“More about me” – Self-Presentation and Narrative Strategies in Caribbean Online Dating Ads

Abstract: This paper focuses on self-presentation in dating ads and the strategies advertisers employ to construct their persona to attract and initiate responses from the desired other. Dating ads have experienced considerable structural changes in their transition from print media to online forms. The use of diverse media and interaction forms as well as extended space has resulted in a diversification of possibilities in online partner search in which advertisers use fragmented stories, past and anticipated narratives in order to construct a basic personal narrative. It is argued here that the act of posting the dating ads also functions as part of the advertisers’ life story with the projected end of finding romance or fulfilling other relational goals. The analysis of examples from a corpus of Caribbean dating ads also shows how advertisers make use of particular cultural references, lexical items and spelling adaptations in their creation of an authentic Caribbean persona and as a means to establish common ground with a potential partner.

Keywords: dating ads; small stories; Caribbean creoles

1 Introduction

Dating ads are known as self-promotional texts where the advertiser uses carefully selected features of their self-estimated character, physical appearance as well as their personal history and situation to create desire in an unknown other. Which particular aspects of the self are emphasized and how much of the personal history is revealed in the self-advertisement might also depend on the ultimate goal of the particular dating ad, which can range from casual friendly or sexual contacts to serious relationships and marriage. While personal advertisements have existed in print for a long time – the earliest documented English match-seeking ad appeared in the British magazine “Collection for the Improvement of Husbandry and Trade” in 1695 (Kaupp 1968) – the emergence of online dating sites and, even more recently, mobile dating apps has led in just a little more than a decade to a staggering increase of the number of persons who use online tools in their search for a suitable partner. For example, a current survey on online dating in the United States (Smith and Anderson 2016) observes that while only few U.S. adults had any experience with this activity when the first polls were made in 2005, today 15% of Americans report that they have made use of online dating sites or mobile dating apps. But the increase of possibilities of cyber-romantic pursuits has not only led to more acceptance of this form of partner search and fast multiplication of users but also to a significant diversification of the genre of the dating ad. This paper will look at some of the changes which dating ads
have experienced in their transition from print media to online forms. In particular, it will take stock of the new possibilities of self-presentation which recent formats, use of diverse media and interaction forms as well as extended space made possible in online partner search. In view of the topic of this volume *Personal Narrative Online*, the exploration of self-presentation in online dating will focus on the following questions: what forms of narration can be found in online dating ads? In what way do advertisers use fragmented stories, past and anticipated narratives, in order to construct an identity suitable to attract responses? How can we make sense of dating ads as part of the advertisers’ life story with an imagined and projected end? In my investigation of the narrative potential of online partner search, I will make use of a corpus of Caribbean online dating ads. The focus of my analysis here will be on the construction of a personal basic narrative which seeks to sum up the advertiser’s life story and their outlook on life. My data analysis will also take into account the role of specific cultural references in the self-presentation of the advertisers as a means to establish a writer-reader relationship and thus enter a form of communication with the intended target. While cultural specificities (e.g. Ramakrishnan 2010) or cross-cultural comparisons (e.g. Pandey 20014) are very present in the discussions of print dating ads, online formats of partner search seem to have led to a more cultural homogenization of the genre. The internationalization of online dating sites will therefore be central for a discussion of global versus local features of online dating sites.

2  Dating ads in print and online

The term dating ads will first of all be used as an umbrella-term for textual partner search in both print and online formats, including contact ads, lonely hearts search, matrimonials, advertisements in registered and unregistered online partner search platforms as well as in mobile dating apps. Arguably, there is a continuity as well as a shared ancestry between the print formats and online versions with the latter, as is generally the case for internet genres, as more fluid and less structured text types (Giltrow and Stein 2009). Swales’s (1990:46) dictum that “(t)he principal criterial feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purpose” is used here as justification for grouping these structurally highly varied text forms together.

The purpose of communication of dating ads has remained principally the same since the first specimen appeared in print and started to form an established constituent of the classified section of (not only) British newspapers in the middle of the 18th century (Kaupp 1968). As in other types of advertisements, the overall communicative function of the text type could be described as largely persuasive (e.g., *attractive, fun-loving female, 25*) but, since the object of marketization is the individual sender of the message – Coupland (1996) talks about the “commodified self” – who, in turn has expectations about the potential consumer, informative and expressive aspects also play a large role in dating ads. In fact, the expression of desires or relational goals (e.g., *seeking serious-minded guy*) to the unknown but by no means unspecific group of addressees is an essential component of the text type and forms also part of the self-portrayal of the advertiser. As Smaill (2004: 98) points out with reference to online personals, “identity is formulated specifically in a manner whereby the other takes shape as an ideal that is foundational to the projection of the self.”

In Western cultures, dating ads are usually self-advertisements and one of the few genres where the augmentation of one’s own image through largely positive self-descriptive attributes is part of the convention. The absence of visual clues in print dating ads means that the description of physical appearance by means of verbal evaluative but also relative qualities (e.g., *athletic, tall, slim, pretty*) has to rely on the self-estimation and standards of the advertiser. Unlike in match-making in many face-to-face interactions, there are no witnesses (friends, colleagues, relatives) or co-narrators to the stories about the self in dating ads, making this format arguably an ideal site for self-invention. Self-disclosure (Gibbs et al. 2006) and self-presentation in a positive light are therefore an essential part of the format. As in hardly any other communicative event¹, self-presentation in dating ads is open to positive face enhancing strategies

¹ However, the use of self-praise and boasting, usually considered taboo in most communicative events which include self-presentation, seems to be yet under-researched. In a recent study on pragmatic repertoire in a microblogging community, Day-ter (2016) shows that these strategies are, in fact, very much part of self-disclosure in her target group of Twitter users.
(self-praise, boasting, exaggeration of positive character traits, physical appearance) and studies like Gibbs et al (2006) have confirmed that their use is a prerequisite for successful consequent interaction with a prospective partner. While self-affirmation on the part of the writer seems inevitable in order to attract the attention of the reader and to prompt a response, it also bears a potential threat to one’s own face. Marley points out that the same is true for the expression of desires since “specifying extremely positive attributes in one’s description of the desired other, requires a reader to respond on the basis of meeting such demanding criteria, and poses the equivalent threat to the Target’s face” (Marley 2010: 439).

The burden of balancing the face-threats in self-presentation as well as the chance of self-invention usually rest with the advertiser him- or herself. However, co-construction of the identity of the partner-seeking individual from a third party might also be found in those ads placed by commercial agencies or well-meaning friends or family members. In the latter case (Looking for a partner for my best friend), the use of positive character and physical traits in the advertisement gain credibility through confirmation from the advertiser and are certainly less face-threatening than self-advertisements. In many non-Western cultures the search for a suitable partner is traditionally conducted by the parents and third party ads would be the norm rather than the exception. In Indian matrimonial newspaper ads, (cf. Panday 2004, Ramakrishnan 2012), the third party presentation of the son/daughter as well as the expressed expectations are highly formulaic and contain carefully nuanced references to caste/sub-caste, patrilineal descent and planetary positions at birth, leaving little room for individual variation – which is also not deemed necessary or desirable: unlike in Western postmodern concepts of the individual self, the identity of the match-seeking person is defined by and embedded in its social environment. The construction of an individual identity, which is very much at stake in the self-presentation in Western dating ads, has therefore little relevance in Indian matrimonial advertisements.

Both traditional forms of matchmaking advertisements such as newspaper dating ads as well as more recent forms of partner search online have been subject of quite a number of linguistic studies in recent years. As for the print versions that could be and still can be found in classified sections of newspapers, some of the linguistic investigations have focussed on sociolinguistic aspects such as gender differences in the presentation of selves and desired features in the other (cf. Marley 2000), age group specific characteristics in dating ads, or cross-cultural differences in matrimonials and dating ads (cf. Pandey 2004). Others have concentrated more on the macro- and micro-structural specificities of the textual format. The restricted (and costly) space in newspapers has resulted in the use of a conventionalized simplified register, “making maximum use of what they take to be shared context between themselves and their eventual readers” (Bruthiaux 1994: 150). Bruthiaux’s sample of dating ads from the LA Weekly had a mean length of 20.3 words, ranging between 15 and 25 words and in this short space, “the register must convey a maximal amount of maximally appealing information about the writer” (1994: 139). Coupland (1996), analyzing the sequential structure in a corpus of written British newspaper ads, identifies six components (1996: 193), five of which are obligatory (advertiser, seeks, target, goal and reference) with one optional element (comment):

(1) Components of dating ads
1. Advertiser: Male, ready willing and able, 26, honest, caring and lovable
2. seeks: seeks
3. Target: similar female 23-28, fun to be with
4. Goal: for lasting relationship
5. (Comment): --

(Example ad taken from Coupland 1996: 202)

2 As with all genres, there is also the possibility to deliberately undermine the conventions to attract attention. In dating ads, negative attributes might be chosen by the writer to sound more authentic and honest. Marley (2010: 441) cites some from her corpus of British dating ads which rely on this strategy (Plain, boring woman, optimistic, seeks hunk…, Fat & ugly. Would any young lady like to meet a lonely coach driver?). Note that there are also specific reader and writer communities where the witty subversion of the genre is considered an art as, for example, in personal ads from the London Review of Books which have been published in book form (Rose 2006, 2010).
Some of the micro-structural features characteristic of the text type are pointed out by Bruthiaux (1994), for instance the use of acronyms (e.g. \textit{WLTM} – “would like to meet” or, in US American contexts, \textit{SWM} – “single white male”), very little use of definite or indefinite articles, deletion of personal pronouns (\textit{Enjoy reading, theatre, week-ends away}), rare use of auxiliaries and copulas, extensive use of hyphenated compounds (\textit{fun-loving, non-neurotic}). Even though the omission of function words and other space-saving devices can be attributed to the cost of words or lines in newspaper ads, the conventions of the register also remain when this factor is absent: Marley (2010: 436-7), for instance, notes that length and textual composition of dating ads which are free of charge are similar to those where the advertiser is charged for each line.

While dating ads are, at least in the initial stage, monologual\footnote{A distinction is made here between “monologual” versus “dialogual” and “monologic” versus “dialogic” with the first referring to the pure number of speakers/writers present and the second referring to the view points invoked (cf. also Traugott 2010:15). Therefore, while dating ads are monologual formats because there is a single speaker/writer, they might employ dialogic conversation strategies to include view points of an imagined other.} formats, they could also be seen as the start of an interaction with an imagined other (\textit{Where are you? Call ...}), as an invitation to a chain of further communicative events – \textit{response of a desired partner} – \textit{follow-up} – \textit{meeting} (cf. Shalom 1997: 189). Marley (2010: 442 ff.), analysing conversational strategies of dating ads which seek to prompt a response from the imagined interlocutor, points out a number of features of British print dating ads which are more often associated with spoken rather than written interaction: the use of exclamations is, in the absence of aural and visual possibilities to claim attention by intonation or gestures, a common tactic to emphasize a particular statement in the dating ad, sometimes also to signal a joke or a humorous incongruity. Directives and invitations, either in the imperative form (\textit{phone for info}) or by means of a conditional clause (\textit{if you want to know more then call me}) are also common conversational strategies which seek to exert a certain amount of pressure on the reader to react to the ad, as are questions. Marley (2010: 448) notes that, in the imagined conversation which is initiated by the dating ad, questions and directives are sometimes combined in serial exchanges (\textit{Do you like Jazz, cinema, going out for breakfast? I do, I’m 29, black, female graduate. Call me. London}) or that the writer him/herself assumes a responding role (\textit{... Me? I’m an undiscovered little gem}).

Some of the norms and conventions of traditional dating ads have been transferred from print to other media. Even before the emergence of internet dating ads, there have been forms of partner advertising texts which go beyond the structural confines of traditional print ads. Comparing the marketing strategies in written and spoken (voice-recorded) dating ads Coupland (1996: 203) notes that the spoken ones show a much greater variety of length and stances adopted by advertisers. Some of these “move well beyond the trading of attributes into confessional data” and tell more of a story of the speaker than what we find in print versions but it is notable that some of the elements characteristic for the print ad are still recognizable:

\begin{enumerate}
\item Voice-recorded dating message  
\begin{flushleft}
(slowly and carefully)

\textit{hello (.) my name is Mary (.) I’ve been a widow for nearly two years (.) and I thought (.) that my memories would sustain me for the rest of my life (.) but I now realise that I didn’t die as well (.) (faster) I want to love again I want to be happy (.) with a kind (slower) gentle man I never thought that I would use this method to find a partner but being on my own I cannot go out and search for mister right (.) so are you this man (breathes) I have many pastimes I enjoy walking eating out (.) I like all types of music I’m very fond of animals I have a dog and a cat (.) I retired (.) er from work when my husband was ill and obviously now have a full day to myself and er (.) I get a bit fed up with my own company so I really am looking for somebody to fill my days as well as my evenings (1.0) I really haven’t a lot more to say about myself I’m (.) as I said tall and slim um (.) I keep fit to (.) leisure centres for (.) games of badminton or (.) into the jacuzzi and sauna (.) I try to fill my time as much as I can but I must admit I dread the thought of another lonely Christmas (.) so if you are this gentleman and you are looking for somebody who’s genuine (.) kind and honest please get in touch with me. (\textit{Making Friends}, December 1993)
\end{flushleft}
\end{enumerate}

(in Coupland 1996: 203-4)
Despite the absence of an overt format it is obvious that the speaker uses a mental template of written dating ads in her spoken message which comprises most of Coupland’s (1996) essential dating ad components (except for the reference). In her text the speaker reproduces some of the well-known practices of the text type dating ad:

a) Self-description:
- tall and slim,
- keep fit,
- I have many pastimes I enjoy walking eating out (.). I like all types of music I’m very fond of animals I have a dog and a cat

b) Expression of desires:
- I want to love again I want to be happy (.). with a kind (slower) gentle man,
- I really am looking for somebody to fill my days as well as my evenings

c) Dialogic conversation strategies:
- direct address: hello
- question: so are you this man,
- conditional directive: so if you are this gentleman and you are looking for somebody who’s genuine (.). kind and honest please get in touch with me

But the changed medium and format also allows for expansions, not only in the sense that the speaker does not use the condensing strategies (avoidance of pronouns, absence of copula) pointed out above. It also allows for elaborations in which the creation of the identity of the advertiser is backed by narrative strands which support her story, e.g. as in the reference to past events and changes from “then” to “now” (I’ve been a widow for nearly two years (.). and I thought (.). that my memories would sustain me for the rest of my life (.). but I now realise that I didn’t die as well, I retired (.). er from work when my husband was ill and obviously now have a full day to myself). What we find in this example is the shift from the skeleton of the five to six component structure of the written print ad to something that resembles a fragmented autobiographical narrative.

As we shall see in further specific examples from my data on Caribbean online dating ads in section 3, such expansions and adaptations of the genre can also be followed when we look at online versions of dating ads. They share some recognizable features with print ads but, as Giltrow and Stein (2009: 11) point out for internet genres in a more general way, are more functionally rather than formally defined, i.e. “they emerge over a series of interactions as internet users orient to one another’s moves and then transfer the newly emergent norms to other CMC settings which in turn modify these norms.” In the early days of online dating sites, Smaill (2004: 93) notes that their success is based on “the cultural currency and notoriety of print-based personal columns and traditional offline dating services” in times of a growing harmony between humans and machines. The possibilities of online dating are changing fast with online dating apps as the latest addition to the scene, allowing for emergence and modifications of norms with more and more users over a short time span. A recent poll (Smith and Anderson 2016) on American online dating reveals that in the age group of 18- to 24-year-olds the use of online dating has roughly tripled from 10% (in 2013) to 27% within little more than two years. The multiplication of online dating users is not restricted to a young age group but has also doubled among 55-64-year olds from 6% to 12% within the same time span (Smith and Anderson 2016). Across the Atlantic, the situation is similar: for the UK it is reported that one in three relationships now start online and 7 million UK users are registered with online dating sites (National Crime Agency 2016).

The vast possibilities of partner search on diverse dating sites make it somewhat unfeasible to make generalizations about the text format. However, there are a number of points which are shared in online dating sites.

Firstly, participants in online dating have a much wider opportunity to represent themselves in a multimedia environment than they had in the traditional print ad: usually, there is a more structured, questionnaire-like part where advertisers can select their likes, dislikes, preferences, imitated co-constructions of their stories (what my friends say about me, the first thing people notice about me) as well as more open sections which include text-based descriptions and narratives about the advertisers themselves.
Photographs play a vital role in the presentation of self and its careful selection and positioning is also a means of using the body as a controlled form of communication which goes beyond the merely verbal enumeration of positive physical attributes. As Goffman (1963: 35) argues the meanings that are attributed to the body are determined by shared vocabulary of bodily idiom. The partial and controlled visual presentation of the individual as well as social self (including setting, dress, hair style, body modifications like tattoos, piercings, facial expression, posture and gesture) and its interpretation by the reader, arguably, lead to a faster selection and initial contact than in the traditional newspaper ad where “sending a picture” was also often the first step in interactions with a potential partner before any further written, phone or face to face contact. However, it is also the co-presence of visual and textual cues that leaves space for the negotiation of how the body is interpreted through textual interaction. As Hardey (2002: 579) writes with regard to self-presentation rituals online and offline, “in off-line meetings with strangers there is a prioritisation of bodily attraction that is replaced by an emphasis on textual adroitness in on-line meetings”. In online dating sites where photograph and text are usually found side by side with possible textual references to the visual part, the text might then also act as an interpretive frame to the meaning of the picture.

Secondly, the use of interactive communication tools such as e-mail, instant messaging (cf. Gibbs et al. 2006) or social media (facebook, twitter) also allows for almost immediate interaction with a potential partner, bridging the curious opposition between, as Smaill (2004: 95) calls it, “the disembodiment of cyberspace and the establishment of real space relationship” that we find in online dating practices. It has been observed that “users’ experiences of establishing and maintaining interaction with others approximated much more closely to Goffman’s view that interaction proceeds via rituals and norms that protect the self rather than to a vision of the internet as a revolutionary social space” (Hardey 2002: 577). What is perhaps new and characteristic of digital interactions once a contact has been made is that relative anonymity and fast intimacy through communicative processes of disclosure and building up trust can exist side by side and that these processes can also be controlled:

Once a user has made contact with another member of a dating site through the internal email system a decision has to be made about whether to enter into an exchange of messages or to simply ignore the invitation. This simple opportunity provides a sense of control experienced by users that some described as ‘liberating’ them from what they see as the limitations or possible embarrassments of encounters in off-line. (Hardey 2002: 576)

The asynchronous nature of communication also provides the interactants with more time and opportunity to construct their self-presentation in a conscious and positive way than in face-to-face communication. The final step of making real-world contact, however, is still the decisive moment where a choice about a continued relationship is made. Exactly because of the sense of familiarity which is established in the digital communicative process between first mediated contact and first physical contact, this step as the ultimate bridge between the cyber-self and the real-world self is often described as disappointing or even a shock when the two do not meet (cf. Hardey 2002, Gibbs et al 2006: 155).

Finally, as we have seen above, disclosure is a vital source to build up trust and to connect the advertiser with the respondent once the contact has been made. But also in the dating ad itself, revelations about the self are an important part of the initial self-promotion. Due to the more open format and the expanded space, this aspect is evidently much more in focus in online dating ads than in traditional print ads, and with it the way writers create their own persona through narrating parts of their story in order to attract a response. This increase in choices about one’s self-presentation also bear more risk of “failure”: the existence of a large body of websites which give advice on how to create a successful online dating profile4 shows that many users are insecure about and overwhelmed by the changing norms of the format and seek clear templates on “how to get their story right.” The role of self-disclosure and its relation to success in

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online dating ads has been researched in Gibbs et al (2006) who find that, among their variables tested, positive intent of disclosures and valence given to long-term relational goals proved to be the strongest factors of self-presentation success. Those advertisers who engaged in a higher amount of self-disclosure also reported to have more responses to their dating ads than those who revealed little about themselves. Honesty, however, proved to be a negative factor for the relative success of dating ads and those who were more honest in their self-presentation were not requited with more responses than those with less open and truthful self-portrayals.

While the communicative strategies of self-presentation outlined above have been dominant in current work on online dating ads, their discussion within a framework of linguistic narrative theory has so far been conspicuously absent. In the following section, I would like to sharpen my focus on online dating ads as fragmented and incomplete autobiographical accounts, a perspective which was already hinted at in the discussion of the example of the voice-recorded dating in section 2.

Secondly, the investigation of online dating material has up to now neglected culturally specific aspects of partner search online. By making use of data from a specific (Caribbean) online dating community, my analysis will therefore also include aspects of local versus global norms in online dating formats.

3 Small stories and basic personal narratives in Caribbean online dating ads

3.1 Online dating ads in a narrative framework: small stories and basic personal narratives

From a Labovian-influenced traditional narrative theory point of view which proposes “a coherent temporal progression of events (...) that is typically located in some past time and place. A plotline that encompasses a beginning, a middle, and an end” (Ochs and Capps 2001: 57), dating ads have little to offer, mostly because the main purpose of communication and overall story line of the advertiser – seeking romance – does not have an actual end but one which is projected and expressed by the desires and wishes for the relational goal, almost like in a fairy tale type of narrative where the “complicating action” of the Labovian narrative model (1967) is the actual placing of the dating ad and the “resolution” is projected and wished for (“and they lived happily ever after”) but as yet unresolved. As Shalom (1997: 187) writes, “descriptions of self, desired other and sought after relationships provide a conventional format for the encoding — and decoding — of a personal fantasy and constitute thus a generic form of wishing.” The step of posting their profiles then becomes part of the life shaping experience of the writer, an act of ‘taking control over one’s life’ (cf. also Smaill (2004: 103).

Dating ads might therefore be seen as elliptical and unfinished autobiographies, a narrative activity, part of a social practice in a specific setting which serves the particular purpose of creating interest in the desired other. The fragmented nature of storytelling the self in online dating lends itself to be tackled from a small stories approach (Georgakopoulou 2007, Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008), an “umbrella-term that captures a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to (previous) tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell” (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008: 381). Small stories typically emerge as narratives in interaction and are part of the social practices of particular groups.

One of the aspects which connect traditional narrative interviews and online dating ads, however, is that they represent the crucial elements or “key episodes” from the teller’s life story. Thus, online dating ads could also be seen as a self-initiated response to an imagined narrative interview question such as “so what is your story?” While dating ads are overtly monologal in nature, their covert interactive potential is evident from dialogic strategies used in the ads as well as from the anticipated interaction with the desired other. The fact that neither the interviewer nor the intended audience – the target group of potential partners – are physically present does not prevent the advertiser from constructing his or her story in an
interactional form, by responding to this imagined basic question ("what is your story") as well as by using
questions and directives to the imagined audience.

Typically, the focus of the narrative in dating ads lies in hypothetical or future events – ideally, the
turn in the advertisers’ lives by finding romance. While past events are also told to construct a credible
identity for the advertiser, the expression of desires and wants for the future life is at least as important, if
not more so, for storytelling the self in dating ads. Interestingly for the “imagined future” loose ends of online
dating stories, Georgakopoulou found in her research on conversations of young Greek women that stories
of projected events proved to be more salient than stories of past events (Georgakopoulou 2003: 75-91). In
other words, narrating the self might be at least as much about the future than about the past.

Telling yourself in a nutshell in a competitive environment – after all there are many advertisers on
dating sites – requires roughly the same skills as pitching a story/idea for a screenplay to a film director
in the famous one minute elevator ride. It seems as if most advertisers in dating ads present some kind of
what they see as an essence of their selves, a basic personal narrative, against which all future dealings
have to be appraised. The term basic narrative, loosely drawing on a concept in sociology of nations’ basic
narratives (Basiserzählungen, associated with Herz 1997) as a critical historical event or story which is part
of the collective memory and against which all further actions and events are evaluated, will be used here
to refer to the attempt to find the essential key element which the advertiser uses to portray him- or herself.

In the following data analysis, I will therefore take a close look at the selection and construction of such key
elements as part of a basic personal narrative in online dating ads. Within a small stories framework, I will pay
attention to the fragmented nature of the stories in online dating ads, references to past and hypothetical/future
events as well as to the emergence of the narrative through interactive strategies with imagined interactants.

3.2 Caribbean dating ads from a narrative perspective: data and analysis

The data consists of 150 Caribbean dating ads which were collected from an international dating site called
“Connecting Singles” (www.connectingsingles.com) which comprises a number of regional and national
free online services, among them also for the Caribbean region. “Connecting Singles Caribbean” is an open
access site which does not require registration to view the advertisements. There are several options for
advertisers: a) Caribbean Women (implicitly: seeking men), b) Caribbean Men (implicitly: seeking women),
c) Caribbean Women seeking Women, d) Caribbean Men seeking Men and e) Dating outside the Caribbean.
In order to limit the factor of cultural variation, the data collection only includes Jamaican and Trinidadian
origin advertisements. Thus, 50 dating ads of Jamaican and Trinidadian writers were randomly selected in
categories a) and b) each as well as 25 ads of categories c) and d). The data of Trinidadian and Jamaican
advertisers was collected between May and October 2015 by downloading and saving the sites for qualitative
analysis. The Connecting Singles advertiser profile sites, as many other online dating sites, consist of a
question/answer part and at least one open section (here: "about me"). For narrative analysis, this open
part is the most interesting one because it allows for a more individual presentation of the self but it is also
the most heterogeneous section with regard to word count, strategy chosen, etc. Therefore, quantitative
analysis of the Caribbean dating ads was not considered for this particular study.

The data has been anonymized and coded for the following categories in which ads can be placed
and searched on this site: JFM = Jamaican Female seeking Male, JMF = Jamaican Male seeking Female,
JFF = Jamaican Female seeking Female, JMM = Jamaican Male seeking Male; TFM = Trinidadian Female
seeking Male, TMF = Trinidadian Male seeking Female, TFF = Trinidadian Female seeking Female, TMM
= Trinidadian Male seeking Male. For ethical reasons, the use of photographs and user names which also
form an interesting part of the self-presentation in online dating ads, will be excluded.

In Connecting Singles Caribbean, the advertisers’ initial self-portrayal consists of an (optional)
photograph, their user name and a highlighted opening line, a teaser for the self-advertisement which
might sum up what they think is essential or significant about them.

This might be a motto, a perspective on life or the core of their self-description and relational goal:

(3) Opening lines in Caribbean dating ads

a) I am a Christian person that is seeking a life partner (JFM3)
b) Seek and ye shall find, i have sought, let me now find (JFF5)
c) I’m a out going fun loving person with a heart and mind full of passion and a spirit of charm (JMF3)
d) The most precious thing on earth is life so try find thatspecial someone to share it with (JMF15)
e) Contentment is not the fulfilment of what you want, but the realization of what you already have (JMF2)
f) A negative mind will never give you a positive life (JFF12)
g) Sweet soul seeking same (JFF25)
h) Sexy and fun (JFF2)
i) Sexy (TMF25)
j) Absolutely No Time For Jokers, Freaks, Nor Time Wasters! (JFM7)

The rather varied solutions the writers find for choosing the right opening line might ultimately lie in the relational goal (sexy versus ...seeking a life partner) and their readiness to tell their basic personal narrative in one line and there are also examples where advertisers simply refuse the task or show their insecurity of what is expected of them (e.g. in the profile of another user, JFF21: Not sure what to say here. Maybe i’ll update it later. :)). The use of aphorisms as in example d), e) and f) might be seen as a conventional way out of assuming this challenge of finding a key statement for one’s individual life story but at the same time revealing something about your outlook on life. It is obvious, however, not only from example 3 j) that most advertisers also use this highlighted key line to preselect the target group of readers who, if they feel attracted by the teaser, find common ground in the relational goal or feel included in the target group, might then click on the full profile of the writer.

The full profile optionally presents more pictures and before the open section about me a structured initial question/answer section with basic information on age, location, height, body type, ethnicity, religion, smoking and drinking preferences as well as marital status and existing or planned children. The questions are recognizably based on the US American origin of the website and are not varied for different regional sites, e.g. Connecting Singles UK, Connecting Singles Germany, where questions about religion or ethnicity would be considered less important than in the United States or in the Caribbean. The relative uniformity by which these questions are answered in my Caribbean data is due to the fact that advertisers can choose from a set of proposed responses to at least some of these questions.

In the more open sections about me and I’m looking for, the writer then has the possibility to give a fuller story about themselves and their desired others. Again, there is a wide range of variations of what writers reveal about themselves in the about me section in length (from two to 150 words) as well as in strategies used but they usually include some descriptions of the advertiser’s life situation and likes.

(4) About me in Caribbean dating ads

About me

a) Hi There! Well.. Hmmm let’s see... I am a mother of 2 beautiful girls,, here seeking to possible find a companion. I am a simple person who loves the finer things in life. I am god fearing, smart...Jovial... Fun.. Kind... Good listener... Attentive... Clean...Loving..passionate... Family orientated... Loves children... I love to tavel and i am also a good cook.. (JFM7)

It is noticeable that the writer not only addresses the reader directly (“Hi There!”) but also represents her writing as if in a verbal response to an actual interview question (“Well,,, Hmmm let’s see..”) with frequent thinking pauses marked by dots. Such imitation of spoken monologue and the inclusion of the reader by direct address and dialogic conversation strategies is rather frequent. There are, however, also some examples in the “about me” section where the advertiser either refuses (b), (c) or playfully subverts the challenge to present their story in a nutshell (d):
b) ask me__ (TFF9)
c) Seeing is believing (JFF2)
d) sexy and smart sexy and smartsexy and smartsexy and smartsexy and smartsexy and smartsexy and smartsexy and smart sexy and smart sexy and smart sexy and smart sexy and smart sexy and smart sexy and smart sexy and smart sexy and smart (TMF25)

For those who do conform more readily with the emergent conventions of the format, self-presentation of the advertiser is often almost identical with characteristics sought in the desired other:

(5) Reciprocity in self-description and desired other:

**About me:**
I am a vibrant positive thinking person who is loving, gentle and understanding who embraces the love of Jesus Christ for humanity.

**I'm looking for:**
I am looking for a woman who is attractive, loving, understanding and who loves the Lord Jesus with passion, commitment and sincerity. (TMF8)

Such reciprocity supports the idea that the advertiser's wants and desires are actually also part of his or her self-presentation. Similar to the spoken dating ad cited earlier (section 2, example 2), however, Caribbean online dating ads also tell narratives and episodes from their life for the purpose of creating a credible autobiography as part of their self-portrayal:

(6) Past and anticipated stories:

Hi everyone, I am a simple person who prefers the quieter things in life... hanging out at the beach, dinner out with friends and movies. I am a discreet person when it comes to my personal life, and I would expect the same from those that choose to get to know me. I am not a party / fete type of person, I have been through the clubs etc. and it's not for me. I am an animal lover, I treat my pets like I would treat a person... with love, care and kindness. I would like to meet persons who are at that juncture in life where they have figured out who they are and are ready to get into something more serious. I'm not into games, or experimentation. I know that I would like to meet more mature minded persons for chat to see where it can lead. I look forward to hearing from you! (TFF5)

There are a number of past and anticipated or imagined stories here in this self-presentation. It starts out (*I am a simple person who prefers the quieter things in life*) with a kind of self-description as we have seen in example 4 (a), but the actions which TFF5 mentions here – *hanging out at the beach, dinner out with friends and movies* – already tell us of past experiences which the writer wants to draw attention to. In the passage *I have been through the clubs etc.* with the resolution *and it's not for me*, the writer leaves out parts of the story, i.e. what occurrences have made her come to this conclusion. It becomes clear, however, that her self-evaluation *I am not that kind of person* is actually the result of past experiences. The fragmentary nature of the narrative might also be useful for the communicative purpose of the ad as it awakens the reader’s curiosity and could serve as an invitation to ask further questions and engage in a conversation with the writer. Apart from the references to past stories, there are also anticipated or projected stories of what the advertiser imagines will happen as a result of the self-presentation: *to get into something more serious* with the right person or, more immediately, *to meet more mature minded persons for chat to see where it can lead*. This wish or imagination is concluded with a conventional conversational closer *I look forward to hearing from you!* which, in its matter-of-factness, expresses a certain degree of confidence that the story initiated by the posting of the ad will be continued.
3.3 Cultural specific features in Caribbean dating ads

Apart from conversational engagements, Marley (2010: 451ff) cites extra-textual references as another way of establishing a closer identity with the reader and a form of invitation to a more intimate writer-reader relationship as they are “an alternative way of forging a more personal relationship with the reader, drawing as they do on a common pool of shared knowledge.” In the specific Caribbean (Jamaican and Trinidadian) context from which my pool of online dating ads are drawn, such extra-textual references might consist of specific Caribbean cultural references, religious practices, lexical items (e.g. *to lime* for “hanging out”, *fete* for “party”, *bake* for “sandwich bread”), naming and addressing strategies as well as particular Caribbean spelling conventions which can serve to establish a common ground and understanding between advertiser and reader.

A first extra-textual reference to which the reader can relate at first glance might include the choice of the user name which, for ethical reasons will be discussed only in a very general sense: User names often coin a metaphorical identity, a “ready-made identity from a familiar intertextual narrative source, as an economical means of projecting identities for self and desired other” (Marley 2010: 451). In my data, these metaphorical identities include references to famous regional music (e.g. reggae and dancehall) artists and make use of geographical (*Trini-*, *Island-*) and religious/cultural references (*-queen*). The choice of a user name in which the reader can decode an assumed identity of the advertiser certainly contributes to a sense of familiarity.

In the writers’ profile, occasional Caribbean cultural and religious references (*jah bless, queen* in the context of rastafarianism) can also serve to establish a particular relationship with the like-minded reader:

(7) Caribbean extra-textual references:

**About me:**
I’m humble down to earth I love soccor n beening around my family an friends an chilling outdoor love animals listen to dancehall an reagge music meeting new people I don’t expect people to try change someone to please them I’m just me take it or leave it jah bless

**I’m looking for:**
Down to earth humble an take life serious easy to get along with an look at herself as a queen she is an respect others jus as herself (JMF15)

Conventional Caribbean spellings such as *gyal* for “girl” or *yuh* for “you” can also serve to highlight the regional identity of the writer and thus form a connection with the reader from the same area. For other spelling deviations, for instance in example 7 (*I love soccor n beening around my family an friends; reagge*) the intentionality is less unambiguous but, in general, idiosyncratic spelling seems to be more common in Caribbean online dating ads than what would be found in print media and might be more the perception of the “informality” and “colloquial nature” of the medium than an expression of cultural identity.

4 Conclusion

Self-presentation and, as essential part of the self-portrayal, expression of relational goals have been central in dating ads to achieve the communicative purpose of initiating contact with a potential partner and, ultimately, finding romance, sex or marriage. In the move from written print ads to online versions, the “more” in the title of this paper, “More about me” alludes to the changed and expanded possibilities

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6 Note, however, that in other cultural contexts, spelling deviations seem to be a negative factor for the success of a dating ad. A recent newspaper article “‘U R dumped!’ Women say bad spelling and grammar are the biggest turn off when looking for love online” (Daily Mail, 7th October 2015) cites a study that especially male advertisers with spelling mistakes in their profile are less likely to get responses to their ads (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3262219/Bad-spelling-grammar-biggest-turn-women-using-online-dating-sites.html#ixzz44qITfynGu), accessed 19 March 2016.
which online dating formats offer for telling the advertiser’s story and thus construct an (idealized) online persona, often in collaboration with the imagined reader. It turns out that in the creation of a fragmented autobiographical narrative, the reference to anticipated stories is as important as those to past events and experiences. In fact, the dating ad could itself be seen as “part of the story”, a decisive point in the advertiser’s life through which a future story is projected. The creation of a condensed personal basic narrative which, together with visual cues, entice the viewer to read more in the advertiser’s profile is a particular feature of online dating ads.

The analysis of my data on Caribbean online partner search has shown that there is a wide range of possibilities to use (or reject) the expanded narrative potential of online dating ads. The utilization of (U.S. origin) international dating sites for regional partner search results in a curious homogeneity in the macro-structure of the genre and a simultaneous vast heterogeneity of the micro-structures. Micro-structural variation can be found also with regard to cultural and linguistic choices and Caribbean users of online dating ads frequently make use of particular cultural references, lexical items and spelling adaptations in their creation of an authentic Caribbean persona and as a means to establish common ground with a potential partner. However, the adaptation of the international format for Caribbean partner search shows less culturally specific aspects than ethnographic research on flirting rituals and strategies in the Caribbean has shown (cf. Yelvington 1996). Ethnographic research, therefore, might be still more significant for an investigation of actual local dating practices than what can be studied in a highly globalized format.

One highly interesting aspect of such internationalization is, however, the open presence of same-sex partner search which would be more difficult to find in offline contexts in cultural environments like Jamaica and Trinidad. The construction of desires and identities in such environments is one area where dating ads could be further explored. In general, the tension between local dating practices and online practices in the globalized internet genre is an area where future research (e.g. in African or Asian context) could meaningfully shed light on the influence of global norms on local practices as well as on local adaptations of globalized norms in online and offline situations.

References


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7 In both countries, homosexual practices are punishable by law.


