RSVP and the role of computer-mediated communication and digital personae in social media

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Abstract

Internet dating is now big business. The 4 line personal ad in a newspaper ‘seeking partner’, often perceived as the domain of the quirky and the unwanted, has now transformed itself into the world of big business and the mainstream. Social media and online social networking are accepted and burgeoning facets of contemporary life. The Internet has facilitated the development of a variety of relationships through computer-mediated communication (CMC) and has made possible the creation of digital personae – multiple selves, as well as enabling a specific new genre of relationship development through online dating. In this paper the authors explore the phenomenon of digital persona or identity, and the implications and shortcomings of CMC in an online dating forum, through a case study of RSVP, Australia’s largest online Internet dating system.
Keywords

Internet dating, computer-mediated communication (CMC), digital personae, social media

Introduction

The rapidly burgeoning world of cyber interactions and computer-mediated communication (CMC) has led to an evolving social phenomenon in the sphere of relationship formation through the practice of online dating which is becoming increasingly common. The use of the internet as a tool in the search for a romantic partner has moved from the realms of social stigma to a more mainstream facet of the dating repertoire for many people in today’s society. In an increasingly technologically adept population, where social networking and communication via computer are perceived as an integral part of modern life, the role and characteristics of online dating, and the efficacy of it, are issues of relevance to many. With Australian home internet access figures at 64% in 2006-07 and rapidly increasing (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008) and an accompanying transformation in social trends of later and fewer marriages with correspondingly longer periods of time spent outside a marital relationship (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007), there is little doubt that online dating will become an even more prevalent part of contemporary society.

The monetisation of Internet audiences is now well established. Facebook is planning to exploit the private information of its 150 million members by creating one of the world's largest market research databases. In an attempt to finally monetise the social networking site, once valued at $A24 billion, it will soon allow multinational companies to selectively target its members in order to research the appeal of new products. Companies will be able to pose questions to specially selected members based on such intimate details as whether they are single or married and even whether they are gay or straight.


In 2005 Fairfax bought RSVP.com.au for A$38.92 million. Fairfax group executive Alan Revell told the media that online dating had become a mainstream classifieds market. “An important factor to us is that the RSVP demographic is similar to the strong AB reach that we enjoy today with our metro mastheads. The market growth has been driven by the increasing social acceptability of time-poor singles looking for better ways to meet people.” (Fairfax buys online dating service, 2005). Jupiter Research estimated that online dating and personals will increase in the US alone from US$900M in 2007 to US$1.9B in 2012.
The evolution of online social interactivity and the rise of user-generated internet content have fundamentally altered the media and social landscape. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter and Youtube have provided alternate avenues for social interaction and relationship development. “Social media is an umbrella concept that describes social software and social networking…simply stated social media…enables people to interact with each other and build social networks” (Barnes in Konijn et al, 2008, p.21). Key features are user participation and interactivity, and user-generated content. Internet dating sites, such as RSVP, may not at first appear to fit the criteria of collaborative user-led knowledge building and social networking. According to Bruns:

User-led content creation today takes place in a wide variety of online environments. These range from widely distributed, loose and ad hoc networks of participants (such as the blogosphere) to more centralized sites of collaborative work (such as the Wikipedia); while some such environments exist as virtually ungoverned spaces (like Indymedia), some have developed hierarchical or at least heterarchical structures (as have many open source software development projects), and others both exhibit emergent self-organising tendencies as well as operate under some degree of corporate governance (as is the case for example in multiplayer online games). A number of key domains are currently driving the development of user-led online environments. (Bruns 2007, p.1)

RSVP is a privately owned and controlled site and at first glance it does not match Bruns’s ideas of user-led content. However, the process of using your own personal space on the RSVP site to develop your own profile and therefore digital persona, even if limited by rules of space and access, and to interact and communicate with other members, certainly fits the broad ethos of social networking and Bruns’s notion of social media. Both RSVP and Facebook or MySpace share similarities as communicative spaces where identity is explicitly conveyed. RSVP provides social networking services but is not a collaborative build up of activities and content in the same way that a Facebook or a MySpace is. Its users are though able to upload within a communicative space their own content and to network with others. There is undeniably social interaction and user-led content despite the commercial aspect. In addition to the “kiss” method of first contact and e-mailing, RSVP has added many of the features of popular social networking sites such as instant messaging, blogs and communities as well as promoting more traditional dating events such as singles travel, dinners and speed dating. RSVP can thus be seen to fall under the mantle of social media and it also presents an interesting study into the paradigm of presenting, and indeed manipulating, identity that can occur in social media.
Modern social networking media make possible active digital identities or digital personae and Internet dating sites provide interesting insights into how personae are being projected and how a new genre of relationship development is emerging. In this paper the authors will provide an overview of a case study into members of Australia’s RSVP that aimed to broaden the descriptive knowledge base relating to online relationships that progress to face-to-face relationships and provides insights into digital personae and its role in social media.

Digital Personae

Active and passive digital personae are not only the accumulation of data. Passive digital personae for example are the representation of the individual in digital environments and are already used in corporate decision-making. The company Visa, for instance, carefully constructs profiles of its customers, based on transactions (passive digital personae). Digital personae can also be active where a digital agent acts on behalf of the individual. The vacation feature in email servers that returns to senders of emails messages like, “I’m away on holidays until <date>”, are the simplest example (Clarke, 1994). Avatars, like those in Second Life, are also active personae as projections and as graphical representations of a person in an online or computer environment. Artificial Intelligence versions of digital personae can be projected by the individual or imposed by others “and it can be used for good or ill” (Clarke, 1994).

People can, and do, adopt identities in online environments. This has a history that precedes the world of Facebook, MySpace or other now familiar social networking sites and online dating sites. Turkle in 1997 used the example of Case to talk about gender identity and gender swapping on the Internet. Case was a 34-year-old male graphics designer who played a series of female characters in MUD (multi-user domain, dungeon or dimension). He describes his identities in the MUDs as strong, dynamic, “out there” women like Katharine Hepburn. He liked being a female identity because it made it easier for him to experiment with assertiveness both online and off (Turkle, 1997). “There are aspects of my personality – the more assertive, administrative, bureaucratic ones – that I am able to work on in the MUDs. I’ve never been good at bureaucratic things, but I’m much better from practising on MUDs and playing a woman in charge. I am able to do things – in the real, that is – that I couldn’t have before because I have played Katharine Hepburn characters.” (Turkle, 1999)

Turkle (1999) argues that online personae are made and transformed by language and the notion of a de-centred identity. “What I am saying is that the many manifestations of
multiplicity in our culture, including the adoption of multiple on-line personae, are contributing to a general reconsideration of traditional, unitary notions of identity.” Online experiences with digital personae are now part of the cultural context that supports new theorizations about multiple selves or what Turkle calls nonpathological multiplicities. Clarke’s and Turkle’s ideas on digital personae were borne out by the research conducted on RSVP which demonstrated the presentation and manipulation of online identity, or in some cases, identities, through profile construction and revision.

The Hyperpersonal Effect
Since the inception of the internet and particularly its rapid popularisation in the 1990s, interpersonal connections have been facilitated via computer-mediated communication (CMC). From functional, games-based or newsgroup interactions, initially incidental personal relationships developed. Subsequently, the sphere of internet connectivity grew to include online environments solely dedicated to the formation of relationships – the internet dating site. Analysis of this form of interpersonal communication draws on traditional theories in relationship formation such as social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), social exchange theory (Kelley, 1979), equity theory (Walster as cited in Dwyer, 2000), incremental exchange theory (Huston & Levinger, 1978) and uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Additionally, CMC research has lead to new theoretical perspectives, principally the hyperpersonal effect (Walther, 1996) and social information processing (SIP) theory (Walther, 1992).

The significance of the Internet as a medium for actively seeking a potential romantic partner and its efficacy as a rapidly developing forum for the post-modern romance seeker, is a field of inquiry that is relevant to many. Traditional interpersonal relationship theories cannot solely be applied to an online dating situation as there are elements of both, as a face-to-face meeting and subsequent relationship is generally the goal of online dating participants. This anticipated goal of meeting in ‘real-life’ means that some of the aspects of computer mediated communication theories are skewed or diluted when applied to online dating. Through studying the experiences of online daters, it may be possible to achieve a better understanding of the interplay between online and traditional face-to-face theories when there is a pre-determined goal of relationship formation as opposed to an incidental relationship formed through non-determinative cyber interaction. This in turn may have implications for models of computer media communication, such as the hyperpersonal communication model (Walther, 1996).
Early research into on-line communication and relationships mainly involved issues of identity and self-presentation within MUDs and as such the results were not able to be generalized to the wider population as they involve dedicated ‘game’ users only. Later research examined wider ranging internet forums and modes of communication, including online dating, and these findings more frequently suggest a positive potential for developing interpersonal relationships via this medium (Baym, 2002; Hardey, 2004) although there are opposing views. The contradictory views towards computer mediated communication and the ability to form genuine relationships in this way, largely depends on whether it is considered that the lack of face to face verbal and non-verbal cues and nuances are detrimental to building interpersonal relations (Culnan & Markus as cited in Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006) or whether “ in the absence of non-verbal cues, communicators adapt their relational behaviours to the remaining verbal and linguistic cues available in CMC” (Gibbs et al, 2006, p.155) and build more intimate, honest and ‘real’ relationships as a consequence.

Traditional relationship formation theories, SIP theory and the hyperpersonal perspective all posit the importance of self-disclosure, reciprocity of confidences and incremental information sharing in relationship development. While traditional theories of relationship formation in a face-to-face context emphasize the importance of spatial proximity and frequent interaction between potential partners (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger & Calabrese, 1975) in addition to physical attraction (Brehm, 1992), research into online relationships suggests that these factors have diminished significance, while the relative anonymity and subsequent increase in candid self-disclosure facilitated by an online setting (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997), may result in a heightened sense of intimacy and rapport known as the hyperpersonal effect (Walther, 1996). SIP theory (Walther, 1992) contends that factors such as the relative anonymity and the absence of physical judgement factors mean that exchanges leading to relationship development in a computer-mediated environment accelerate intimacy. As Cooper and Sportolari (1997, p.7) assert “computer-mediated relations reduce the role that physical attributes play in the development of attraction and enhance other factors such as propinquity, rapport, similarity and mutual self-disclosure, thus promoting erotic connections that stem from emotional intimacy rather than lustful attraction”. Conversely however, in online dating the mediated and thus deliberate nature of self-presentation can also lead to exaggerated or idealized constructs of self, evidencing Turkle’s notion of the potential for multiplicity and fluidity associated with digital personae.

The once marginalised process of internet dating has become increasingly socially acceptable and popular as a result of demographic, technological and lifestyle factors. The research into CMC and online dating presents contradictory evidence of greater dishonesty and identity
manipulation on the one hand and increased intimacy and self-disclosure on the other. The resulting paradox is that while participants may engage in selective self-aggrandisement they may concurrently experience accelerated depth and breadth of self-disclosure leading to greater emotional attachment and intimacy. Whitty’s studies (cited in Konijn et al, 2008, p.241) of online daters and the reasoning they employed in constructing profiles revealed they were driven to “commodify the self – ensuring they were presenting a self that others would feel compelled to ‘buy’ into” thus highlighting the problematic issue of ‘honesty’ online. While some computer-mediated relationships remain online those that feel a strong bond frequently meet face to face even if the initiating forum was not specifically relationship formative in intent eg MUDs, MOOs, chat rooms or online support groups (Parks & Roberts, 1997). When face-to-face meetings do occur after online relationship inception, there can be varying results as the levels of affiliation developed may or may not translate into a real-world setting. What is beyond doubt though is that this avenue of relational development is playing an increasingly significant role in contemporary society.

**RSVP**

The authors were interested in whether the hyperpersonal effect in fact exists in online dating sites and how a person’s digital representation, or personae, might be implicated in the consequences. The data collected and analysed comprised both qualitative and quantitative elements. The qualitative data collection component primarily comprised of three focus group sessions with varying numbers of participants, and a personal interview. Two additional participants provided more informal feedback and their responses were recorded under the broad themes which emerged from the interview groups. Participants were current members of RSVP – the largest internet dating site in Australia (RSVP site, 2009) with over 1,340,000 members. This site was chosen specifically because the stated intent of RSVP is to enable meeting new people for friendship and to facilitate the search for compatible romantic partners (RSVP site, 2007) as opposed to sites geared explicitly to sexual liaisons. Participants were given a verbal overview of the areas of interest and objectives of the research project when they confirmed their involvement, in addition to a written outline which was provided to them when they were initially approached to be a part of the study. Given the emotive nature of the topic, it was deemed particularly important to ensure all participants were fully informed and cognisant of the areas of inquiry prior to agreeing to participate.

All participants also completed a questionnaire, which was distributed prior to the interview sessions and comprised quantitative and qualitative components. Included was basic demographic information as well as brief questions that addressed affective, cognitive and
conative aspects of the participants’ online dating experiences. The review of current research literature available on CMC and online dating shaped the questions and provided a basis for more in-depth discussion in the focus groups and interviews. Key aspects of the online dating experience that were addressed included:

- amount of contact (in various forms) resulting from having a profile on the RSVP site
- relationships (romantic or friendship) that have formed as a result of being a member of RSVP
- perception of personal satisfaction with the site over time
- factors that prompted initial contact or response to another’s contact
- profile revision and any motivating factors

The sample chosen was a non-probability sample as the sampling frame (RSVP member database) was not available and as such any results will not be able to be generalized to the whole site population. It was not a uniform sample in respect of variables such as income, race, and relationship history. However, it was purposive in that the respondents were all heterosexual, currently unmarried, aged between 35 and 50 and joined the site with the intent of forming a committed, long-term relationship in addition to expanding their social circle. The initial participants were known to the researcher (friends and acquaintances) and snowball sampling was applied in order to achieve sufficient numbers. In the interests of promoting greater honesty and disclosure the groups were divided according to gender thus increasing homogeneity and removing some social barriers to open communication. By dividing the sample along gender lines, the emergence of any gender-specific experiences and responses allowed for the development of independent themes from a base of standard prompts.

The role of self-disclosure online, the hyperpersonal effect of computer mediated communication, the role of digital personae, the differences in online relationships that become face to face relationships (as opposed to those that are conceived and conducted in the ‘real’ world) and the perceived validity of emotional connections made online were the prime areas this research aimed to investigate.

The data collected from the focus groups, interviews and questionnaires produced several significant themes regarding the perceptions and experiences of online daters. Many aspects of CMC theories, such as the hyperpersonal effect and SIP theory (Walther, 1992 & 1996), were borne out by the participants’ experiences. However, the specific intent of relationship formation intrinsic to the online dating experience, meant aspects of traditional face-to-face
interaction played an important part in the development, or non-development, of a romantic relationship.

“Is this all that’s left in life, sitting in this apartment all on my lonesome?”

The common motivating factor behind all participants joining RSVP was the desire for a significant, intimate romantic relationship. Despite varying relationship backgrounds, the lack of love and companionship in their lives was perceived to be affecting enough for participants to actively seek to enhance their prospects of meeting a potential partner through an online forum.

“I knew that I wanted more.”

“I would like a relationship.”

“My motivation for joining…well, loneliness basically.”

Joining the site, particularly for the women, often came about through the urging of a friend who was themselves a member of the site, and the initial profile put up in several cases was a joint collaboration arising from a social gathering.

“A neighbour…brought around a bottle of red one night and we sat down by the computer and she said ‘I’ll make you sound wonderful!’ and she did, then I had to go back and edit it all because it wasn’t about me, it was all about her! But we had a lot of fun with that like Helen said you start getting little hits and you go ‘ooh, he looks interesting’ and before you know it, you’re really addicted and you’re up ‘til midnight checking all the time.”

All participants had been on the site prior to becoming a member and had browsed profiles before they created theirs and were thus aware of common aspects of style and content. Although all participants aimed to create a profile that was an authentic representation of self, many also mentioned a desire to present themselves in the best possible light as they were cognisant of a certain ‘marketplace’ mentality intrinsic in the initial perusal of profiles by users of the site. This duality between truth and authenticity, and the ability and allure of selective self-representation, was a recurring theme in various guises throughout the study. Many of the participants construed this situation as having both positive and negative ramifications. Most participants likened creating the best profile possible as being reflective
of a face-to-face meeting in that you “put your best foot forward”. However, all participants were also absolutely aware of the potential, and actuality, of misrepresentation – both unintended and deliberate.

“The unfortunate thing with that of course, is that eventually you will meet face-to-face. I guess the logic is, on the part of the person that perhaps oversells themselves with a flattering photo, is they might think we get on well personality-wise and that may be enough or they just might not realize that they’ve fallen away a bit in the looks department but, yes, I’ve been disappointed a few times.”

“Put it this way, when you read the profiles it would be impossible to be everything that a lot of these people claim to be but, of course, everyone’s putting their best foot forward so they say lots and lots of good stuff about themselves. Nothing negative, but life is not all positive, positive.”

“The other thing is they can spend so long working on that one e-mail, so they can carefully edit what they are presenting.”

“I think by telling lies you’re more successful at it. The more honest you are, the less kisses you get, but the responses are more genuine. So, it’s a toss-up.”

This notion of selective self-presentation (Walther, 1996) is representative of aspects of CMC as well as aspects of the traditional face-to-face theory of social penetration (Altman & Taylor, 1973). While participants believed this to be a major drawback of the online experience, they accepted it as an unavoidable pitfall but adapted their behaviour accordingly by becoming more selective over time in the initial stages of filtering and contact with a potential partner. There also seemed to be some consensus on what constituted acceptable embellishment. In the main, things like altering age slightly to fit a different category of search filter or moderate, and possibly unintentional, exaggeration of self was deemed allowable. However, deliberate manipulation of self-presentation to be more appealing was seen as totally unacceptable, and almost contrary to the ‘spirit’ of openness inherent in the very act of making oneself accessible online.

“Curiosity…and to actually go on some dates!”

One of the greatest benefits of online dating, according to all participants, was the perception of similar intent. Despite the acknowledgement of some degree of misrepresentation or deceit
on the site, it was felt that the online process more effectively filtered those with an analogous desire for a romantic relationship, thereby ensuring both availability and a similar objective.

“When you’re on RSVP you know they’re single. You know that they are there with the intention of finding someone whereas when you’re meeting someone elsewhere, how do you know?”

“They’ve at least acknowledged they’d like a relationship. They’ve at least taken that step. If you meet someone at a pub, you have no idea if they’re married, divorced, what stage of life they’re at or if they’re interested in a relationship.”

While the opportunity for people to present a selective version of themselves was perceived as a negative, the participants felt that online dating offered opportunities to meet many more prospective romantic partners than any other ‘real-life’ avenue. Through circumstances of situation and the mores of contemporary life, other traditional methods of meeting people were deemed not as effective. Regardless of this, all participants saw RSVP as an additional mode of meeting potential partners only, and did not curtail their usual social activities or discount the possibility of meeting a partner through other means.

“I think it’s a good supplementary measure. It is a question, I think, of having lines in the water and letting the law of averages do its thing.”

“It’s critical mass really. Saturate the market! Spread the net wide!”

“I feel, I guess, that at least I’m doing something. I’m not just waiting.”

The issue of any stigma attached to online dating drew mixed responses. The men felt there was no longer any stigma. Although they were initially cautious about disclosing they were members of the site, this quickly changed after they experienced some ‘success’ online. The women were fairly evenly divided about the perception of stigma. All participants agreed that initially online dating was seen as the domain of the ‘desperate and dateless’ but that it was now a mainstream avenue of relationship formation. Those that were older or were long-term married couples were seen as less accepting of the process.

“The cross-section of people using RSVP now is so broad that you are going to get people from all walks of life. I guess, 10 years ago, the only people using internet
dating would have been computer-literate, maybe not overly sociable who saw it as really their only opportunity to meet a partner. That stigma is gone.”

“Once you put your profile on and you get a reaction, it gets addictive”

Other factors that rated highly with participants were the ease of online dating and its appeal as an enjoyable activity in and of itself. Despite all participants stating that they were not on the site with the intent of making friends (as they felt that was readily accomplished in ‘real-life’) but rather to specifically search for a romantic partner, all participants found the actual process of online dating to have many enjoyable, even compelling aspects.

“It’s exciting. It’s an ego boost. Everyone likes to be told that they’re nice, that they’re good, that they’re accepted and it’s one of the great ‘wants’ of life, of people, that they are liked and accepted and this is one way in which that need can be fulfilled.

“It’s exciting…you’ve got something to look forward to. I find the process quite enjoyable definitely.”

“It could almost replace the TV.”

“It’s addictive.”

“It’s flattering.”

The convenience and ease of online dating was one of the most appealing aspects for participants. The time pressures endemic in modern life make the comparative efficiency of meeting many prospective partners through RSVP enticing.

“Well you could just go home and look on the computer and not have to think about where am I going to go, or how am I going to meet someone or having to get dressed up and all that. You just walk in, sit down and look.”

“I think it’s convenient, you can do it in the comfort of your lounge chair. You don’t have to be tired and busy and waste money going out and about.”
Although all participants had experienced negative responses, the ones that occurred only in an online environment were more easily dealt with emotionally and were perceived to be less hurtful than negative experiences that took place when a face-to-face meeting had occurred. A rejection at an early stage, before meaningful exchange and disclosure occurred, and the lack of a physical reality, appeared to lessen the impact of these negative experiences. Nonetheless, there was still an element of rebuff although this appeared to become less so, the longer a participant was a member of the site. As participants became more selective about responding to contact and their filtering strategies became more evolved, there was a corresponding acceptance of others decisions and an assumption of similar motives.

Additionally factors such as a sense of control, over self-presentation but also over degree and rate of contact, and the ability to easily disconnect from undesirable or unfulfilling contact before a face-to-face meeting has occurred heightened the appeal of RSVP. There were contradictory views regarding the safety of online dating. While participants, particularly the women, felt the RSVP site provided a controllable and safe environment for engagement with prospective partners, once a face-to-face meeting was arranged they felt an increased sense of anxiety. This was due to a realisation that identity manipulation or deception can occur and for many intents and purposes the person they had agreed to meet was a stranger.

“I do get far more nervous with RSVP than I do meeting people through other ways. I’m much more cautious. I always drive my own car and give my details to somebody else plus their details, whereas when I’m going to meet somebody else I’m much more relaxed about that.”

Despite many of the facets of computer mediated communication theory being verified, to a greater or lesser extent, by the participants’ experiences online, one of the most consistent and striking findings of the study was that the hyperpersonal effect and SIP became totally irrelevant in all but one isolated case, when a face-to-face meeting occurred. While many participants reported a heightened sense of intimacy and self-disclosure online, this did not have a commensurately positive impact on any subsequent meeting.

“You can get things out of them that you maybe wouldn’t have got out of them face-to-face because they’re more relaxed behind the screen.”

“I think the anonymous perspective can encourage someone to divulge a bit more about themselves than they would otherwise…I think it depends whether the person disclosing the information thinks that they are ever going to meet that person.”
The online daters in the study all had a clear and specific intent to meet face-to-face and develop a relationship with a compatible partner and consequently felt that traditional aspects of interpersonal relationship development such as physical attraction, ‘chemistry’ and even spatial proximity, were in no way diminished by any sense of online rapport. To this end, one of the recurrent factors of cognitive and conative evolution among the participants was the strategy of limiting the time between first contact and a face-to-face meeting as much as practicable, given the need to establish some basic sense of what the other person was like.

Conclusion

Participants viewed RSVP as a filter in the search for a relationship. Rather than a mechanism by which physical factors are down-played, the site was seen as a starting point, albeit a more efficient starting point, from which a great deal of information could be gleaned but which ultimately was merely a conduit to a face-to-face meeting whereupon the process reverted to a traditional relational development - one of incremental self-disclosure and increased interactions.

The inverted relational developmental progression merely delayed the traditional mode of interpersonal development, not superseded it. Consequently, for the online daters in the study, beginning a relationship in a computer-mediated environment did not allow for accelerated intimacy and rapport developed online to mitigate the usual elements of physical attraction, proximity and face-to-face interaction. The awareness of the possibility of online identity manipulation and selective self-presentation was also a factor.

“I see it as a vehicle to a relationship rather than forming a relationship online that progresses on to real-life…I don’t think you really get to know someone until you’re actually sitting at the table and seeing their body language and seeing who they really are. You can write anything but I don’t think you can tell anything until you’re face-to-face. Its easier to lie with words than it is face-to-face.”

Although all participants were unequivocal about the importance of the traditional factors of relationship formation, there was also a recurrent theme reflecting the ‘checklist’ nature of RSVP. Time pressures of modern life and the increasing sense of commodification of sexuality and romance (Bauman and Giddens as cited in Ross, 2005) coupled with the format of online dating (profiles, ideal partner category, search criteria etc) resulted in a perception of a somewhat functional and utilitarian approach to the search for romance in many respects.
Notwithstanding the imperatives of physical attraction and ‘chemistry’, participants, while being somewhat open to small variances, were generally more prescriptive in their approach to online dating than if they met someone elsewhere. At the very least, the act of actively searching through the online search engines required participants to clarify in their own minds, their wants, needs and requirements in a potential partner.

Participants were well aware of the issue of selective self-representation (Walther, 1996) and the possibility of deliberate deception or misrepresentation online. The findings of this study provided support for the relevance of an anticipated future face-to-face meeting on honesty as posited by SIP theory (Walther, 1994). Despite this element of the online experience and other perceived negatives, RSVP was deemed overall to be a convenient, effective and largely enjoyable mode of making contact with other relationship-oriented people. It facilitated interaction that was controllable and provided a means to pro-actively seek a romantic partner, while being an activity in and of itself, that was engaging and mostly agreeable.

In terms of the evolution of digital personae as a phenomenon, RSVP provides some important insights into how active and passive digital identities are evolving and will evolve. The research demonstrates that people are willing to create and to project their digital personae (selective self-presentation in profiles) and, indeed, to create ‘multiple selves’, as evidenced by adjusting profiles to better ‘target’ prospective mates or, in some instances, running multiple profiles simultaneously. The fluidity of identity constructs online is evident and echoes Turkle’s concept of nonpathological mulitple personalities. There is a reverse order of traditional projection of personality, where self-disclosure is often slow and incremental. The hyperpersonal effect is an important part of understanding the impact of digital personae and their potential but also their limitations when intersecting with expectations of everyday face to face life. As the technology of active digital personae becomes more sophisticated, there is no doubt that people will allow their digital identities to explore and to interact with others online. In Second Life avatars, as representations, do this but they are more puppet-like than active digital personae (although people can record information on people’s sites for later reference) but there will certainly be improvements in technological complexity which enable even greater approximations of real-life and correspondingly greater emotional involvement and satisfaction. While imposed digital personae have not been discussed in this paper – where your digital identity is created by others and used – there are clearly going to be serious issues with how our own identities are represented by others, corporations and governments. People like control over their own identities.
References


