Excerpts from Managing Impressions Online:

Self-Presentation Processes in the Online Dating Environment

Nicole Ellison
Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media
Michigan State University

Rebecca Heino
McDonough School of Business
Georgetown University

Jennifer Gibbs
Communication Department
Rutgers University

As discussed, online environments offer individuals an increased ability to control their self-presentation, and therefore greater opportunities to engage in misrepresentation *(Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001)*. Concerns about the prospect of online deception are common *(Bowker & Tuffin, 2003; Donath, 1999; Donn & Sherman, 2002)*, and narratives about identity deception have been reproduced in both academic and popular outlets *(Joinson & Dietz-Uhler, 2002; Stone, 1996; Van Gelder, 1996).* A survey of one online dating site's participants found that 86% felt others misrepresented their physical appearance *(Gibbs et al., 2006).* A 2001 research study found that over a quarter of online dating participants reported misrepresenting some aspect of their identity, most commonly age (14%), marital status (10%), and appearance *(10%) (Brym & Lenton, 2001).* Perceptions that others are lying may encourage reciprocal deception, because users will exaggerate to the extent that they feel others are exaggerating or deceiving *(Fiore & Donath, 2004).* Concerns about deception in this setting have spawned related services that help online daters uncover inaccuracies in others' representations and run background checks on would-be suitors *(Baertlein, 2004; Fernandez, 2005).*

Online dating participants operate in an environment in which assessing the identity of others is a complex and evolving process of reading signals and deconstructing cues, using both active and passive strategies *(Berger, 1979; Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 200; Tidwell & Walther, 2002).* SIP considers how Internet users develop impressions of others, even with the limited cues available online, and suggests that interactants will adapt to the remaining cues in order to make decisions about others *(Walther, 1992; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994).* Online users look to small cues in order to develop impressions of others, such as a poster's email address *(Donath, 1999)*, the links on a person's homepage *(Kibby, 1997),* even the timing of email messages *(Walther & Tidwell, 1995).* In expressing affinity, CMC users are adept at using language *(Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005)* and CMC-specific conventions, especially as they become more experienced online *(Utz, 2000).* In short, online users become cognitive misers, forming impressions of others while conserving mental energy. *(Wallace, 1999)*