

Techno-Identity, Spring 2005  
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Assignment #6

**The world of online dating is a classic signaling system, in which personal essays and photos are the signals - but what are the qualities they are meant to represent? Drawing from the readings above, describe the process in terms of signaling.**

A person's online dating profile usually consists of personal essays and photos, which are intended to give other online daters a glimpse of what that person is like, both in terms of personality and appearance. A photo is primarily a signal of what the person looks like. It represents qualities of attractiveness, physical fitness, race, approximate age, hair and eye color and other physical qualities of a person that can be gleaned from a photograph. However, photos can also be used to represent qualities other than physical appearance. For instance, people often post photos of themselves involved in various activities (i.e. riding a horse, whitewater rafting, or skydiving, perhaps to show that they are adventurous and enjoy the outdoors). They also post photos of themselves taken in exotic locales (i.e. standing in front of the Eiffel Tower, or in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, or on a Caribbean beach) to demonstrate that they are well traveled, and perhaps also that they are financially well-off to be able to afford all the traveling. It is also fairly common for people to post photos of themselves with large groups of people to show that they have a lot of friends and are very social, for example. Thus, a photo can represent many qualities, not only that of physical appearance, but also subtler qualities, such as what activities a person enjoys, where s/he has traveled to, and the fact that s/he has many friends.

Personal essays are meant to represent qualities of what the person is like, what kinds of people s/he wants to meet, and what s/he is seeking in a relationship. For example, many online dating websites include essays that ask online daters to describe themselves, and also to describe the type of person they would like to meet. Some websites have more creative questions, such as "What is the best lie you ever told?" and "What are five items you could not live without?" But these more creative essay questions are still intended to give insight into the personality of the person behind the profile. The essays can also serve to represent the qualities of how good a writer someone is, and how much attention s/he pays to detail (have his/her essay responses been proofread, or are they laden with typos and spelling errors?)

**What are the costs of writing a profile – in terms of effort? Money (here are some notes on how pay sites impose useful costs)?**

The costs of writing a profile include the time and effort it takes to answer all the essay questions. This can involve revealing personal information about oneself, which can be costly especially for someone shy, who may not find it easy to talk about him/herself. It can also be costly in terms of finding a way to accurately convey one's personality and sense of humor through writing, especially if the person is not a very good writer. A poor writer may not come across very well through a written profile, even

though s/he may be very scintillating in person. A lazy person may not wish to exert much effort in writing a good profile, and may not write very interesting or insightful essays. However, this person may pay costs later in terms of not being contacted frequently by other members, because s/he has not revealed enough information to entice interest from other members. Thus, the costs paid in terms of effort of writing a rich profile may be rewarded later by frequent contact with other members of the site.

In terms of money, it is usually free for anyone to post a profile. Financial costs begin to be imposed when one wants to communicate with other members. On some websites, members need to pay either to contact other members, or to read messages that have been sent to them. Thus, in order to either initiate or receive communications with other members, it is necessary to pay the fee. Other sites have a slightly different model in which it is free to be contacted by other members, but it costs money to initiate contact. Thus, if a person is satisfied to just respond to whomever initiates contact with him/her, s/he may not have to pay at all. But if a person wants to contact someone in particular, then s/he must forfeit the fee to do so.

**What are the costs of including a photo? What is the function of the photo? Is physical appearance a signal or a quality - and is that different than its function in the face to face world?**

The costs of posting a photo include the time spent in finding a photo that depicts the person in a favorable light. If a woman is trying to use the photo as a deceptive signal, she may spend extra time using a tool such as Photoshop to alter or enhance the photo. She may also hunt for an older photograph depicting her at a younger age, in order to deceptively imply that she still looks now as she did back then.

Another cost of including a photo may be embarrassment. Suppose a person is self-conscious about being on a dating website, and does not want anyone she already knows in person to recognize her on the site. Posting a picture makes it easier for others to recognize her profile, and thus, increases the likelihood that someone she knows will see her on the site, thereby potentially adding to her embarrassment.

The primary function of the photo is to display physical appearance (i.e. for online daters to show others what they look like), but it can also have other subtle functions, such as to demonstrate how well traveled one is, how many friends one has, and which activities one enjoys. The physical appearance conveyed by the photo that an individual posts online is a signal, rather than a quality, because it is not necessarily honest. For example, an online dater may post a photo of someone else instead of himself. He may post a photo of himself ten years ago, when he had more hair, or weighed less, for example. He may use Photoshop to enhance his photo. Thus, one's physical appearance conveyed by the photo is not necessarily accurate, and therefore, this is a conventional signal, rather than a quality that is necessarily honest. In the face-to-face world, however, physical appearance is a quality rather than a signal, because it cannot really be very well altered from what it actually is (except in extreme cases, i.e. if someone wears a very high-quality disguise). In the real world, it is much harder to modify one's actual physical appearance than it is through an online photograph.

**What are the costs to the receivers? What are the assessment signals in these sites? What signals denote qualities mainly by convention?**

In an online dating website, the costs to the receivers in evaluating the signals are rather high – if a receiver wants to see for himself whether others are signaling honestly through their pictures and written essays, it is necessary for the receiver to meet them in person to determine how they actually look, and what they are actually like. Thus, receivers must pay in terms of time and effort in meeting the real people behind the profiles. This is often costly financially, as well. Not only is it sometimes necessary for receivers to pay for the privilege of contacting/being contacted by others on the site, but a first meeting with an online date often involves buying a drink or a meal, so a receiver may be expected to pay for this as well.

There are not too many assessment signals in the world of online dating. One possible assessment signal is how well someone is able to write/spell, as judged from the quality of writing/spelling in his/her essays. One can also determine whether someone has a good vocabulary from their written profile, which may be an indicator of intelligence and/or articulateness. But even this is not necessarily always an assessment signal, as someone else (a more talented writer) could have written the profile for the online dater. Nearly everything else about an online profile is a conventional signal – the photographs, the character traits one ascribes to oneself, the activities one claims to enjoy, the income/occupation one claims to have, the types of people one says s/he wants to meet, etc. None of these signals are inherently reliable, and there is not really any way to verify any of this information about a person without meeting them. The receivers have to trust that the signalers are signaling honestly for the most part, until they can meet in person and evaluate the signals for themselves.

**What are some kinds of deception that could occur (if you can't think of any, trying searching for "online bad dates")? What mechanisms are in place now for minimizing this?**

There are many kinds of possible deception in online dating. An online dater may pretend that he is single, when he is actually married (or involved in a relationship), and is just looking online to have an affair outside of his relationship/marriage. There are some websites however, which claim to safeguard against this practice – one example is <http://www.true.com>, which screens members against public records to verify their marital status. This site also performs criminal background checks on its members to ensure that its membership does not include convicted criminals.

Other deceptions include posting misleading photographs (such as those doctored in Photoshop, or those that are not recent so that the person looks much younger). Also, people can deceive others by lying about their age, their income, their occupation and any other aspect of their lives or personality, in order to attract people to their profile.

**Could information be shared among the participants? Would this be helpful? How could you redesign the system to allow for this? Think about the reputation systems we discussed in class. How would this impose costs on deception?**

As far as I know, most online dating websites do not provide a mechanism to allow the participants to share information with each other about the other online participants. Obviously, if the online participants already know each other in person, they are free to share information amongst themselves. This could possibly be helpful – for example, if two women are friends and are both members of the same dating website, and one woman goes out on a date with a man who does not treat her particularly well, she may warn her friend to avoid dates with this man. But in other cases, it may not be helpful, since everyone has different tastes - what one woman finds attractive could be a major turn-off to another woman. Thus in many situations, it is important to find out for oneself whether one is attracted to another person, without relying on the evaluations of another.

However, in some cases, if an online dater is signaling deceptively through her profile, and a receiver goes out with her and learns through meeting her in person that she was dishonest on her profile, he may wish to warn others about her. This is almost like punishing her, in a way, for being misleading and wasting his time. Perhaps online dating sites could allow their members to write testimonials (as in Friendster) about the people they have met, which would appear on their profiles. Thus, if a man went out with a deceptive woman, and found out only after meeting her that she was 50 lbs heavier than she claimed to be, he could write a short testimonial about this on her profile, which might dissuade others from meeting her. Unlike Friendster, however, each member should not have the option to first approve or reject the testimonial; otherwise, members would always reject unflattering testimonials, and no one would ever learn from about deceptive behavior through the testimonials. In order for this system to work, the testimonials would have to not be subjected to approval by the person about whom they were written. People could also use them to recommend a particular person; for example, if two people met and enjoyed each other's company, but found that they were not compatible with each other for some reason, they could each write positive testimonials recommending the other as a very nice person to meet.

Such a testimonial system might greatly discourage deception, for fear that others would learn of the deception and would then use it as a basis for rejection. Thus, testimonials could make the costs of deception much higher than they would be without this system to keep people's behavior in check. Moreover, the system would encourage everyone to treat everyone else they met through the service with respect, so as to not acquire negative testimonials.

**How is dating similar or different from other types of "people markets"? Any employment situation is potentially such a market, as is the market for tennis partners, book club members, etc. The costs of deception differ in these cases, as do the structure of the market (are there repeated interactions? is information likely to be shared? what is the relationship among competitors? [Read Gates and Nissen for additional examples]**

Online dating is similar to other types of "people markets", such as employment websites, and activities partners websites, in that the same basic format is followed: people post profiles, almost always consisting of a written component, and which may or

may not have a photo. In their profiles, they state what they are seeking – i.e. which types of jobs they are qualified for, which activities they want to find partners for, which types of people they want to meet. Then they either contact others on the site, or wait for others to contact them in order to try to fulfill their requests.

Dating differs from sites geared more toward finding activity partners in that people may take a rejection more personally. People may feel that they are putting themselves on the line more than if they are just advertising for a tennis partner. They may even develop superficial attachments to other online daters, simply based on their profiles, and they may feel worse if they are rejected by a date prospect, than if a potential tennis partner rejects them.

In an online dating website, repeated interactions are likely between two people who have not already met. For example, one person may initiate contact with another via email or instant messaging. If the contacted person chooses to respond, then there is likely to be a string of interactions as the two people get to know each other; perhaps they will eventually move beyond the online medium and speak on the phone or meet in person. After they have met in person, if they decide to go out again, then they will obviously continue to interact. However, if either party decides that s/he is not interested in pursuing the relationship, then the interaction between the two parties will most likely cease altogether. Information is not likely to be shared, and the competitors are not likely to have any relationship to each other.

This contrasts to a situation on an employment website, for instance. An employment agency may initially contact a person who has posted an online profile or resume with a potential job opportunity. However, if the opportunity falls through, and the online poster is still seeking a job, there may still be future interactions between the employment agency and the online poster as the agency seeks out new opportunities for the poster. Interaction will likely cease once the poster finds a suitable job, but it is likely to continue up to that point. Information is more likely to be shared in this situation, as the employment agency will probably share the online poster's skills and qualifications with potential employers who have job openings. But again, the competitors are not likely to have any relationship to each other.

**Propose a topic for your final project. We will be discussing final projects (or papers) in class - please be prepared to succinctly describe the topic and approach you have in mind.**

I would like to explore the possibility of an online dating website in which one's profile is written entirely by one's friends and family, instead of by the person himself. This would almost be a combination of a social networking site, like Friendster, in which an individual's friends write testimonials about that person on their profile, and a dating website, which is geared primarily toward finding dates and relationships online. I envision that such a site would reduce the amount of deception that people use in their online dating profiles, and would work to keep people's profiles more honest. I plan to propose a rough design for this site, as well as evaluating the pros and cons of this idea, in terms of signaling theory.