CONSTRUCTION OF THE ABSTRACT OTHER IN ONLINE DATING PROFILES

by

JONATHAN LOUIS BEHR

B.A., Metropolitan State University of Denver, 2020

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado, Boulder

in partial fulfillment of the requirement

for the degree of M.A. Linguistics

Department of Linguistics

University of Colorado Boulder

2025

Committee Members:

Chase Wesley Raymond

Kira Hall

J. Calder

Abstract

Behr, Jonathan Louis (M.A., Linguistics, Department of Linguistics)

Construction of the Abstract Other in Online Dating Profiles

Thesis directed by Chase Wesley Raymond, Ph.D.

This paper serves as an exploration into the concept of the abstract other and the ways in which language users construct the identity of an individual who does not necessarily exist in their online dating profiles. While most interaction includes a negotiation of the identity of concrete others (other speakers or a person who is jointly known by speakers), a few specific interaction types include the prescription of identity onto an imagined other. Online dating profiles are an example of this, as users describe their ideal partner, an imagined figure, thus attributing characteristics to a person that does not exist. Through qualitative and distributional analysis, this paper finds that in addition to listing traits of their ideal partners, users are able to obscure the individualism of the abstract other by using the first-person plural, simultaneously constructing the abstract other and the self in imagined joint activities. Users can also create the abstract other by constructing a different, but related characteristic, leveraging the relatedness between the stated trait and the desired trait. Furthermore, the sets of tools that a dating platform provides to users in order to construct identities have an impact on user identity construction techniques, offering varying affordances and contingencies. Finally, the existence of a profile on a specific platform is itself a part of the identity building process as it is a tool leveraged by users to communicate alignment with the norms of that site.

Contents

Figures

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Previous research in the field of sociolinguistics has attempted to understand the role language plays in the construction of identity of both speaker and listener. Traditionally conducted through the analysis of spoken language, the rise of digital media has brought attention to online written language as an object of study. In recent years, social media in particular has opened new avenues through which interaction can take place; thus, researchers have been able to explore the ways in which novel forms of communication are leveraged by speakers in order to construct and maintain their identity. Even more closely related to this study is scholarly discourse focusing on interactions taking place on online dating sites.

This study focuses on the linguistic material provided by users of online dating sites, and the ways users construct their own identities and the identities of their prospective partner. It seeks to understand what linguistic practices users employ in this process, taking an intersectional approach. Primarily, this paper builds on prior research of identity building in personal ads in order to analyze identity construction in online dating profiles.

In terms of form, users of online dating websites are generally restricted to two primary forms of communication: uploaded visual elements and linguistic descriptions. While a profile in its entirety is a complex combination of multimodal elements, this paper focuses on textual evidence. Visual elements within the online dating profiles certainly are central to identity construction, though the role they play into the construction of a user's ideal partner (henceforth referred to as the "abstract other") falls outside of the scope of this paper.

In terms of function, identity construction plays a central role in the use of online dating websites, as these sites aim to function as an expedited means to establish relationships between users. Crucially, these sites still adhere to the traditional means of relationship building, relying on a perceived "identity compatibility" between interactional partners as the basis on which relationships are built. These sites, therefore, encourage users to express their identity efficiently to other users. In short, identity construction is central to the online dating site on a structural level. It is this structure of online dating sites that allows researchers to study identity as an object of inquiry. The shared understanding that identity construction is core to online dating websites ensures that this data is easily accessible on one's profile.

While identity construction in online dating profiles has been previously studied, such research has tended to focus on the construction of the account owner's identity. Research has been conducted in this space that focuses on the construction of the account owner's prospective match. This is unsurprising, as the type of interaction occurring at the level of the online dating profile construction has a unique structure. In a prototypical communicative instance, users negotiate the identities of themselves, their interactional partner, or a shared known other. When a user of an online dating website describes the type of person they are looking to match with, they are not negotiating the identity of a real and specific person; rather, they construct the identity of an imagined or idealized individual. In essence, identity construction is prototypically done in relation to concrete others, while the online dating website space serves as one of a handful of spaces where individuals construct the identity of an abstract other.

1.1 Research Questions

The primary research question guiding this paper is as follows:

RQ1. *How do users of online dating websites construct the identity of the abstract other?*

This study seeks to analyze the construction of users' idealized partners. To further flesh out understanding in this space, the following secondary research questions are being proposed:

RQ2. *How do users of online dating websites construct their own identity?*

RQ3. *How does the target audience of a dating website shape the way identities are constructed?*

Though these questions are not central to this paper's primary research question, they are important in that they inform conclusions made in the primary research question. Understanding the construction of the abstract other will be put in contrast with the construction of the poster's own identity, thus research question 2 will be informative in determining linguistic techniques used to construct the abstract other. Research question 3 brings questions of intersectionality to the forefront, and seeks to understand the construction of the identity of the abstract other within larger social structures. Specifically, it focuses on the stated target audience of individual dating platforms, and the ways that a platform's social positioning impacts user identity construction practices.

In the following, I will be reviewing theorizations and studies conducted in the field of identity construction and online dating profiles. This review will serve to ground readers in current theory as well as highlight the way in which this study contributes to existing literature. I will then introduce the data collected to explore this space, as well as the methods of both data collection and analysis. After discussing the results of this analytic process, I will discuss implications of this study, before introducing ways in which future studies can flesh out findings from this study.

2.0 THE ABSTRACT OTHER: AN IDENTITY REMOVED FROM A PHYSICAL FORM

2.1 Identity as a Construction

Foundational to this paper is the view that identity is a constructed phenomenon. Following Bucholtz & Hall (2005), identity is assumed to be continuously (re)created through interaction. This is to say that identity is not a fixed phenomenon that an individual "has", rather it is a dynamic, ever-emergent part of human experience that is negotiated through interaction.

Within this understanding of identity as a dynamic entity, it is also assumed to be multi-faceted. Erving Goffman's (1978) metaphor of performing life as though it were a stage play understands human actions (and interactions) as performances, intentionally crafted to fit the social situation of the (inter)action. This view agrees with Silverstein's (2003) belief that linguistic variation allows speakers to index different dimensions of their identity while retaining the semantic content of an utterance. From this perspective, multiple sign vehicles can refer to a singular object while indexing distinct characteristics in the speaker themselves. Indeed, Silverstein's view of indexicality is critical to the truth of Goffman's metaphor. Without multiple ways of "saying the same thing", there would be no means to "perform" in a particular way by mobilizing some ways rather than others. Creative expression necessarily requires multiple means of performing a semantically identical (at least in the strict sense of the term) utterance.

Previous research also notes how identity work and interaction are closely related. The specific relationship between language and identity can be viewed from two angles: (1) talk constructs identity and (2) identities shape talk (Tracy & Robles 2013). This paper takes the perspective outlined by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). In this regard, identity will be assumed to be the product of linguistic practices, rather than its source. This is critical to this paper, as its primary focus is the construction of the abstract other. As an idealized entity, the abstract other

does not have a physical source which can be linguistically expressed. The constructed identity of the abstract other is purely driven from the linguistic choices of the user of the online dating site. While it can be argued that the abstract other is the creation of the profile's owner, who indexes their desires (thus an element of their own identity), the point remains that the identity of the abstract other cannot be read by interactional partners until users linguistically construct the identity.

2.2 Identity and Social Media

One of the defining characteristics of a social media platform is the ability for "users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present" (Carr & Hayes 2014). Indeed, a single user may utilize multiple accounts on a single platform in order to present an alternate identity (Xiao et al. 2020). Furthermore, identity construction can take place on social media platforms, regardless of the original intent of the site. This can be seen in Cook & Hasmath (2014), who notes how Facebook groups that were originally created to organize events can become spaces for individuals to construct and perform their personal identities

Identity construction on online social media platforms is distinct from identity construction in face-to-face interaction. In their 2008 study, Zhao et al. point out how early adopters of Facebook used their profiles as mediums through which they could construct an idealized version of themselves. Crucially, this paper points out the fact that identity construction online cannot be flattened to a singular experience; rather, users construct their identities in a socially normative fashion, and the (non)anonymity of the platform is a factor in setting those norms. Given the fact that individuals use online dating sites for the express purpose of erasing anonymity, in this paper, users can be assumed to adhere to a set of norms to effectively construct their identities in a way that is readable by other users.

While identity construction is generally assumed to occur at a singular level, with a single identity-building (inter)action negotiating the characteristics of a single identity, this is not always the case. As noted by Khazraee & Novak (2018), users of the online social media platform Facebook, driven by shared political goals, create a *collective* identity through interaction with in- and out-group members. In doing so, a user's identity-building practices are not restricted to only constructing identity traits of the self, but the shared identity of the group as a whole.

In exercising their ability to curate interactional experiences on social media platforms, users are able to both index their identities, simultaneously constructing a space that meets their individual needs (Buss et al. 2021). This paper introduces the idea that a user has power over the 'other'. As users are able to filter out their friends/follower lists, they are able to manipulate the voices present in their informational sphere. In this case, the power held by the user is the status of the 'other' as either a conversational partner or not, thus constructing the users' own interactional landscape. Building off this idea, this paper seeks to highlight how users of online dating sites do not just have the ability to construct the interactional setting, but they are able to construct the identity of their interlocutor altogether.

2.3 Style and Social Media

Stylistic choice in the online space remains an emerging area of study, though it draws from traditional views of style. The contemporary study of linguistic style finds its roots in T. B. W. Reid's (1956) paper defining registers. Under this view, a register is a way of speaking, shaped by external factors such as audience or setting. It is this theory that houses Silverstein's understanding of linguistic variability (noted above). Focusing on one element of an interaction's

context, Allen Bell's (1984) "Language Style as Audience Design" set out to define the different types of audiences in an interaction. To Bell, listeners take up different audience roles based on criteria such as whether they are known to be listening by the speaker, whether they are directly addressed by the speaker, or whether they are ratified by the speaker. For example, a listener can take up the role of address if they are "known, ratified, and addressed", while a listener who is not addressed but is known and ratified is labeled an auditor. Known listeners who are not ratified are overhearers, while listeners who are not known to be listening are eavesdroppers. To Bell, a speaker will shape their utterance based on the role the audience takes up. Later in this paper, I will argue that speakers can *assign* listeners to these roles by constructing their utterances to refer to listeners as members of these roles.

Critical to style and online discourse is Gershon's (2010) idea of media ideologies, the idea that users evaluate and compare media types (and platforms) in order to differentiate one from the other, and Gibson's (1977) idea of affordances, or the idea that an individual's capabilities are shaped by the environment, such as, in the case of this study, a social media platform. Within the realm of online discourse, speakers have adopted various linguistic practices that are distinct from spoken discourse. From shorthand abbreviations, to emoji use, to prompts about what information to share in one's profile, the online conversation tools offered by a particular platform afford opportunities for speakers to creatively construct utterances in ways distinct from spoken discourse (Sandel et al. 2019).

2.4 Online Dating in the United States

Online dating services in the United States have made their way into every major demographic, with more than a quarter of the US adult population having used an online dating site (Anderson et al. 2020). In the US, young adults are more likely to use online dating sites

compared to all other surveyed age demographics, as 48% of respondents aged 18-29 reported using a dating site. This same poll found that members of the LGB community were more likely to use online dating sites, as 55% of survey takers in this community reported using a site, compared to 28% of respondents who identified as "straight". [1]

When looking at the most popular dating sites, it becomes clear that online dating sites have split the market based on age group (McClain & Gelles-Watnick 2023). Users of online dating sites age 19-29 report to have used Tinder (79%), Bumble (51%), and Hinge (39%), and are proportionally much more likely to use these sites than other age groups.

2.5 Identity and Online Dating Websites

Research investigating online dating sites and identity building can be traced back to print-based personal ads and the linguistic analysis of these ads. Typically found in magazines and newspapers, personal ads are spaces where "advertisers embark on the discourse practice of self-advertising equally strategically, producing versions of themselves for selective consumption by recipients" (Coupland 1996). Prior research looking at identity building on personal ads have analyzed the ways users align their ideal partners with traditional sex role stereotypes (Davis 1990), the way users commodify themselves to readers of the ads (Coupland 1996), and the ways gay men practice masculinity in the *Gay News/Times* magazine (Baker

1 It is critical to note some of the limitations of this poll. Primarily, the social categories that users are allowed to identify with is severely limited. As reported, the poll only accounts for respondents who identify in a male/female binary. In a similar vein, in polling for sexual orientation, this poll only allows space for those who identify as "straight" and those who position themselves as "gay, lesbian, or bisexual". This is problematic in that it does not cut out entire groups of people (there is no representation for those who identify as non-binary or those in the trans community). Furthermore, this poll lumps the "LGB" community into a homogeneous group. The result of this decision does not necessarily change the underlying statistics provided by this group of respondents, though it does make the results of this poll more opaque than necessary.

2003). Critically, these studies *have* taken interest in the ways the idealized partner (the abstract other) is constructed in a pre-internet relationship market system.

However, sociocultural linguistic research within the online dating profile space has tended to look at the ways specific user communities have constructed their *own* profiles in order to connect with other users. Looking across the spectrum of sexual orientation, "older adults seeking same-sex relationships [use] a greater proportion of words in their profiles belonging to […] the romance theme" compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Griffin & Fingerman 2017). In analyzing users of online dating profiles across the age spectrum, Davis & Fingerman (2015) find that older users are more likely to use the first-person plural pronoun, suggesting a focus on connectedness and external relationships, while younger users are more likely to use singular pronouns, thus enhancing the self and their own achievements. Similarly, older users are more likely to focus on financial stability and personal health. These findings reinforce Alterovitz & Mendelsohn's (2013) study, which found that the dating profiles of middle-aged users are more likely to include language surrounding adventure, romance, and sexual interests more than their older counterparts. This suggests that younger users are more willing to describe themselves through these lenses, though, as a content analysis paper, the connection between referenced themes and identity building was not explicitly stated.

An important variable to keep in mind is the (unstated) goals of users of online dating sites. Individuals who have long-term goals establishing in-person relationships are more likely to value honesty and are more willing to disclose personal information (Gibbs et al. 2006). User intent on online dating platforms operates at multiple levels. On one hand, individual users have the ability to express their own intent, regardless of the online dating platform. At the same time, online dating platforms position themselves as spaces to set up distinct types of relationships.

One service might position itself as a place to find a “committed” relationship, while others may position themselves as spaces to facilitate “hookups”. To assume that the intent of a user aligns with the positioning of a dating platform would assume that the user is aware of the platform’s positioning, approaching its use with specific media ideologies, as Gershon (2010) would put it. In reality, it is possible that the position of any given platform is not understood by all users. It is also possible that the positioning of a platform is more salient to some userbases compared to others (i.e. the type of relationships sought on Bumble might be more salient and homogenized than those on Tinder). Given the breadth of this study, user intent will not be taken into account, unless it is expressly stated by the user.

Crucially, these studies all look at the ways users construct their own identities, and highlight the ways different user communities construct the identity of the self in the online dating space. This paper instead focuses on how users construct the identity of their idealized but not yet met partner, the abstract other, as an area deserving to be further explored.

3.0 DATA AND METHODS

3.1 Data Collection

For this study, data from 250 users of online dating services were collected. As all of the platforms display potential matches based on distance from the user, all users were geographically located within a 50-mile radius from a major university in the western United States.

User profiles were selected based on a number of factors. The first category used for participant selection was online dating platforms. Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge were selected as they are the three most popular dating sites among adults age 19-29. The final two sites were selected as they appeal to minority demographics, thus facilitating a preliminary look at how intersectionality interacts with identity construction of the abstract other. Grindr was selected as it markets itself as a platform for LGBTQ+ users, while Christian Mingle was selected as it is the largest US dating site catering towards a user base practicing a specific religion.

Within each online dating platform, the profiles of 50 users were selected. These users were selected based on the gender identity of the abstract other. Of the 50 users on any particular platform, 25 of them indicated the abstract other as “male” and 25 indicated the abstract other as “female”.

Collected data includes textual data posted in the self-description section of each site. Additionally, basic information including user age, presented gender, and gender of the abstract other was collected.

3.2 Data Analysis

To ensure anonymity of users, information about each user was assigned to a random number in groups of 25, along with their fellow users and identified abstract other's gender. This is to say that participants 1-25 shared both dating platform and specified gender of the abstract other. Participants 26-50 shared a dating platform as participants 1-25, but differed in the stated gender of the abstract other.

Analysis of this data took an inductive approach, with content patterns being identified and compared across user populations. From there, I identified recurrent linguistic techniques through which users discuss, thus construct the identity of, the abstract other. As this study is establishing preliminary research in a novel segment of identity construction, this bottom-up approach is preferable over a deductive approach. This inductive approach led to three rounds of qualitative coding. In the first round of coding, utterances were coded to categorize the utterance as it relates to the study's research question (if the utterance refers to the abstract other, the self, or the target audience of the platform). The second round of coding sought to closely reflect the data. Examples of this level of coding include 'humor', 'thoughtfulness', 'outdoorsy', or 'concert goer'. The third round of coding attempted to collate second-level codes into larger themes such as 'personality traits' or 'shared experiences'. Second and third level coding were conducted in relation to the main question of this paper, thus the intersectional analysis in this study looks at the ways intersectionality impacts the construction of the abstract other.

Through this analysis process, it was uncovered that users deploy linguistic tools to obscure the identity of the abstract other. Additionally, the existence of the user on a platform is itself a readable sign that works in constructing the abstract other.

4.0 RESULTS

Content and linguistic analysis of identity construction in online dating profiles shows the traits prioritized by users of online dating platforms as well as the role that pronominal forms have in the construction process of the identity of the abstract other. Users are most likely to construct the abstract other's identity by negotiating their hobbies and personality traits rather than physical characteristics. Users are also much more likely to construct their own identity than the identity of the abstract other. Both of these construction practices are shaped by the platform. On one hand, the target user base of a platform has an impact on the way they construct the identity of the abstract. At the same time, tools provided by platforms facilitate identity construction practices through structured, thus necessarily linguistically limited forms.

4.1 The Construction of the Abstract Other

Analysis provided insight to the way that individual users construct the identity of the abstract other. First, the construction of the abstract other was not a ubiquitous practice. Of the 250 profiles sampled, 47% of users engaged with the construction of the abstract other in some way (n=118). The remaining 53% of users did not engage with the identity of the other in any way (n=132). Of the 118 profiles making reference to the abstract other, 46 users self-identified as female, while 69self-identifiedd as male. The remaining 3 users identified as gender non-conforming. This indicates that users who identify as male on a dating site are slightly more likely to construct the identity of the abstract other. Crucially, only 4 of the sampled profiles explicitly self-identified as gender non-conforming. Although a high percentage of the sampled gender non-conforming profiles constructed the abstract other, the small sample size of these profiles must be taken into account. While *user* gender identity seems to play a role in the likelihood of construction of the abstract other, the gender identity of the *abstract other* does not

seem to impact these practices. Of the 118 profiles that referenced the abstract other, 56 of these profiles were listed as seeing a female partner, while 62 of these profiles were visible to potential male partners.

Techniques to construct the identity of the abstract other varied from user to user, though several overarching themes frequently came to light. These themes included construction of the abstract other's personality, physical traits, sense of desire, hobbies, political views, religion, and desired relationship type. Hobbies was the most frequent way in which a user constructed the abstract other, with 46 users leveraging this theme. This was followed by construction of the abstract other's personality (n=43), physical traits (n=18), desired relationship type (n=17), religious views (n=10), sense of desire (n=3), political views (n=2), and openness to dietary restrictions (n=1). The frequency of these techniques has been included in Figure 1 (below).

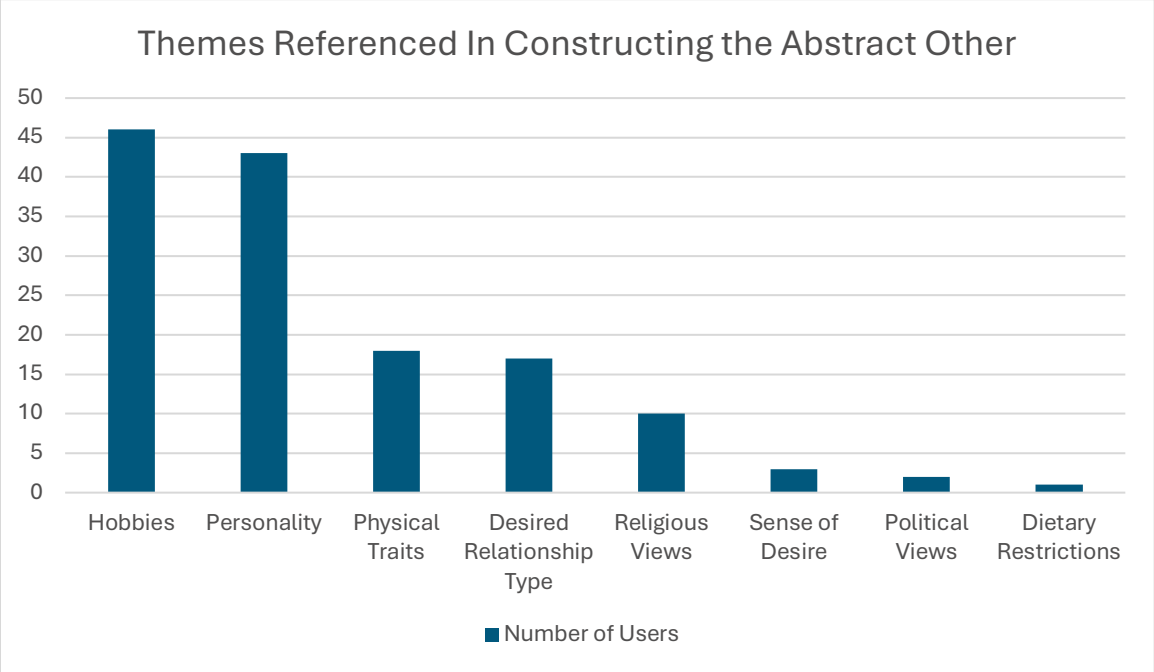

Figure 1: Themes Referenced in Constructing the Abstract Other

From this dataset, it is important to make two notes. First, several users used multiple themes when constructing the identity of the abstract other. For example, one user stated that they were "looking for someone to connect with spiritually and enjoy the outdoors". In cases like this, both the themes of "religious views" and "hobbies" were included. Additionally, some of these themes are directly related to research question 4 (the impact of the platform on user behavior). Namely, all ten users who referred to the "religious views" theme were users of ChristianMingle. Given the fact that this study sampled an equal number of users from all platforms, regardless of the size of a platform's user base, the relative frequency of references to religious views of the abstract other in this study may not necessarily be reflective of the frequency of this theme's use broadly.

4.2 The Construction of the Self

Users were more likely to linguistically construct their own identity in online dating profiles, with 88% of users linguistically constructing their own identities (n=221). The remaining 12% (n=29) of users did not construct their own identities linguistically. These users either did not use linguistic data at all, only relying on images in their profiles, or provided no information about their own identity in their bio sections (e.g., "my parents want me to get married by the end of the year, swipe right to apply"). A comparison of the frequency of the

types of identity construction has been provided in Figure 2.

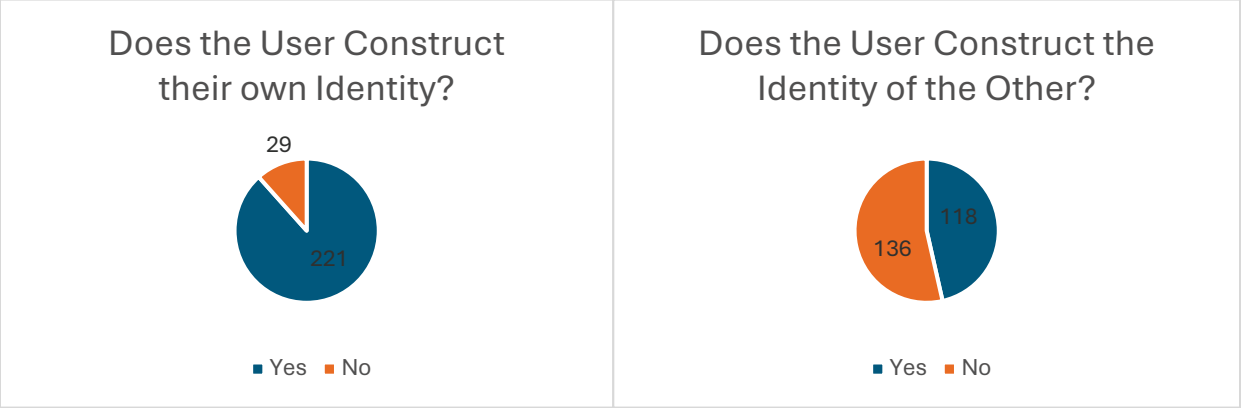

Figure 2:Does the User Construct the Identity of the Other? Does the User Construct their own Identity?

Critical to the understanding of the construction of the self in online dating profiles is an understanding of the structure of profiles across dating platforms. While all dating sites sampled still allow users to type in an open text box for their personal bios, all sites sampled provide alternate means through which users are able to construct their own identity. In the profile creation stage, all sites allow users to respond to preset questions by selecting multiple common responses from a list. For example, Tinder asks users what their interests are, and users can select any number of preset responses such as "shopping, basketball, Harry Potter, etc.". A slightly different approach is taken by Hinge, which provides users with sentence starters which they can complete. For example, one user filled the sentence starter as follows: "I wind down by reshuffling tarot cards until I get the exact answer I'm longing for." Both of these scaffolded identity construction tools allow users to construct their own identity in scaffolded ways.

4.3 References to the Platform's Target Audience

To determine references to a platform's target audience, only data from Grindr and Christian Mingle were taken into account (100 profiles total). Because Tinder, Hinge, and

Bumble all market towards users regardless of intersectional influences, Grindr's marketing towards the LGBTQ+ community and Christian Mingle's marketing towards a religious user base make them the only two platforms with a specific target audience. Of the 100 profiles sampled from these two platforms, 40 users made direct references to the target user base of the platform. Users of Grindr are more likely to reference the target Grindr user base, with 25 of the 50 users making reference to these users. For example, one user stated that they were "looking for trans women or fems, I would also like to play with other fit hung men," directly referencing one of the gender identities appealed to by Grindr. Users of Christian Mingle were slightly less likely to refer to the platform's user base, with only 15 of the 50 users directly referencing religion in their profiles.

For both platforms, it is important to note that direct references are likely not necessary in order to index their inclusion within a user base group. Furthermore, users are able to leverage audience-specific linguistic registers to signal membership within a platform's target audience. For example, one user identified themselves as a "chubby bear". The term "bear" is most prominently used to describe a subgroup of gay or bisexual men, especially those with larger builds and body hair. By employing a linguistic register often used within the gay community, this user indexes their membership within the stated target user base of Grindr, even without directly referencing a gay identity. In addition to direct disclaimers about their identities, their act of using a platform with a stated target user base may allow users to align themselves with the persona of 'someone using X site'. With this in mind, direct reference to a platform's target audience may not be viewed as necessary by some users.

5.0 DISCUSSION

5.1 Techniques for the Construction of the Abstract Other

When looking at techniques used to recruit themes in the construction of the abstract other, there are four primary methods through which the identity of the abstract other is done. These four methods utilize only two grammatical constructions. In order to make these four methods of abstract other identity construction clear, I will provide an example sentence for each construction generated myself as well as examples from the dataset. These constructions have been visualized in a table in figure 3 (below). In general, these constructions differ across two axes: whether they reference the figure of personhood (Agha 2011) directly (i.e. whether the abstract other is constructed as an individual set of features distinct from the user) and whether they reference the negotiated trait directly. These axes can be understood as sets of features, as noted in figure 3 (below).

	+ **DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE FIGURE OF PERSONHOOD**	- **DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE FIGURE OF PERSONHOOD**
+ **DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE NEGOTIATED TRAIT**	Attribute Constructions	Shared-Trait Constructions
- **DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE NEGOTIATED TRAIT**	Indirect Constructions	Doubly Obscured Constructions

Figure 3: Techniques for the Construction of the Abstract Other and Their Features

The first set of features, +/- DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE FIGURE OF PERSONHOOD revolves around whether or not the user references the abstract other as an

individual identity onto which traits can be ascribed. + DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE FIGURE OF PERSONHOOD constructions mirror the prototypical identity building constructions when not referencing the abstract other. Sentences like “Sara is tall” or “Bella reads books about vampires” construct the identity of a person *as* an individual. In contrast, a - DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE FIGURE OF PERSONHOOD phrase does not treat the other as an independent identity, rather it constructs them as a part of a larger group. For example, in a sentence like “that soccer team isn’t fast, but they are good at passing the ball”, no individual identity is being constructed, but the traits of the group as a whole are constructed. Because of this, any one person within the group fits, to some extent, within the identity of the whole.

The second axis, +/- DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE NEGOTIATED TRAIT is dependent on whether the stated identity trait at a textual level matches the underlying trait being constructed. Taken outside the realm of the abstract other, a + DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE NEGOTIATED TRAIT sentence might be “Jonathan is not a good writer”. In this case, the underlying constructed trait is the same as the trait expressed within the utterance (the trait of being a good writer). For an example of a - DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE NEGOTIATED TRAIT, consider an interaction where speaker 1 asks, “Is Josie smart?”, to which speaker 2 responds, “Well, she does read a lot of books”. In this situation, the trait being constructed on the surface level (Josie is someone who reads a lot) is taking the place of a distinct, but related identity trait (Josie is smart). Notice how this construction type requires the identity trait on the surface to be sufficiently related to the underlying identity trait to allow the listener to construe the underlying meaning from the surface form.

First, users can use *attribute constructions* to negotiate the identity of the abstract other. A prototypical construction of this type is the statement “I’m looking for someone who has a

muscular build." In this case, the figure of personhood in the abstract other is referenced directly. At the same time, the trait being negotiated about that figure of personhood at the textual level is the *same* trait that is meant to be negotiated. It is unlikely that the average reader would construe this construction as negotiating a different trait. An example of this construction within user data comes from one user, who claimed they "need a funny guy in [their] life". Once again, the figure of personhood is directly referenced, as is the personality trait being negotiated.

Second, users can use *shared-trait constructions* to construct the identity of the abstract other. A prototypical example of this construction would be the statement "We could work on our physiques". In this construction type, reference to the figure of personhood is *not* direct, even as the trait being referenced is referenced directly. A user example of this construction type is the user who states "Together we could go camping in the desert this spring". The user constructs the hobbies of the abstract other under the umbrella of a shared experience, rather than directly referencing the figure of personhood of the abstract other as an individual. By referencing prospective activities that could be shared by the user and their partner, the user is constructing hobbies of the abstract other without explicitly referencing their figure of personhood.

Third, users can *indirectly* construct the identity of the abstract other. This is done when the user uses one element of the abstract other's identity to construct a distinct, but related part of the abstract other's identity, leveraging the relative closeness between two ideas within an indexical field (Eckert 2008). Following the theme of previous prototypes, an example of this construction is "I need someone who is able to lift me in the air." In this construction type, the figure of personhood is directly referenced, as they are in overt constructions. Crucially, the trait of the abstract other is <u>not</u> being directly referenced. At the textual level, this construction is about a physical activity able to be completed by the abstract other (lifting the speaker in the air),

but through construal, the reader is able to make an inference that, in reality, the speaker is constructing a physical trait of the abstract other. An example of this generated by a user can be seen in the user who states that they "need someone to work out with". On the surface, the user is describing an activity that the abstract other enjoys. Crucially, the indexical closeness between the hobby of working out and the muscular physique enable readers to understand this utterance as indirectly constructing a physical trait in the abstract other rather than the overt construction of the abstract other's hobbies. It is important to note that this requires the "reader" of a profile to construe the construction of one identity trait of the abstract other as the construction of a different identity trait. This construal is enabled by the relative closeness between the textual and underlying negotiated traits being negotiated.

Fourth, users can simultaneously use shared-trait and indirect construction techniques to *doubly obscure* the construction of the abstract other. A prototypical example of this construction type is the statement "We could max out my gym equipment together". Here, neither the figure of personhood is directly referenced, nor is the trait being negotiated. The abstract other's hobbies are lumped under the umbrella of shared experience with the speaker. At the same time, the shared activity of "maxing out gym equipment" can be construed by the listener as a way to construct the physique of the abstract other. Within the dataset of online dating profile user, there is one who states that "together, we could rot away until we both become worms in the dirt"[2]. In this case, the user is using the first-person pronominal form to construct the abstract other

[2] To fully understand this construction, it is important to break down the use of the verb "rot", as the meaning of this verb has changed amongst some speakers recently. Originally meaning the state of progressing decay, younger users of various short-form video social media platforms such as TikTok began to use "to rot" in order to describe a feeling of contentment with being unproductive. A reaction against the FOMO and need for perfection felt by users of social media platforms, this use of "to rot" is often accompanied by clips showing users under blankets, watching TV shows or scrolling social media for extended periods of time.

through a shared activity (the abstract other should be someone who wants to mutually exist with the user, even if in an unproductive manner). Beyond this, the user leverages the indexical closeness of the modern meaning of the act of "rotting" with a pessimistic outlook in order to indirectly construct the abstract other. On the surface, the user appears to construct a hobby of the abstract other, when in reality, they are indirectly constructing an epistemological personality trait of the abstract other.

These four techniques help to explain user's tendencies to overwhelmingly construct the abstract other's hobbies, personality, and religious views (given the relatively small sample size of users on ChristianMingle) while few users constructed the physical traits of the abstract other. The hobbies, personality, and religious views of the abstract other can be constructed through all four construction techniques. On the other hand, users did not use - DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE FIGURE OF PERSONHOOD constructions to describe physical characteristics of the abstract other. Because -DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE FIGURE OF PERSONHOOD rely on the abstract other being constructed as a part of a larger group, users were less likely to use these forms to negotiate physical traits of the abstract other (an example of this would be the theoretical sentence *"together, we could be taller than average"). The only time a user employed this construction feature to negotiate physical traits of the abstract other is when they did so through a doubly obscured construction, such as the user who told the abstract other "let's hit some laps." This user can be understood to be constructing a set of physical traits of the abstract other through a description of hobbies (indirect construction), but importantly, they recruit the first-person plural form in order to describe the hobbies (shared-trait construction).

In looking at grammatical tools deployed by speakers to construct the abstract other, two major tools arise with frequency. One linguistic tool used to construct the abstract other is the

use of indefinite articles and pronouns to describe the abstract other. Examples include “I need a funny guy in my life” and the claim that they are looking for “someone to do activities with or enjoy each other’s company”. In the first example, the indefinite article *a* is utilized, while the second example uses the indefinite pronoun “someone”. As indefinites, by their very nature, do not make reference to a specific, real entity, the use of these forms allows users to attribute characteristics to the object of an indefinite article or pronoun in order to negotiate the identity of the abstract other.

The second tool, as noted above, is the first-person plural pronoun “we”. Users frequently use this pronoun alongside a permissive auxiliary (prototypically ‘can’ or ‘could’). Examples of this include “we could rot” and “we could go camping”. In both of these cases, the user uses a prototypically definite pronoun *we* within an irrealis event (through the auxiliary) in order to negotiate the identity of an abstract other. This construction was employed when the negotiated trait had the feature -DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE FIGURE OF PERSONHOOD.

Understanding how these two tools work in indirect sentences adds another layer of complexity to this construction process. When indirectly constructing the identity of the abstract other, the construction employed by users is afforded some level of variation. This can be seen in two indirect identity construction example sentences. On one hand, the user claiming they “need someone to work out with” uses an indefinite pronoun in order to indirectly construct a physical trait in the abstract other. On the other hand, the user who claims that “together we could rot” constructs the abstract other as one who shares the user’s contentedness with being unproductive or low-key by recruiting the first-person plural + permissive auxiliary. Indeed, when indirectness comes into play, either construction is freely available to the user in order to describe the abstract other.

5.2 Considering the Construction of the Self

The construction of the self was the most common practice across all users. Crucially, it is necessary to consider the onboarding process to create a profile on each of these sites. When constructing a profile, users on all sampled platforms are prompted with scaffolded identity construction tools such as multiple-choice questions and fill-in-the-blanks. In providing users with pre-fabricated identity building tools, online dating sites encourage users to construct their identities, while the construction of the abstract other is not directly elicited by the platform. Particularly interesting is the effect that this design feature has on user experience. By pushing the same scaffolded identity construction tools to all users, nearly all profiles have the same basic information filled out. For example, nearly all Tinder profiles sampled included a list of interests that users identify themselves as having. This homogenization of information leads to a space where individual profiles are easy to compare to one another. Even if two users have vastly different bio sections, the "interests" section of each profile is easy to compare to one another. In essence, by limiting user creativity, scaffolded identity construction tools promote cross-profile comparison. On the other hand, the use of scaffolded identity construction tools shapes the context of which identities can be constructed. When constructing a profile on Tinder, for example, users are prompted with a series of activities (drinking, smoking, working out, etc.) and the ability to select the frequency with which they partake in these activities. The very structure of this tool primes users to talk about themselves, and does not allow them to overtly construct the identity of the abstract other through this tool. In contrast, one of the sentence starters on Hinge is "My favorite quality in a person is…". With this scaffolded identity construction tool, users are primed to overtly construct attributes of the abstract other, and are not able to construct their own identity.

When analyzing how users utilize these scaffolded identity construction tools, it becomes clear that scaffolded identity construction tools facilitate the overt and obscured construction of identities, with higher levels of scaffolding being followed by higher cases of attribute identity construction practices. Responding to a sentence starter, one user stated that "My greatest strength: loyalty". In these cases, as in the cases where users select from a pre-constructed list of responses, users overtly state attributes about themselves to their prospective partners. In this instance, however, the user relies on a sentence starter provided by the platform in order to generate an idea of what to disclose.

While the attribute constructions occur frequently with highly scaffolded tools, obscured construction of identity occurs primarily through the open text biographies, and to a lesser extent through the completion of sentence starters. For example, in a free written biography, one user stated that they're "just bored, hmu and see where that goes." Here, the user utilizes a temporary emotion to index a more fundamental characteristic, the view that relationships are something to cure boredom. Another user, completing a sentence starter, claims that their friends ask them about "a lot of things, love, financial advice, hiding a body…but mostly how to build a website". In this example, the user constructs both the elements of their identities pertaining to their skills (love, managing finances, building a website) and their personality with "hiding a body" helping to construct a humorous personality.

5.3 The Role of the Platform

The impact of the online dating platform on identity construction is, in some ways, directly controlled by the platform. At the same time, however, users have agency to add norms to the experience on a specific platform. The main focus of this section will be on two of the five platforms surveyed (Grindr and Christin Mingle) as they are the only two to explicitly cater to a

subgroup of online users. That said, some of the findings from these sites will be applicable to the other platforms. As noted before, Grindr users were more likely to reference the target audience of the platform through attribute constructions, exemplified by one user who directly evaluates traits in a partner by claiming they “prefer masc Hairy +". In this example, the user is constructing the identity of the abstract other both by directly referencing the negotiated traits of the abstract other as they fit under the stated target audience of the platform. While some Christian Mingle users still constructed the abstract other’s attributes, reference to religious views as an attribute was not as common of a practice.

It was hypothesized previously that attribute constructions are not necessary for users, as their participation on a platform is sufficient to do some level of indexation, either of the self or the other. The uneven distribution of attribute constructions between the two platforms supports this hypothesis. While Grindr and Christian Mingle both lean towards a specific user base, the specificity of each varies. This could very well explain the difference in explicit references. It is possible that the breadth of users targeted by Grindr is perceived to be wider than that of Christian Mingle. While Grinder caters to multiple gender identities and sexual preferences, advertising on its homepage as “The World’s Largest Social Networking App for LGBTQ People” (Grindr 2025), the target user base of Christian Mingle may be seen as comparatively one-dimensional, with being a follower of some denomination of Christianity being the only true filter to be considered within the in-group of users. Furthermore, salience may play a factor, as gender and sexual preference on Grindr may be seen as more salient than denomination on Christian Mingle. This hypothesized difference in perceived specificity and salience could shape a user’s decision to directly reference the dating platform.

Furthermore, the platform on which users post impacts the ways they index gendered stereotypes. This is perhaps unsurprising considering the fact that the demographics targeted by Grindr and Christian Mingle have historically approached gender from different perspectives. The difference in perspective taken by each site could be seen in the onboarding process to each site. When creating a profile on Grindr, users are asked to disclose their gender, sexual preference, and ideal relationship type. In contrast, Christian Mingle only asked for a user's gender on a binary scale. From there, the user's sexual preference was assumed to adhere to a heterosexual "norm". All profiles were assumed to be seeking a formal monogamous relationship. Indeed, just as with the scaffolded identity construction tools, the ways platforms approached gender, sexuality, and relationship types was coded directly into the platform itself. In controlling the profile creation process, platforms are able to shape what Gershon (2010) labeled media ideologies, or qualitative ideologies about some quality of a media platform developed and negotiated by speaker groups. Beyond a positive/negative binary, users can develop ideologies about what is acceptable on certain platforms and what is dispreferred. This may serve to explain why users of Christian Mingle more closely adhere to the traditional view of masculine figures needing to be assertive and independent, while feminine figures are expected to value connection, themes noted by Rosenkrantz et al. (1968) and reinforced by Deborah Tannen (1990). Critically, by compelling users to adhere to the platform's ideologies through the affordances offered, a platform can shape the user experience to more closely align with that stance.

A final note about the impact of platforms on identity construction deals with Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. While these platforms were not included in the majority of this section, as they do not explicitly cater to a subset of the larger population, these three sites are not

monolithic. Indeed, even if the developers of each platform did not construct limits on the type of user allowed on the site, there does seem to be user-constructed sets of norms and expectations reserved for specific platforms. This could be due to the fact that the marketing of a platform is complex. Even though a site like Hinge does not market towards a specific identity as understood by traditional sociolinguistic research, it does market towards a specific group of people. Marketing itself as "the dating app designed to be deleted" Hinge does not market towards a group of people traditionally identifiable in sociolinguistics, rather it markets towards a specific group of people outside the scope of traditional linguistic inquiry (i.e. the target audience is "people who don't want to be on dating sites for extended periods of time"). The difference in culture across dating platforms can also be due to historic reasons, as is the case with Bumble, which previously did not allow male users to initiate conversation with female users. In broadening its scope beyond a male/female binary, Bumble stopped using this feature, though it is possible that some residual understanding of Bumble as a space for feminine users to initiate contact might shade user expectations of the space.

5.4 Identity Construction on Dating Sites and the Reading of Signs

One way to understand the relationship between the user of an online dating platform and the abstract other with whom they are trying to meet is that of a listening subject and a speaker, though with an element of recursivity. By outlining a set of criteria which they desire to be present in partners, users of online dating sites position themselves as a sort of pseudo-listening subject. A traditional listening subject (Inoue 2006) is one whose ideologies are so ingrained that they override production practices in the listening process. In doing so, agency is revoked from the speaker and assigned to the listener. A similar shift in agency occurs in online dating platforms. By explicitly stating characteristics about the abstract other, users position themselves

as agents, encouraging others to self-measure their presentation against the abstract other. Adding a layer of recursivity is the shared understanding that online dating platforms rely on a matching system, where both users must approve of the presentation of the (concrete) other as compared to their constructed abstract other. An example of how this transfer of agency occurs is highlighted below, incorporating Allen Bell's view of audience design (1984).

First, User A has the agency to construct their own identity, knowing that this construction will be compared to an abstract other created by a yet-to-be-met concrete other. User A then sees User B's profile, which also has constructed abstract others. It is at this point that User A takes up the position of an overhearer, or a listener who is known but not ratified by the speaker. User A then compares their own identity against User B's abstract other. If User A believes they meet the standard set by User B's abstract other, they may decide to attempt to match with User B, petitioning to move from the role of an overhearer to the role of addressee, which would lead to them gaining ratified and addressed status. At a later time, User B (maintaining the role of speaker) will be served User A's profile, at which time User B will be able to measure User A's identity construction against the abstract other. If User B deems User A's performance as satisfactory, they can also show interest via the platform's matching mechanic, which, in effect, promotes User A to the position of addressee. It is only if the two users show interest in one another that the platform connects the two users in real time. Crucially, after User A compares their own identity to the abstract other, evaluative agency is transferred to User B.

While this sequence may appear to be a unidirectional transfer of agency, this is not the case. User B's experience mirrors User A's experience, starting with a self-assessment, and this agency is transferred to User A. This is the recursive element of this interaction. Both users begin

with an agency to assess their own identities, but both users give that agency up to the other user through the matching process.

Adding an additional layer to this interactive process is the fact that users, when constructing their own profiles, the design of a profile coincides with their level of obscurity within their construction of the abstract other. When using +DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE FIGURE OF PERSONHOOD techniques, users stylistically form their utterances as if their audience is an overhearer. In referencing their ideal partners as abstracted identities, removed from both the speaker and listener, they anticipate their readers to exist as overhearers of their descriptions of the abstract other. In contrast, when using -DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE FIGURE OF PERSONHOOD techniques, users address their audience as addressees. By using the first-person plural form, they allow the listener to take a position within the interaction, ratifying their existence within the discourse, and promoting them to the position of addressee. Future studies could consider the impact of these competing stylistic choices on "successful" matches. Does the way a user treats their audience as either addressee or overhearer impact match rates?

When comparing Grindr and Christian Mingle to the other three sites, it becomes clear that users of all sites use the platform itself as one of a series of signs readable by viewers. This is most prominently seen on Grindr and Christian Mingle (see section 6.4), where the use of a platform itself can be mutually understood as an alignment with the target demographic of that platform. This suggests that in future studies, the platform might not be best understood as a tool by which to organize and label users, rather it may best be understood as one of a number of signs readable by other users. In this view, the use of a platform and its specific qualities is a part of the bricolage (Eckert 2004) of identity constructing resources.

The understanding of existence on a dating platform as a sign is critical to the creation of the abstract other. If it is true that (1) users understand the cultural expectations of a specific platform and (2) the use of a platform is itself a readable sign, then by attempting to connect on a given platform, they inherently index the norms of that platform, and ascribe those norms onto the abstract other.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study sought to understand the ways in which users of online dating platforms construct the identities of their ideal, though abstract, partners. Through analysis of user linguistic data, several findings arose. First, users creatively construct the identities of the abstract other. By using *we* + modal auxiliary constructions, users construct the identity of the abstract other through shared interests. By making reference to shared interests, users are able to construct their identities and the identity of the abstract other simultaneously. This allows the user to construct the identity of the abstract other, but it also allows the user to disguise this practice as the construction of the self. Second, though initially outside the scope of this study, it became apparent that platform design has a direct impact on user tendencies. From scaffolded identity construction tools to cultural assumptions about what a relationship is being hard-coded into the platform, the design of a unique platform shapes the way users meet and connect with others. Finally, a user's existence on a platform is itself a sign, readable by other users, which does the work of aligning the user with the social norms adopted by the specific dating platform. Combining this with the shared understanding that online dating platforms are spaces to meet others, a user's existence on a specific platform is itself a statement, signaling that the abstract other must be someone who adheres to (or at the very least, acknowledges the existence of) the expectations of that platform.

This paper serves as an introductory exploration into the construction of the abstract other. Certainly, the act of limiting variables in future studies will yield more specific characteristics of the process of constructing the abstract other. This study was limited in that it sought to get a generalizable understanding of practices employed by users. In sampling a relatively small number of users from a relatively broad set of platforms, the scope of this paper

is great, while the detail of specific strategies is limited. Future studies would benefit from sampling more users from a smaller number of platforms.

Given the fact that the construction of the abstract other is a relatively uncommon practice in language use, I offer another ideal space to do this type of research. Future studies looking to understand the phenomenon of constructing the abstract may find success looking at job boards and hiring websites, as employers are also going through and trying to meet a certain type of person, though that person is not a definite person in the mind of the employer.

Through this work, it is my hope that the understanding of identity as an object of study is broadened. Indeed, the most interesting finding of this paper might not be the practices employed by speakers at all, but the fact that identity itself can be abstracted and exist separate from any specific individual.

REFERENCES

Agha, A. (2011). Large- and Small-Scale Forms of Personhood. *Language and Communication*, *31*(3), 171-180.

Alterovitz, S. S., & Mendelsohn, G. A. (2013). Relationship goals of middle-aged, young-old, and old-old Internet daters: an analysis of online personal ads. *Journal of aging studies*, *27*(2), 159–165.

Baker, P. (2003). No Effeminates Please: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Masculinity via Personal Adverts in Gay News/Times 1973-2000. *The Sociological Review*, *51*(1_suppl), 243-260.

Bell, A. (1984). Language style as audience design. *Language in Society, 13*(2), 145–204.

Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies, 7*(4-5), 585-614.

Buss, J., Le, H., & Haimson, O. L. (2021). Transgender identity management across social media platforms. *Media, Culture & Society, 44*(1), 22-38.

Carr, C. T., & Hayes, R. A. (2015). Social media: Defining, developing, and divining. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, *23*(1), 46–65.

Cook, J., & Hasmath, R. (2014). The discursive construction and performance of gendered identity on social media. *Current Sociology, 62*(7), 975-993.

Coupland, J. (1996). Dating Advertisements: Discourses of the commodified self. *Discourse & Society, 7*(2), 187-207.

Davis, S. (1990). Men as success objects and women as sex objects: A study of personal advertisements. *Sex Roles, 23*, 43-50.

Davis, E. M., & Fingerman, K. L. (2016). Digital dating: Online profile content of older and younger adults. *The journals of gerontology. Series B, Psychological sciences and social sciences*, *71*(6), 959–967.

Eckert, Penelope. (2008). Variation and the indexical field. *Journal of Sociolinguistics. 12*(4). 453-476.

Eckert, Penelope. (2003). The meaning of style. *Texas Linguistic Forum*. *47*. 41-53.

Gershon, I. (2010), Media ideologies: An introduction. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, 20*, 283-293.

Gibson, J. J. (1977). The theory of affordances. In R. Shaw & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Perceiving, acting, and knowing: Toward an ecological psychology*. (pp. 67-82). Hillside, NJ: Erlbaum.

Goffman, E. (1978) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Penguin Books, London.

Griffin, E. M., & Fingerman, K. L. (2017). Online dating profile content of older adults seeking same- and cross-sex relationships. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, *14*(5), 446–466.

Grindr (2024). *About grindr.* Grindr. https://www.grindr.com/about

Inoue, M. (2006). *Vicarious language: Gender and linguistic modernity in Japan* (1st ed.). University of California Press.

Khazraee, E., & Novak, A. N. (2018). Digitally mediated protest: Social media affordances for collective identity construction. *Social Media + Society, 4*(1).

McClain, C., & Gelles-Watnick, R. (2023). From looking for love to swiping the field: Online dating in the U.S. *Pew Research Center*.

Reid, T. B. W. (1956). Linguistics, structuralism and philology. *Archivum Linguisticum*. 8(1), 28-37.

Rosenkrantz P. S., Vogel S. R., Bee H., Broverman I. K., Broverman D. M. (1968). Sex-role stereotypes and self-concepts in college students. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 32*, 287–295.

Sandel, T., Ou, C., Wangchuk, D., Ju, B., & Rosa Duque, M. (2019). Unpacking and describing interaction on Chinese WeChat: A methodological approach. *Journal of Pragmatics. 143.*

Silverstein, M. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language and Communication*, 23(3-4), 193-229.

Tannen, D. (1990). Gender differences in conversational coherence: Physical alignment and topical cohesion. In B. Dorval (Ed.), Conversational organization and its development (pp. 167–206). Ablex Publishing.

Tracy, K. & Robles, J. (2013). *Everyday talk: Building and reflecting identities* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Wodak, R. (2012). Language, power and identity. *Language Teaching*, *45*(2), 215–233.

Xiao, S., Metaxa, D., Park, J. S., Karahalios, K., & Salehi, N. (2020). Random, messy, funny, raw: Finstas as intimate reconfigurations of social media. In *CHI 2020 - Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* Article 3376424 (Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - Proceedings). Association for Computing Machinery.

Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin S. (2008) Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5), 1816-1836.