

## **Looking for Love on Craigslist: An Examination of Gender Differences in Self-Marketing Online**

**Cara O. Peters**  
**Winthrop University**

**Jane B. Thomas**  
**Winthrop University**

**Richard Morris**  
**Winthrop University**

*The purpose of this research is to examine the self-marketing occurring among heterosexual men and women who are advertising for a prospective date on the social media site, Craigslist. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of 1,200 posts was conducted. The findings offer unique insight into differences between males and females that can be used when creating marketing messages. The results illustrate that language is an imprecise form in how people read and understand the written and spoken word. It is important for marketers to understand the criteria that consumers are searching for and the language that they use in self-marketing.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Those in the popular press have begun to assert that men and women use social media differently. For example, some have argued that certain social media sites, like Pinterest, are only utilized by women (Conaway, 2013a). Others contend that women, when compared to men, are more likely to use Facebook and other social media to foster and reinforce social connections (Bond, 2009; Joinson, 2008). Furthermore, some researchers have found that women are more likely to have a public Facebook profile, put up more photos of family and friends, frequently update their own profile photos, and post more often about their ongoing activities (Bond, 2009; Strano 2008). In contrast, recent research reports that women are less likely to report their detailed, personal information (such as phone numbers) on social media sites when compared to men (Conaway, 2013b). While these studies have begun to identify the different ways men and women use social media, they only present part of the picture. There is virtually no examination to date of how men and women present and “market” themselves differently via social media.

Given that studies show men and women use social media differently and the fact that academics have known for quite some time that the two genders communicate differently (c.f., Lakoff & Bucholtz, 2004), it seems important for marketers to understand the differences in communication used by males and females in social media and how these language differences assist in the development of an online identity that is packaged and presented to others. Marketers could better communicate with potential target audiences if they had a stronger understanding of the language utilized by the different genders.

Moreover, knowing more about gendered language also helps understand online consumer behavior, not only for social media sites (like Pinterest) but also for other websites that are selling goods and services (like eHarmony.com and Match.com).

In both the popular press and among academics, there is a small but growing literature around the idea of “self-marketing” (a.k.a., “personal branding”) in which individual consumers carefully construct a personal identity, much like a brand image, that is presented to others (McCaffrey, 1983; Montoya & Vandehey, 2008; Peters, 1997; Shepherd, 2005). “Self-marketing” appears to happen in a variety of contexts, ranging from functional to social reasons, such as in search of employment, promotion, self-expression, social connections (i.e., familial relationships and friendships), and romantic relationships (i.e., dating) (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). Furthermore, many assert that much of self-marketing takes place online via social media (Chase, 2011; Elmore, 2010; Greer, 2010; Hearn, 2008; Hyatt, 2010).

As explained in our literature review below, e-dating is the ultimate form of “self-marketing,” which presents a unique opportunity to explore differences in the language used by men and women in social media. Self-marketing via Craigslist.com served as the focus of the current study because this website is one of most well known online communities that is public (i.e., no fee required). In the U. S. alone, more than 50 million people use Craigslist, and the site has 30 billion page views per month (<http://www.craigslist.org/about/factsheet>). Craigslist provides more than 100 topical forums that contain more than 200 million user postings at any given time. One of Craigslist’s topical forums is “personal advertisements.” These advertisements are a unique blend of content that mirrors traditional newspaper personal ads with online dating. However, unlike traditional newspaper ads and e-dating websites, personal ads on Craigslist require no fees, no contracts, no limits on text, and provide for more real-time communication between interested individuals. Within these personal ads on Craigslist, individuals are using self-marketing to communicate with prospective partners, who then decide to make connections based on information provided in the online post.

The purpose of this research is to examine the self-marketing occurring among heterosexual men and women who are advertising for a prospective date/partner on the popular social media site, Craigslist. The central aim of this study is to review the content of these online ads and then explore how men and women communicate differently as they self-market online. This paper makes a unique contribution to the literature, as research in self-marketing via social media has yet to delve into gender differences. Little is known about how men and women market and present themselves differently via social media sites. Findings from this study also provide insights for understanding gendered language and developing marketing communication for online communities, social media, and other marketing activities. Following is the theoretical foundation, methodology, findings, and discussion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Schau and Gilly (2003) argue that consumers consciously construct online identities, using a combination of words and pictures. Although they were studying web pages and not social media per se, these authors seem to have planted the early seeds of the online self-marketing literature that is currently growing into a field of study on its own. Although self-marketing has been around for quite some time in the popular press (McCaffrey, 1983; Peters, 1997), the literature has flourished among practitioners (cf., Chase, 2011; Elmore, 2010; Greer, 2010; Hyatt, 2010; Montoya & Vandehey, 2008) and is beginning to take hold among academics as well. From an academic perspective, Shepherd (2005) defines self-marketing as “those activities undertaken by individuals to make themselves known in the market place” (p. 590). Shepherd suggests that individuals are continually reinventing themselves in an effort to remain desirable to others. Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005) similarly describe self-marketing as efforts by individuals to create and position the self as a package that is presented to others. Hearn (2008) also examined self-marketing, although from the perspective of consumer culture theory. She states that in marketing themselves online, people purposefully direct messages outward and this self production is “narrated, marked by visual codes of mainstream culture industry, and subject to extraction value” (p. 197).

One of the few academic studies of self-marketing to date that actually includes data collection, as opposed to being conceptual in nature, is Labrecque, Markos, and Milne's (2011) examination of twelve individual's online profiles. These researchers found that individuals purposefully craft and post material on social media to project a personal identity. Through interviews, Labrecque et al. found that most of the informants had a "branding strategy" and were "consciously aware" of what they were posting. The twelve individuals attempted to highlight their positive attributes that they believed were of value to the target audience (and were also ways to differentiate themselves from others). After interviewing the informants, the researchers then conducted "brand audits" of these online profiles, inviting HR professionals and undergraduate students to judge the content of these profiles. The results of these brand audits suggested that at times the audience did not fully comprehend the positioning of the informants and authenticity was often important in posting and interpreting the content of the profiles.

The literature on e-dating suggests that in their efforts to find prospective partners/dates, consumers are practicing self-marketing online. E-dating consists of a set of "activities such as subscribing to a dating website, posting a personal ad, and/or replying to dating messages online" (Close & Zinkhan, 2004, p. 153). The primary means for communicating with others in the e-dating process is via an online personal ad that lists the person's personal data, self description, and states what they are looking for (Malchow-Moller, 2003). Because these online personal ads communicate what is "valuable" about the person in order to attract prospective partners, several researchers have argued that these online personal ads are self-marketing (Arvidsson, 2006; Coupland, 1996; Patterson & Hodgson, 2006).

Malchow-Moller (2003) found that when posting e-dating personal ads, consumers experience tension as they balance highlighting their positive attributes against presenting their authentic or true selves. While the mediation in e-dating allows for greater control over the presentation of self and can create opportunities for misrepresentation, it also allows for consumers to be more open in the self-disclosure process (Malchow-Moller, 2003). Malchow-Moller (2003) actually found that consumers present themselves how they want to be perceived, as opposed to how they actually are, which could lead to the tension described by Ellison et al. (2006). Another factor that weighs into what consumers post about themselves in the e-dating process is that prospective daters use subtle cues in the posts to make judgments about the content of the post and whether he/she wants to reply to the e-dater (Malchow-Moller, 2003). For example, Rosen, Cheever and Felt (2008) found that the amount of emotionality and self-disclosure in the personal ad were key factors that affected a person's perception of a potential e-dating partner. Posts with more emotional language (like excited or wonderful) had a more positive effect on the reader, but the amount of self-disclosure needed to be more moderate because too much self-disclosure led to negative perceptions.

There is a small but growing literature on gender differences in e-dating personal ads, but these studies tend to focus more on traditional media, as there are only a few that examine gender differences in an online context. Butler-Smith, Cameron and Collins (1998) examined personal ads from the Sunday newspaper and found that content typically fell along lines of gendered stereotypes. Men more often sought younger partners and offered financial security, when compared to women. Women more specified that men must have financial security more frequently than men. These researchers did not find gender differences among a host of other variables, including relationship commitment (i.e., fling versus long term), declared age, divorced, and family status (i.e., children). In a follow-up study, Cameron and Collins (1999) analyzed personal ads from the newspaper and found that women's declaration of wealth and divorced status had a positive impact on the demand for male looks. In other words, when women reported being wealthy, they were more likely to be seeking an attractive male. In addition, Cameron and Collins (1999) found that older women were less likely to require attractiveness in a prospective partner.

Jagger (1998), like Butler-Smith et al. (1988), analyzed newspaper ads and found that the content mirrored gendered stereotypes. Men offered financial status and sought physical attractiveness in prospective partners, while women offered physical attractiveness and sought men with financial resources. However, what was unique to Jagger's study was that she also found that both men and women equally marketed their bodies as a primary selling point. In fact, both genders marketed their bodies more frequently than their other resources. Jagger suggests that this may be the case because lifestyle choices

may be displacing financial resources as identity markers for men in today's society. However, despite these findings, more recent studies examining newspaper personal ads have continued to reinforce the assertion that content of personal ads follows typical gender stereotypes. For example, Tither (2000) found that females were more likely to offer weight and seek financial security, while men were more likely to offer height, stipulate weight, and prefer to date someone younger.

There are a few studies that examine personal ads online. Specifically, Dawson and McIntosh (2006) analyzed Internet dating ads for attractiveness, income, physical attributes, and other positive personal characteristics (i.e., personality, lifestyle, interests). These researchers found that when men stated that they had wealth and were attractive, they were less likely to place emphasis on positive personal characteristics. For women, when they placed emphasis on their physical attractiveness, they too were less likely to emphasize other positive personal characteristics. These findings put a new twist on the previous literature on gender differences in personal advertisements. Simply put, Dawson and McIntosh's findings support the assertion that personal ad content is largely consistent with gender stereotypes (in that men seek physical attractiveness in women and women seek financial resources in men), but their findings also support previous research in that suggest when these factors are not prominent in the personal advertiser, he/she will then emphasize other positive attributes such as lifestyle, personality, and interests. Interestingly, Gallant (2011) analyzed photos posted in e-dating sites and found that, while women emphasized reproductive fitness in their photos, the men's photos did not emphasize the ability to provide resources.

Bond (2009) appears to have provided one of the few studies to date that specifically examines gendered self-marketing on social media. While Bond does not explicitly examine e-dating per se, he surveyed 137 college students with respect to the amount and content of their self-disclosure on social media. Bond found that women, when compared to men, were more likely to include images and information related to friends, family, romantic partners, holidays, school and alcohol. (The only variable where men disclosed more than women was sports.) The content of the posts were also analyzed for sexual expressiveness but females were only marginally more sexually expressive when compared to men (i.e., the finding was not statistically significant). While Bond's study was important, it merely proves that there may be differences among men and women in self-marketing via social media. Studies have yet to uncover the specific gender differences that exist when women and men self-marketing via social media. Toward that end, the methodology is presented next.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Craigslist.org was selected for data collection because it is one of the most popular self-advertising websites in the world. This online community is the 15<sup>th</sup> most viewed site on the Internet in the United States (<http://www.craigslist.org/about/factsheet>). Craigslist's platform does not require a set time a posting has to be up, which gives users the ability to post whenever they want, leave it up for an extended time, and take it down when needed. This site does not require consumers to use a template when creating an advertisement. This provides users more freedom of self-expression than traditional e-dating sites, which require fees and use of an existing template. Thus, Craigslist.com was chosen for the current study since self-expression was less restrictive.

The sampling process utilized methods employed by Kroft and Pope (2008) in their research on the matching efficiency for job and apartment postings on Craigslist and Thomas, Peters, and Tolson (2007) in their research on Myspace.com. To obtain the sample data from Craigslist.org, the United States was divided into six different regions (North East, South East, etc.) and the two cities with the largest number of posts were selected from each region. Table 1 presents a summary of the sampling process. It should be noted that the cities with the largest number of posts also had substantial population bases, allowing for greater diversity among those who posted. Data was selected from the Craigslist "personal advertisements" section. The personal advertisements section had nine sub-categories: strictly platonic, women seeking women, women seeking men, men seeking women, men seeking men, miscellaneous romance, casual encounters, and missed connections. Because this study focused on differences between

heterosexual men and women, data were drawn from two of the nine sub-categories, women seeking men and men seeking women. For each selected city, the first fifty posts within these two sub-categories were extracted and saved as a word document. This resulted in a total of 1,200 posts in the data set.

**TABLE 1  
SAMPLING PROCESS**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Cities with Largest Number of Posts</b>	<b>Categories Selected *</b>
Southeast	Jacksonville Memphis	Men seeking women Women seeking men
Upper Midwest	Chicago Milwaukee	Men seeking women Women seeking men
Northeast	New York City Philadelphia	Men seeking women Women seeking men
Southwest	Los Angeles Phoenix	Men seeking women Women seeking men
Lower Midwest	Houston San Antonio	Men seeking women Women seeking men
Northwest	Portland Seattle	Men seeking women Women seeking men

\*The first 50 posts were selected from each of these categories.

A two-step process was used to examine the self-marketing occurring among men and women on Craigslist. This two-step approach provided a more holistic view of the data and clearer insights into how men and women differ in regards to gender and self-marketing. Categories from the data were first explored from a heterosexual cohort viewpoint (i.e., the two categories men seeking women and women seeking men were analyzed for common themes). This process was then followed by examination of the differences by gender (i.e., men seeking women and women seeking men were separated and compared).

For the first phase of the study, content analysis was selected as the method for analyzing the 1,200 posts because it provides a well-accepted, objective, systematic, and scientific process for analyzing communication (Kassarjian, 1977, p. 8-9). Each of the two authors participating in the study (who are trained, qualitative researchers) printed hard copies of data. Utilizing the transcripts, the authors then followed an emergent coding process as described by Stemler (2001). To identify the categories for classification, the two authors independently reviewed the transcripts, noting the general categories of content as they read through the data. The authors then met and shared their independent classification schemes. After discussing the commonalities and differences in the classification schemes, the authors identified a set of common categories for purposes of classification. After independently returning to transcripts and coding each of the individual posts until all the data had been accounted (Stemler, 2001), the authors got back together and shared their independent coding of the data. Inter-rater reliability was computed using the number of agreements divided by the total number of observations (Hartman, 2006). The authors had 98.4% agreement and discrepancies were reviewed and resolved via debate and discussion. The frequency of occurrence for each category is reported in Table 2. In addition to tabulating the frequency of occurrence, each category of data was interpreted for its specific meaning. Finally,

exemplary verbatim quotes were drawn from the data to be incorporated into the interpretation presented in the findings.

**TABLE 2**  
**CONTENT OF THE ADS**

<b>Types of Interaction</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
a. Kinky	53	0.0654085
b. Sex	71	0.088476
c. Dating (friend to more)	282	0.3644395
d. LTR (long term relationship)	141	0.1848945
e. Friend/New to Area/Bored	117	0.149766
f. Other	114	0.1470145
Sub-total:	778	
<b>2. Criteria for Partner</b>		
a. Relationship Status	113	0.1402915
b. STD Free/Drug Free	83	0.106293
c. Demographics (Race, Religion, Employed)	193	0.2442595
d. Physical Characteristics (Age, Weight, Height)	374	0.509156
Sub-total:	763	
<b>3. Self Disclosure</b>		
a. Physical Characteristics (Age, Weight, Height)	492	0.2754425
b. Personality (Shy, Outgoing)	279	0.1558555
c. Hobbies/Interests	332	0.185488
d. Sex Life (Desire)	40	0.0224245
e. Family Structure (Divorced, Kids, Pets)	205	0.11458
f. Demographics (Race, Religion, Professional, Employed)	328	0.1834985
g. Non-Smoking/Disease Free/Non-Drinking/Drug Free	112	0.06271
Sub-total:	1788	
<b>4. Tone</b>		
a. Sales Pitch	30	0.0652505
b. Wordy	72	0.156796
c. Honesty (Real/Not Real)	101	0.2196915
d. Picture for Picture	258	0.558262
Sub-total:	461	
Total:	3697	

For the second phase of the study, the authors conducted a quantitative analysis comparing the frequency of occurrence by gender. The frequency and percentage of each category and subtopic of discussion was calculated for men and then women. This step was followed with a Chi-square test of the

proportions to uncover statistically significant differences in the topics discussed by men and women. Table 3 presents the frequency and percentage of occurrence by gender. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, the authors utilized the 2-tailed p-value when interpreting the significance of the z-scores (i.e.,  $p \leq .05$  was used as the significance level).

**TABLE 3**  
**GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SELF MARKETING BY CATEGORY**

	Frequency (%)		z-score	2-tailed p-value
	Women	Men		
<b>1. Types of Interaction</b>				
a. Kinky	9 (0.025)	44 (0.106)	-4.486	0.000*
b. Sex	17 (0.047)	54 (0.130)	-4.025	0.000*
c. Dating (friend to more)	143 (0.394)	139 (0.335)	1.708	0.087
d. LTR	87 (0.240)	54 (0.130)	3.957	0.000*
e. Friend/New to Area/Bored	51 (0.140)	66 (0.159)	-0.722	0.472
f. Other	56 (0.154)	58 (0.140)	0.571	0.569
<b>2. Criteria for Partner</b>				
a. Relationship Status	82 (0.169)	31(0.112)	2.154	0.032*
b. STD Free/Drug Free	56 (0.115)	27 (0.097)	0.783	0.435
c. Demographics (Race, Religion, Employed)	134 (0.276)	59 (0.212)	1.959	0.050*
d. Physical Characteristics (Age, Weight, Height)	213 (0.439)	161 (0.579)	-3.722	0.000*
<b>3. Self Disclosure</b>				
a. Physical Characteristics (Age, Weight, Height)	211 (0.234)	281 (0.316)	-3.882	0.000*
b. Personality (Shy, outgoing)	165 (0.183)	114 (0.128)	3.202	0.001*
c. Hobbies/Interests	193 (0.214)	139 (0.157)	3.149	0.002*
d. Sex Life (Desire)	13 (0.014)	27 (0.030)	-2.282	0.023*
e. Family Structure (Divorced, Kids, Pets)	113 (0.126)	92 (0.104)	1.457	0.144
f. Demographics (Race, Religion, Professional Employed)	158 (0.176)	170 (0.191)	-0.868	0.384
g. Non-Smoking/Disease Free/Non-Drinking/Drug Free (vice versa)	47 (0.052)	65 (0.073)	-1.830	0.067
<b>4. Tone</b>				
a. Sales Pitch	14 (0.059)	31 (0.138)	-2.868	0.004*
b. Wordy	32 (0.135)	27 (0.121)	0.465	0.638
c. Honesty (Real/Not Real)	47 (0.198)	59 (0.263)	-1.660	0.097
d. Picture for Picture	144 (0.608)	161 (0.719)	-2.521	0.012*

\* $p \leq .05$  significance level

## FINDINGS

The categories that emerged from the data and the analysis of differences by gender are presented together in order to provide for a comprehensive understanding of the themes utilized in self-marketing and also allow for a parceling out of the differences that may exist between the self-marketing of men and women. Furthermore, this approach also provides a clearer understanding of how marketers and advertisers can use these findings when marketing to men and women. Four general categories emerged from the data: types of interaction, criteria for partner, self-disclosure, and tone (see Table 2). Within each of these general categories there was a subset of four to seven items that comprised the category. It should be noted that the total number of responses for these four categories was much greater than 1,200 (i.e., the total number of posts selected for the sample) because more than one category could have been represented in a given post. In other words, a consumer's post could contain information that fell into more than one category. In addition, Craigslist provides the consumer with a number when posting on the site and thus all data was treated anonymously and no identifying markers (such as name or email address) are reported below.

### Types of Interaction

Data included in this category provide insight into what a person is seeking from the relationship. When reading the posts, it appeared that many of the participants specified the type of interaction that they were seeking. The types of interaction sought represented a range of sexual to non-sexual interactions, including kinky, sex, dating, long-term relationship (LTR), friend, and other (see Table 2). While a small number of the posts contained lewd comments, most of the content reflected posters who were seeking those types of interactions that would commonly occur in traditional, offline dating situations.

The most frequently mentioned type of interaction for was dating (n=282, 36%) and least frequent type of interaction discussed was kinky (n=53, 6%). Dating involved individuals stating that they were looking for someone to start out as friends, go out on a few dates (like to lunch or the theater), with the idea that the relationship could potentially turn into a romantic if both parties agree. The second most frequently discussed type of interaction was long-term relationship (n=141, 18%). In contrast to dating, which was based more on friendship with the potential (but no expectation of) a relationship, the long term relationship posters clearly stated that they were looking for an exclusive, committed relationship for an extended period of time. For example, a woman in New York City wrote an advertisement that began with a description of her physical appearance and a clear statement that she is seeking a long-term relationship.

*I am a very attractive full-figured Black and Puerto Rican woman. I am very voluptuous with a great shape. I work out so I am getting my body tight. I have body and face shots as well. I have no children, crazy ex-boyfriends, or stalkers in my life. I am college educated with a great career. I love sports, including WWE wrestling (yes I know it is fake). I love going dancing because I am a good dancer. I like going to museums especially art museums. I like going away on vacations even though the restrictions for flying are a bit tedious. I like playing video games and just staying home to relax. I work very hard and sometimes I have to travel for business so if you can be understanding about my career, then we will have no problems. I will make every effort to make for a relationship. I have a good career, however no one special in my life. Race is not important. I am not looking for someone over forty-five. Please be employed, attractive, and looking to be in a relationship. I am not interested in men with children. I have no children so I am seeking someone with no children as well. I don't smoke so please be a non-smoker as well. I like to laugh and have a good time. If you are seeking someone who has no drama and wants to be in a committed relationship, then please respond back. Take care!*

In contrast to dating or long-term relationship posts, the friend types of interactions (n=117, 15%) consisted of someone who was bored or lonely (many of which were new to the area) and were looking

for platonic relationships. This man from San Antonio, who is new to the area, creates a short post that clearly explains what he wants.

*I have a good job and am self sustaining. I just moved to the San Antonio area for my job and would love to get to know the area. I hear there is much to see, I only need someone to see it with. I would like you to have a job as well.*

The least discussed types of interaction were sexual (n=71, 9%) and kinky (n=53, 6%) interactions. These types of interactions sought consisted of one-night stands where the poster is asking someone to fulfill his/her sexual or physical fantasies, with little expectation of a friendship or long term relationship coming from the interaction. Sexual posts merely stated that the person was looking for sex, while kinky posts stated that the person was looking for a more erotic type of physical interaction (like sexual fetishes). For example, the following post from a man in Chicago is written similar to a job description. In this post he describes the type of woman he is seeking for this “full time position.”

*Am accepting applications and reviewing resumes for the full time position with extreme benefits for a sexy young lady to play the role of "Spoiled Sex Princess." As Hiring Manager, I require that you submit the following documentation: 1. Resume. 2. Photograph (Clothing is optional; extra bonus points for lingerie shots), 3. Work Experience, 4. Talents. The hiring manager (who just happens to be the person you will be reporting to) is an upper managerial type, advanced degreed with stylish wavy hair, hazel eyes, smart, intelligent, passionate, romantic with stylish clothes, stylish shoes, smart, sensual and very sexual. Duties include, but not limited to, serious role playing so a flair for the dramatic will be handy. "Boss after work with sexy Secretary." "Teacher keeping Naughty Girl After School for Discipline," and my personal favorite - "Catholic School Girl Gone Bad." Physically, must be able to withstand extended sessions of foreplay. Serious spoiling, pampering and pleasing available. Whatever your beautiful heart desires...within reason. Lingerie showings are on the itinerary as well as mutually pleasurable "oral activities." Physically must be able to withstand extended sessions of foreplay and be able to simulate a variety of different positions for the extreme sessions of intercourse. For the intelligent, open minded, college educated and extremely sexual young woman only. Serious Inquiries from seriously sexually advanced women only.*

With respect to differences in the types of interactions sought, the analysis did reveal some statistically significant differences by gender (see Table 3). Men (n=54, 13%) were more likely to state that they were interested in sex when compared to women (n=17, 4%). Moreover, men (n=44, 11%) were more likely to be seeking kinky interactions than women (n=9, 2%). However, women (n=87, 24%) were more likely to be seeking a long-term relationship, when compared to men (n=54, 13%). These findings suggests that men seem to seek out more one-time, sexual encounters while women may be seeking more long-term, committed relationships, which is consistent with previous research (Dawson & McIntosh, 2006; Gallant et al., 2011). From a marketing perspective, this finding suggests that men and women utilize somewhat traditional norms (i.e., men seek sex and women seek relationships) when specifying what they want from e-dating on Craigslist.

### **Criteria for a Partner**

The criteria for a partner category was defined as the characteristics that are required for a potential date/partner to be considered suitable. Four criteria were identified in the data: physical characteristics, demographics, relationship status, and drug/sexually transmitted disease (STD; see Table 2). The most frequently discussed criteria for a prospective partner was preferred physical characteristics. More than half of the posts clearly articulated preferences for the physical characteristics of a partner, including age, weight, and height (n=374, 51%). For example, a female from San Antonio not only describes her criteria for a partner, but also comments that she offers a complete package to a potential suitor.

*Yes, like most other women, I am looking for the whole package, but I feel that I can because I offer the whole package in return :) I want someone who is attractive, smart, funny, great personality, responsible/mature, up for random fun and who is open to a more serious relationship if things worked out well between the two of us. I must admit I'm not looking to be someone's hook-up or casual friend. Taller than 5'7", average body type or better, somewhere between 25 and 35, race is of no issue to me-- I've dated across the board. Also, I don't have children and would prefer that you don't as well.*

The second most frequently discussed topic related to criteria for a partner was related to demographics, such as race, religion, and professional status (n=193, 24%, Table 2). The following post from a 35 year-old male musician in Houston, Texas demonstrates how self-marketing is used when describing the criteria for a partner.

*I am looking for a 24 to 43, fit, non-smoker, not yet spoiled, able to have fun and be happy no matter what the event is, educated with employable skills. You should like: music (including hard rock), kids, cats, good conversation, motorcycles, going out for dinner and drinks, concerts.*

Less frequently discussed criteria for a partner included preferred relationship status (n=113, 14%) and drug/alcohol/STD free status (n=83, 11%). For some posters it was important that they state up front that they were looking for someone to date who was not already in an existing relationship or married. In addition, a minority of the posts also clearly articulated that a person who answers the ad must not have a sexually transmitted disease or any issues with alcohol and drugs.

With respect to statistically significant gender differences (see Table 3), women (n=213, 44%) tended to specify preferred physical characteristics when compared to men (n=161, 58%). This difference could be attributed to the absence of a face-to-face encounter, but the lack of interpersonal interaction exists for both genders. To the extent that gender is a contributing factor, the results are counter-intuitive when compared to previous research on personal ads. Past research on personal ads in newspapers suggests that men are more likely to specify preferred physical characteristics when compared to women (Jagger, 1998; Tither, 2000). The findings of the present study are different in the context of self-marketing on Craigslist.

In addition, when compared to men (n=59, 21%), women were more likely to create personal advertisements that specified preferences on demographics (n=134, 28%). In contrast to the findings on preferred physical characteristics, the finding on demographics is consistent with previous research on personals ads in newspapers. Research on personal ads in newspapers found women, who are seeking resources, are likely to prefer partners that are professional and employed in contract to men (Butler-Smith et al., 1998; Dawson & McIntosh, 2006; Gallant et al., 2011; Jagger, 1998).

Finally, the data also suggest that women (n=82, 17%) were more likely to specify the preferred relationship status of a prospective partner when compared to men (n=31, 11%). This finding is consistent with the literature on e-dating as some studies have found that authenticity can be an issue in this context. Men, more often than women, misreport their relationship status (i.e., claim they are single when actually married) when participating in online dating activity (Close & Zinkhan, 2004).

### **Self Disclosure**

Self disclosure is the essence of self-marketing. It is through the process of self disclosure that participants in the Craigslist personal ads revealed as much or as little as they wanted the other person to know about themselves. Furthermore, self-disclosure is required to establish trust and mutual understanding in interpersonal relationship (Derlega, 1979; Ellison et al., 2006). Seven key pieces of personal information were revealed in the data: physical characteristics, personality, hobbies/interests, desire for a sex life, family structure, demographics, and smoker/drug free/disease free (see Table 2). Consumers utilized these seven pieces of information to carefully construct an image of themselves for a prospective dater.

Individuals most frequently offered information about their physical characteristics (n=492, 27%), hobbies/interests (n=332, 19%), and demographics (n=328, 18%). Personality (n=279, 16%) characteristics and family structure (n=205, 11%) were also disclosed frequently in the posts. And while discussed less frequently, non-smoking/drug free/disease free (n=112, 6%) and desire for a sex life (n=40, 2%) were also present in the data. The following post from a woman in Chicago illustrates how she discloses her physical characteristics and hobbies/interests.

*More about me- Height/Weight proportionate, 5'3, 110 lbs., blue eyes, brown hair, I'm spiritual but not religious. I enjoy reading, watching movies, hanging out, dining out, drinking, live music, dance clubbing, communing with nature, going on impulsive adventures, and just walking the beach can be a work out.*

It is interesting that while individuals were seeking partners that met specific criteria (see criteria for partner above), they were also not afraid to disclose their personal information. This finding was not necessarily surprising because, in some ways, e-dating allows individuals a forum for less inhibited self-expression when compared to face-to-face communication (Malchow-Moller, 2003; Rosen et al., 2008).

At the same time, authenticity is important, and individuals often project their ideal (as opposed to actual selves) online (Close & Zinkhan, 2004; Malchow-Moller, 2003). Consumers, after all, are self-marketing in looking for a prospective date on Craigslist. Individuals seeking online for a date or partner understand the importance of these personal facts and use this information to help them form a complete image of the other person. Similar to how consumer brands are recognized by their trademark, self marketing provides cues such as physical characteristics and hobbies that are used to help others determine whether or not the person is a fit for them (Arvidsson, 2006; Hearn, 2008; Patterson & Hodgson, 2006). It could be that much of what consumers put in the posts was in response to what they see in preferred criteria for a partner. This may be why consumers self-disclosed on items like family structure, being drug/disease free, and their desire for a sex life, as shown in the example below from a woman in Memphis.

*I am a single parent of one and am really frustrated right now because I don't have any friends who I can call on in my time of need. I have been single for 4 yrs. Men seem to play so many games and that has led me to Craigslist. I'm sexy, smart, independent, fun, have paperwork to prove I'm STD FREE and still that's not enough I guess. I am not trying to get over on anyone but I am really frustrated right now due to some recent circumstances that may lead to some bad things that I need someone to help me avoid. We can talk about the specific things later. I have my own apt, car, and job but it's still a strain especially when you don't have anyone to have your back and vice versa. I really would like to just meet a knight in shining armor to take away some of my stress that may need a good girl to cook, clean, or be there for them as a companion and see where things go. I'm tired of stressing and would love to just be happy for a while to just enjoy someone but that's not the case. I am serious about life especially since I have a son to raise alone so please ONLY the mature and sincere apply.*

The data analysis revealed gender differences in four of the seven items that comprised the self-disclosure category (see Table 3). Men were more likely to reveal information about their physical characteristics (n=281, 32%), when compared to women (n=211, 23%). This finding is somewhat counter-intuitive in light of previous research on newspaper personal ads. Previous research by Jagger (1998), Dawson & McIntosh (2006), and Gallant et al. (2011) suggests women would be more likely to advertise their physical characteristics. However, men (n=27, 3%) were also more likely to self disclose their preferences for a certain type of sex life than women (n=13, 1%), which is somewhat consistent with sexual strategies theory (Dawson & McIntosh, 2006; Gallant et al., 2011). It is interesting that while women were less likely to disclose their physical characteristics and sex life preferences, they were more likely to describe their personality (n=165, 18%) and hobbies/interests (n=193, 21%) in their self marketing, when compared to men (n=114, 13%; and n=139, 16%, respectively). Thus, gender

differences do appear to exist in self-marketing related to utilizing personality and hobbies/interests in attempting to attract a prospective date.

### **Tone**

The tone of the personal ad conveyed the overall feeling and approach that the individual was using for the self-marketing. The tone of the post is important because the language selected for use in the post becomes the subtle cues utilized by others in judging the content (Rosen et al., 2008). If the post is deemed too wordy or the individual is believed to be dishonest, her personal advertisement may be ignored. Four sub-categories were identified related to the tone: sales pitch, wordy, honesty, and picture for picture (see Table 2).

Picture for picture (n=258, 56%) and honesty (i.e., “Keeping things real”) (n=101, 22%) were the most frequent tone utilized in the ads. These findings are supported by previous research that says authenticity can be important in e-dating (Close & Zinkhan, 2004). Because of the mediated nature of e-dating, there is a tendency for the consumer to not always be completely accurate in his/her post and may tend to project their ideal (as opposed to real) self (Malchow-Moller, 2003). The tone of the ads asking for honesty and asking to exchange current photos suggests that the posters want to be forthright and are looking for frank information in return. This post from a woman in Jacksonville illustrates the importance of honesty.

*Keep it real and no one gets hurt. Just be yourself unless you're one of 'those kind of guys'. A façade living out a charade. Then umm yea; buh-bye.*

The other tones that appeared to emerge from the data was extreme wordiness (n=72, 16%) and a sales pitch (n=30, 7%). The wordiness could have been the fact that the poster did not plan out his/her advertisement and, instead, wrote the ad in a “stream of consciousness.” Furthermore, wordiness could also have been due to the fact that he/she was nervous and unsure exactly what to post, so he/she put down everything that came to mind when typing up the ad. Although less frequent, there were also ads that had a tone that appeared to mirror a sales pitch for a consumer good. This man from Chicago utilized a sales tone.

*I am a masculine, yet boyish, sexy American white boy. 34, that's me in the body, blond hair, hazel eyes, and super smooth with a great body. Discreet, personable, sane, healthy, d/d free. Looking for an attractive woman, and most importantly, someone with a good attitude and an open mind. Contact me for more. Yes the ad is real!!!!!! ... Lastly - no hassles, no drama, no b/s, no attitudes, and no wasting of each other's time.*

Utilizing a tone with a sales pitch when writing a personals ad, suggests that the consumer realizes that the post for a date is truly a form of self-marketing, where the poster is trying to attract a potential partner into the exchange, as suggested by previous research (Arvidsson, 2006; Patterson & Hodgson, 2006).

When examining gender differences by the type of tone, the data also suggested differences exist among men versus women. While there was no difference on the two genders with respect to preference for honesty and wordiness, men were more likely than women to request a picture for a picture (n=31, 14% for men; n=14, 6% for women) and to utilize the sales pitch (n= 171, 72% for men; n=144, 61% for women) in their self-marketing. Men asking for a current photo is consistent with previous research. Close and Zinkhan (2004) found that authenticity can be an issue in e-dating. While men tend to mis-report their relationship status (i.e., they say that they are single when really married), women tend to mis-represent their age and weight. If they share a photo, it can even be from many years ago (Close & Zinkhan, 2004). To the extent this is a common occurrence in the context of e-dating, men may be more likely to request an updated photo from women, as found in the data from the present study.

## DISCUSSION

The findings from this study reinforce some of what is already known in the e-dating and personal ads literature. And yet, some of the findings are innovative, making a contribution to both of these literatures, as well as the literature on self-marketing. In fact, no study to date has examined gender differences in self-marketing. The present study, not only extends the literature on e-dating and personal ads, but it also unpacks how men and women market themselves different in the context of personal ads on Craigslist.

To begin, the results of this study support some of the existing findings in previous research on e-dating. Specifically, this study suggests that authenticity in the context of e-dating is an issue for both men and women. There was no difference in gender with respect to honesty (i.e., “keep it real”). However, in our sample, women were more likely to state a preferred relationship status for a prospective dater when compared to men. This is a significant finding related to authenticity because previous research has indicated men are more likely (than women) to misreport being involved in a relationship when participating in e-dating (Close & Zinkhan, 2004). Similarly, the present study found that men were more like to articulate that they wanted to exchange photos with a prospective dater when compared to the women in the sample. This also reinforces existing findings by Close and Zinkhan (2004), who found women were more likely to share old photos and not disclose current age and weight when interacting with a prospective e-dater.

The results of this study also reinforce existing findings in the literature on personal ads. This study’s findings show that much of the content of online personal ads in the context of Craigslist is based on traditional gender stereotypes, such as men want sex and women are seeking long term relationships. Furthermore, the findings also show that women, when compared to men are more likely to state preferred demographics (such as employment status) in their online personal ads. This finding also suggests that women are seeking men that can provide resources, as suggested by previous research.

And yet, this study’s findings also make some novel contributions to the literature on personal ads and e-dating. For example, the content of the Craigslist ads showed a range of types of relationships sought. Not all interactions sought were romantic in nature, nor were they all based on the idea of an extended relationship. Some relationships sought were more platonic in nature (i.e., new to the area and looking for a friend) and others were more one-time, discrete interactions (i.e., a one-night stand). In addition, criteria for a partner, such as relationship status and being disease/drug free, are new to the literature on personal ads. It is possible that these things have always been important to dating via personal ads, but the free-form and unlimited space available on Craigslist could have brought these issues to the forefront of the advertising content.

This study also makes a contribution to the literature on self-marketing in that it begins to unpack gender differences that exist as consumers begin to market and brand themselves online. One interesting finding from this study was that men utilized a tone of a sales pitch more often than women. Why this is the case has yet to be determined. Do men view e-dating more as a form of self-marketing than women? Or are men more comfortable selling and marketing themselves than women? Clearly, this gender difference merits future research. Other gender differences that occurred in self-marketing included that men pitched more of their physical characteristics in the ads, while women pitched more of their personality characteristics and hobbies/interests. Again, this was a counter-intuitive finding in that sexual strategies theory suggests that women should want to sell their physical characteristics (in order to attract more prospective partners), while men should want to sell their ability to produce resources (i.e., their demographics). This was not the case in the data. Future research needs to unpack these gender differences to determine the extent to which consumers plan out what kind of content they build into a personal ad in order to maximize their chance at obtaining a potential date. Finally, the results of this study also showed that women were more likely than men to specify preferred physical characteristics of prospective partners. This finding also suggests that future studies are needed to understand why, given that men want to attract fertile females, women are more likely to specify what they want with respect to the physical attractiveness of a man.

The findings of this study also offer unique insight into differences between males and females that can be used when creating marketing messages from a managerial perspective. In advertising consumer products, crafting the right message and using the right person to deliver the message is crucial for the success of the campaign. The present study suggests that the same premises are true in self-marketing on Craigslist. Online dating is replete with obvious marketing tactics where the presentation of the self is consciously sales oriented. The types of interaction, criteria for partner, self disclosure, and tone of the post suggest that online self-marketing is carefully constructed and communicated. Thus, the findings of this study provide insight into how gendered identities are constructed, which is insightful for those creating marketing messages. For example, consumers often try a product because they like the package and/or remember a slogan or brand message. In much the same way, when online self-marketing is effective, an individual might connect with someone whose post matches his/her personal views. Thus, it is important when creating marketing messages to understand what types of messages would appeal to the target market. Should the message be about building a relationship with the consumer or about benefits offered by the product? What selection criteria are important to members of the target market? Is the criteria more fact based (i.e., like demographics) or is it related to emotions? Finally, how should the marketing message be constructed? Answers to these questions can assist marketers in crafting a message and improving positioning of brands. And answers to these types of questions should also be studied among consumers who are self-marketing online as well.

Another interesting implication of this study is that the Internet is an important space for finding and exhibiting one's self because it is free from the immediate bias often present in face-to-face communication (McKenna and Bargh, 2000). According to Arvidsson (2006), Internet dating sites are the perfect branding tool where communication and interaction are based on the brand image (i.e., self-marketing) that is created and accepted. Marketers are encountering an untapped resource with social media tools, like Craigslist. Information from online communities represents an important source of marketing information that can be acquired at minimal cost. Our findings illuminate opportunities for marketers to expand their understanding of how the genders self-market and what they are looking for in heterosexual relationships. Not only is this information useful for a host of online dating companies (like eHarmony.com), but it is also relevant for media companies (like VH1, Cosmopolitan, Playboy, Facebook) and consumer product companies, like fashion designers (i.e., Abercrombie & Fitch), beauty products (i.e., Calvin Klein), and other product categories that are marketed via appeals to identity and sex.

Finally, the results of this study also illustrate that language is an imprecise form in how people read and understand the written and spoken word. It is important for marketers, especially advertisers, to understand the criteria that consumers are searching for and the language that they use to describe the criterion. In the case of self-marketing via Craigslist, words are used to motivate another person to get in touch with the poster in the hope that the first encounter (i.e., an e-mail hopefully followed by a face-to-face meeting) will lead to something more. The same scenario happens in advertising. The advertising message is carefully crafted to encourage the consumer to desire an experience with the product. The message is a strategic combination of words and sometimes pictures that provide a reason to believe. And yet, no matter how right the copywriter "gets" the words, it is the picture that may often seal the deal. In Craigslist, a thoughtfully crafted personal ad may attract someone's attention, but it might be a picture-for-a-picture exchange that generates the next level of interest.

## REFERENCES

- Arvidsson, A. (2006). 'Quality singles': Internet dating and the work of fantasy. *New Media and Society*, 8(4), 671-690.
- Bond, B.J. (2009). He posted, she posted: Gender differences in self-disclosure on social network sites. *Rocky Mountain Communication Review*, 6(2), 29-37.

- Butler-Smith, P., Cameron, S., and Collins, A. (1998). Gender differences in mate search effort: An exploratory economic analysis of personal advertisements. *Applied Economics*, 30(10), 1277-1285.
- Cameron, S., and Collins, A. (1999). Looks unimportant? A demand function for male attractiveness by female personal advertisers. *Applied Economics Letters*, 6(6), 381.
- Chase, L. (2011). The power of personal branding. *American Salesman*, 56(6), 7.
- Close, A., and Zinkhan, G. M. (2004). Romance and the Internet: The e-mergence of e-dating. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 31, 153-157.
- Conaway, C. (2013a). Pinterest is for girls, gentlemint is for boys, February 26. Retrieved from: <http://cameronconaway.com/pinterest-is-for-girls-gentlemint-is-for-boys/>.
- Conaway, C. (2013b). Are men more risky with social media?, May 1. Retrieved from: <http://goodmenproject.com/good-feed-blog/are-men-more-risky-with-social-media/>.
- Coupland J. (1996). Dating advertisements: Discourses of the commodified self. *Discourse & Society*, 7(2), 187-207.
- Dawson, B., and McIntosh, W. D. (2006). Sexual strategies theory and Internet personal advertisements. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 9(5), 614-617.
- Derlega, V. (1979). Appropriateness of self-disclosure in self-disclosure: Origins, patterns, and implications of openness in interpersonal relationships, ed. Gordon J. Chelune, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 151-176.
- Ellison, N., Heino, R., and Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), 415-441.
- Elmore, L. (2010). Personal branding 2.0. *Women in Business*, 62(1), 12.
- Gallant, S., Williams, L., Fisher, M., and Cox, A. (2011). Mating strategies and self-presentation in online personal advertisement photographs. *The Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, 5(1), 106-121.
- Greer, J. (2010). The art of self-marketing online. *U.S. News & World Report*, 147(5), 30.
- Hartman, K. (2006). Television and movie representations of salespeople: Beyond Willy Loman. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 26(3), 283-292.
- Hearn, A. (2008). 'Meat, mask, burden': Probing the contours of the branded self. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8(2) 197-217.
- Hyatt, J. (2010). Building your brand (and keeping your job). *Fortune*, 162(3), 70-76.
- Jagger, E. (1998). Marketing the self, buying another: Dating in a postmodern, consumer society. *Sociology*, 32(4), 795-814.
- Joinson, A. N. (2008). Looking at, looking up, or keeping up with people? Motives and uses of Facebook. *CHI 2008 Proceedings*, 1027-1036.

- Kassarjian, H. H. (1977). Content analysis in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 4(1), 8-18.
- Kroft, K. and Pope, D. (2008). *Does online search crowd out traditional search and improve matching efficiency? Evidence from Craigslist*. Working paper.
- Labrecque, L. I., Markos, E., and Milne, G. R. (2011). Online personal branding: Processes, challenges, and implications. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 25(1), 37-50.
- Lair, D., Sullivan, K., and Cheney, G. (2005). Marketization and the recasting of the professional self: The rhetoric and ethics of personal branding. *Management Communications Quarterly*, 18(3), 307-343.
- Lakoff, R. T. and Bucholtz, M. (2004). *Language and woman's place: text and commentaries*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Malchow-Moller, A. (2003). Internetdating. A focus group investigation of young Danes' and Frenchmen's attitudes towards the phenomenon. *Kontur*, 7, 11-20.
- McCaffrey, M. (1983). *Personal marketing strategies: How to sell yourself, your Ideas, & Your Services*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- McKenna, K. A., and Bargh, J. A. (2000). Plan 9 from cyberspace: The implication of the Internet for personality and social psychology. *Personality & Social Psychology Review (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates)*, 4(1), 57-75.
- Montoya, P. and Vandehey, T. (2008). *The brand called you: Create a personal brand that wins attention and grows your business*. United States: McGraw Hill.
- Patterson, A., and Hodgson, J. (2006). A speeddating story: The lover's guide to marketing excellence. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 22(5/6), 455-471.
- Peters, T. (1997). *The brand called you*. *Fastcompany*, 10, 83-88.
- Rosen, L. D., Cheever, N. A., Cummings, C., and Felt, J. (2008). The impact of emotionality and self-disclosure on online dating versus traditional dating. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5), 2124-2157.
- Schau, H., and Gilly, M. C. (2003). We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 30(3), 385-404.
- Shepherd, I. H. (2005). From cattle and Coke to Charlie: Meeting the challenge of self marketing and personal branding. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 21(5/6), 589-606.
- Stemler, S. (2001). An overview of content analysis. *Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation*, 7(17).
- Strano, M. (2008). User descriptions and interpretations of self-presentation through Facebook profile images. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 2(2), Retrieved from: [http://www.cyberpsychology.eu/view.php?cisloclanku=2008110402&article=\(search in Issues\)](http://www.cyberpsychology.eu/view.php?cisloclanku=2008110402&article=(search%20in%20Issues)).

Thomas, J., Peters, C. and Tolson, H. (2007). An exploratory investigation of the virtual community MySpace.com: What are consumers saying about fashion? *Journal of Fashion Marketing & Management*, 11(4), 587-603.

Tither, J. M. (2000). Selling yourself and procuring another: Investigating gender differences in NZ dating advertisements. *New Zealand English Journal*, 14, 66-74.