars. Making a profile with personal information such as where one lives, what one looks like, and how one spends one's time opens the door for people with bad intentions. Provisions like using anonymous email addresses may mitigate this problem but the chance exists for persistent person to put two and two together. Alternatively, someone who knows the profile owner in one context could stumble upon information that is intended for a completely different audience. Thus, impressions could be changed, and not necessarily for the positive.

Photos are costly signals because they can be used to associate a person known in the physical world with an online profile. Someone who knows the person in one light might find some contradiction between the offline and online personas that could prove damaging or embarrassing. It is also costly to provide a misleading photo. Misrepresenting oneself could lead to a wasted night out or even an embarrassing confrontation. Photos do serve an important function, however. Photos are usually reliable signals that the posting person is invested in working with the online dating

system. They are different than presenting oneself in a real world meeting because they are fixed in time. A person can and often does change between when a photo is taken and when a meeting occurs. This change is likely to be for the worse considering that one usually selects a photo that flatters how one looks with good lighting, angle, context, etc.

Receivers incur several costs when pursuing a date from an online site. Time spent browsing through ads does not necessarily guarantee a date and therefore can be time wasted reading about random other people. The cost of going out on a date can be monetarily expensive, especially if one is trying to impress the other party. One might also have to endure an evening with someone with whom they would not normally associate.

The assessment signals in these sites tend to be things like wit and knowledge about certain domains. Both are costly to feign. The knowledge may be about certain obscure events or topics that would be difficult or useless to write about unless actually experienced. Since there are not typically communication channels between members of these online dating communities, conventional signals that are enforced by the community itself cannot exist.

Deception can occur in many ways on these sites. People can masquerade as someone who they are not if they are willing to put the energy into it. For example, a man could pretend to be a woman simply by checking a button, filling out the profile appropriately, and grabbing a few photos off the Internet. A less extreme example is when someone lies about their age and uses an old photograph. In order to prevent this type of behavior, guides to online dating suggest getting to know a person over email, phone, and web cam before arranging a physical meeting. This mitigates the risk that a person is someone completely different from what his or her profile presents.

Information could be shared between participants in these sites, but safeguards would need to be taken to control access to this information. Dating is different than selling goods in that the optimal situation (for most) is not in many repeated positive outcomes. Rather, the goal is to have one really good date that will end the need for future dates. Consequently, it would not be the case that having a lot of feedback, even if positive, would be desirable for fear that it would signal something bad about the person. A system that only showed the last N dates might be a better option. Also, a person should be able to clear their feedback and maintain their profile if desired. Basically, the system should be designed to allow for illuminating feedback that would direct better matches to the person.

Dating is a somewhat unique people market. Competition is cleanly separated along gender and sexual preference lines. This is unlike a situation like eBay where the same people who consume may also become sellers of the same product. Dating competition is somewhat similar to the job market where lines can also be drawn between groups of competitors such as engineers, writers, accountants, etc. The cost of deception in the online dating market is not as great as in the job market, where references are provided

and often are actually checked. People who are dating are not expected to refer a potential partner to a previous partner.

### *Part 3 – Final Project Proposal*

I propose writing a research paper examining a set of distributed, social groups along dimensions that consider their employment of technology for signaling. These groups would be distributed in nature and highly dependent upon (ideally digital) technology for their existence. Possible groups include university alumni, political party members, open source proponents, car owner clubs, and people from a shared place of origin. Dimensions would include what qualities are signaled by group membership, how people signal that they should be allowed to join the group, how they ascend and descend within the group, how they express membership in the group to non-members, and how membership in the group is maintained.