

The Virtual Shadchen:

Internet Dating as a Modern Tool for Matching Jewish Singles

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..... 3

Literature Review..... 3

Methodology..... 6

Data..... 8

Synthesis..... 11

Reflexive Statement..... 14

Conclusion..... 15

Data Tables..... 16

Bibliography..... 17

Introduction

Interestingly, Internet dating is not only a vastly growing industry, but constitutes a, “new realm in which to reexamine traditional interpersonal theories of self-disclosure...” (Ellison et al, 2006: 152) It is a fairly untouched slice of the contemporary virtual language in which researchers can open new and fascinating doors. My aspiration with this study was to find trends and patterns in how people present themselves on their Internet dating profiles. My method for discovering trends in Internet dating profiles was a content analysis. I also used literature to examine the importance of matchmaking as it pertains to Jewish culture in this age of virtual communication. I chose to analyze and narrow down my research of Internet-Facilitated Matchmaking (IFM) to Jewish Internet dating sites because of the indicated growing relevance virtual matching has in the Jewish community.

As a Jewish person I was taught that it is essential that I find a Jewish partner to have children with for the purpose of ensuring the continuation of Jewish traditions and values. As I’ve been exposed to, community elders (matchmakers) match men and women; and with the emergence of new technology, the Jewish community now has the assistance of a virtual matchmaker (the Internet). As I’ve found through Jewish texts and a recent documentary called *Match & Marry*; Internet dating has provided new pathways for Jewish men and women of all ages to find a potential partner on their own and, from other geographical areas.

Literature Review

In the studies I reviewed on Internet dating the issues most explored by researchers were consequences of self-disclosure, trust issues, motives for usage and the consequences of relationships being sustained through computer-mediated communication rather face-to-face

interaction. My study looked mostly at what was disclosed by Internet dating users and themes in the disclosed information. A central point made by virtual community researchers is that the Internet has become a medium in which users are able to engage in a communicative process of building up trust; and, are able to safely create their identities based upon symbolic interaction, for the purpose of finding a romantic partner. According to Hardey, the Internet has become a conducive environment for creating, exploring and maintaining romantic relationships (2002: 581).

Another main point of researchers made about relationships created and sustained through virtual communication, is that they have the potential for becoming intimate more quickly because of the room for anonymity on the Internet. What I gathered from Hardey, McCabe, Watchravesringkan and Yurchisin is that the anonymity of virtual communication provides individuals with a form of psychological comfort resulting in a wider range of self-disclosure. Most literature about Internet dating discusses self-disclosure; however, what I found to be missing from past research that limited my ability to adequately explain some of my findings was a discussion on writing style and in what terms individuals described themselves. For instance, in my data I found that individuals described themselves in absolute terms; I will explore this further in my synthesis.

What I found through my review of Jewish religious and cultural learning literature was that there maintains to be a very high importance placed on marriage and procreation in Jewish communities. In consequence, the combined importance of children and marriage perpetuates the matching of Jewish men and women. All of the texts explored noted

that those who do not marry are considered incomplete persons and are living in sin. Marriage is seen as a way in which you recommit to god; every aspect of the marriage ceremony as described by Greenberg serves to symbolize the commitment to god and to your spouse. According to Rabbi Donin, it is a mitzvah (biblical commandment) to have children; and, as Rabbi Hoffman stated, “A home without children, Jews believe, is a home without blessing” (1993: 139). I additionally found that there are three ways an individual can identify as Jewish; culturally, religiously and ethnically (racially). The reason why this is important to note is because an individual can consider themselves culturally Jewish but not religious; that is interesting because the culture is largely influenced by religion. In order for a person to be considered Jewish their mother must have been Jewish. If a Jewish person has children with a non-Jewish person (Goyim) than their children must go through a ritual conversion to be considered Jewish; which explains the continued use of matchmaking for Jewish people.

It is important to note that matchmaking isn't just a Jewish method for sustaining culture; but was mainstream at the time it began to be used by Jewish people. It has been used by many cultures not for love but for political and procreation reasons. It continues to have a significant role in Jewish life; indicators of the current relevance of Jewish matchmaking are the large number of Internet dating sites dedicated to the matching of Jewish men and women. On a humorous and interesting note, Greenberg stated, with society so highly atomized, the services of a good shadchan are at least as good as a good computer dating service” (1983: 216). The lack of mention of Jewishness in my data was very interesting after reading through texts that focused on the importance of marrying within the culture; this will be covered in more depth under my synthesis portion.

Methodology

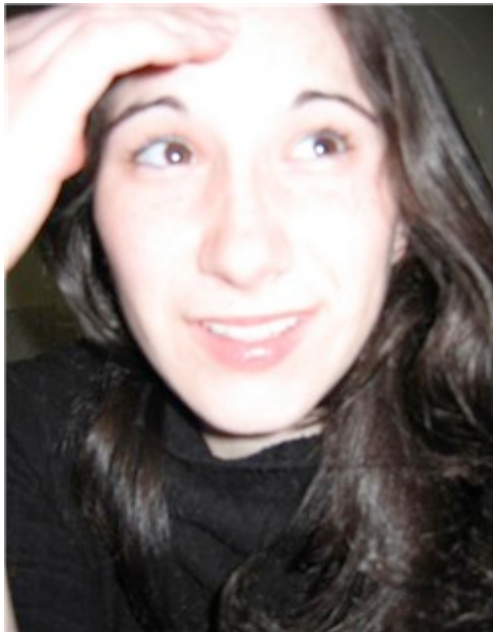
For my study I was originally going to conduct individual interviews with members of the Internet dating sites; however, there are two reasons as to why I did not end up using that as my methodology. The first reason was the difficulty of finding people willing to be interviewed, and from such a long distance; I would have had to interview them over the phone. The second reason was that I thought it could be potentially unsafe for me to reveal my personal information over the Internet site; I was concerned about someone with alternative or harmful intentions having access to my contact information. I did not want to be harassed and distinguishing between individuals with potentially harmful motives and those who do not is an unstable ability of mine. I also found that individual interviews would be extremely time consuming and that other methods, such as the one I used, could be just as effective.

After deliberating about the reasons why individual interviews were perhaps not the most efficient way to go; I decided upon conducting a content analysis of twenty Internet dating profiles on the Internet-facilitated matchmaking (IFM) site, JDate.com. There are many Internet dating sites to choose from including; The J Café, Jewish-personals, J people meet, Jewish Singles, Gefilte Fishing, Spirit Jewish, Jewish Mingle, Date Jewish, and Jewish Passions; however, I choose JDate because of the ease of accessing profiles without being a paying customer. I also chose to do a content analysis because I would have no contact with my subjects; therefore, there was no potential harm that could come to them or myself. I used a systematic random sample to find my subjects and the first step I took in locating/ compiling my sample was to manifest a search on JDate. I plugged in the Los Angeles zip code 91042 and found five men between the ages of 25 and 35; and, five men between the ages of 36 and 55. I

additionally found five women for each of those age groups. All subjects were within 40 miles of the 91042 zip code and I picked the last profile on each search page until I collected twenty. I labeled the men and women ages 25 to 35, "young adult"; and, labeled the men and women ages 36 to 55, "middle aged".

For my content analysis, I looked at the section of my subject's profile that was titled, "About Me" (below is a visual example I created of what the profiles looked like).

SAMPLE PROFILE



114419001



114419001

Single, Woman seeking a Man

For: A date, Friend, Marriage, A long-term relationship, Marriage & Children, Activity Partner

22 years old

Tujunga, CA

Logged in: 0 hours and 4 minutes ago

Last Update: 12/4/2008

About Me

I enjoy long walks on the beach, reading a good book, hanging out with friends, going on adventures and listening to music. I am a vegetarian and I love my pets. My ideal man is tall, handsome, smart, and financially stable. If you are looking for an intelligent, sexy, fun and caring women message me :) btw I am Jewish, no goyim need apply...lol.

Physical Info

I am:

5' 0" (152 cm)

I weigh:

My hair is:

Dark Brown

My eyes are:

Dark Brown

My body style is closest to:

Petite

I was only able to look at that particular section because I would have needed to pay the member fee in order to view all other aspects of their profile. I found this to be somewhat limiting; therefore, I did not make note of information my subjects may have excluded about themselves because it could have been somewhere else in their profile. As I reviewed subject profiles/ self-presentation, I began to notice trends in the following areas and coded them; type of relationship looking for, number of words written, mention of their physical attractiveness, references about love or romance, mention of family, description of Jewishness, style of writing, mention of uniqueness and marital status. If I had had more time and money, I would have collected data from more profiles and paid the membership fee on the site so that I could've viewed their full profile. I would have also looked at interest in profiles based upon chosen profile picture and indicators of socio-economic status.

Data

I began my content analysis by coding subject demographics; I cataloged age, gender, and marital status. All of the Internet dating users I looked at are located in Los Angeles County. As you can see in figure 1.1(on page 16) that most of my subjects are currently single and have never been married. All of the subjects that said they were divorced and/or separated, excluding one, were in my middle aged category. Half of all my subjects classified themselves as male and the other half as female. The median age of subjects both male and female in my "Young Adult" category were 27 years old; while the median age of both men and women in the "Middle Age" category are 45 years of age. I found that women in both age groups tended to write more than men. I also found that the older subjects, including males, wrote more than

the younger subjects (Refer to figure 1.2 on page 16 for a visual representation of number of words written on average per category).

Under the “What are you looking for” portion of the profile users could have chosen one or more of the following; activity partner, marriage, marriage & children, friend, date, and/or long-term relationship. I found that generally speaking, my subjects were not looking for an activity partner or friend through the Internet dating site. The two other noticeable patterns under the category of what they were looking for were; none of the middle-aged women were looking to have children and over half of the young adult men were not looking for marriage.

Despite the fact that all my subjects had a posted photo of themselves, half of them still positively mentioned their physical appearance. 60% of the older women and younger men commented on their physical attractiveness.; the older men and younger women rarely did so. Some examples of statements that were counted as comments on outward appearance were; “My body is smoothed and toned”, “I am sexy”, “I’ve been known to model”, “I am a young 52 year old. I don’t feel it or look it” and “I look 30-35”. One third of my subjects made statements that indicated that they consider themselves to be unique; some indicators of that include statements such as, “I love anything original” and “There is one word to describe me, Unique!” Not surprisingly, only one of the twenty subjects had anything directly negative to say about their life, and that comment can still be taken by some as not necessarily negative ; the comment was, “I work a lot”.

I noticed that all but one of my female subjects mentioned the importance of family while only 40% of men made any reference to it. Some of indicators of familial importance were

statements such as, “I love...home filled with family”, “Family is very important to me”, “My family and friends mean the world to me” and “...and my family, well, they are the best part of me”. After looking at what people said about family, I was curious as to whether or not there was a correlation between those who mentioned family and those who commented on their Jewish identity. I did not find a correlation because out of the seven people who said anything about being Jewish, only three also talked about family.

From what I found in the Jewish religious and cultural learning texts, I anticipated more of an emphasis to be placed on an individual’s Jewish identity and Jewish values; however, the data showed that not to be the case. As found through my review of the literature procreation and marriage between Jewish people holds a strong importance among Jewish communities and it was surprising to find that such a low percentage of Internet dating users made any mention of their Jewish identity and/or Jewish values. The majority of my subjects (73%) illustrated a desire to have children; middle aged women were the exception. When users did make mention of their Jewishness, they made it to re-enforce that they are specifically looking for a Jewish mate. By looking at some of the profiles, I found that because some non-Jewish people (Goyim) have joined Jewish Internet dating sites users want to weed out the Goyim. An example of a reference for the purpose of deflecting non-Jewish people is, “I am only looking for a women who is Jewish so all others need not bother”. Another example was the following statement, “I would love to meet a nice Jewish girl”.

What I found to be most interesting were the descriptions of the subject’s ideal mate, references to romance, and the tendency for my subjects to describe themselves in absolute terms. The phrase used in subject’s self description that indicates an all encompassing personality trait is, “I am”. The stating/phrasing of eternal personality traits were made by 90% of my subjects and “I am” was used

one to eight times in each of those profiles. Some of the statements containing “I am” include; “I am sexy”, “I am independent”, “I am a night person”, and “I am a good listener”.

Every one of the 55% of users that described what their ideal mate would encompass gave an ambiguous description; meaning that the traits they specified are subjective/ open to interpretation. For example, “I dream of a women who is intelligent, beautiful”, “A women who is real”, “I am only interested in women that are fit”, and “I want a strong man”. Some of the traits stated that are relative include; nice, funny, intelligent, beautiful, genuine and wealthy. What I noticed most about those who made references about love and romance was that the word love was used in many different contexts. 85% of my subjects used the word love at least twice in their self descriptions. Some examples of statements that referenced romance are, “I am a hopeless romantic”, “I love deep passionate kisses”, “Where are you my prince?” and “I am looking for my soulmate!”

In terms of writing style, profiles for those in my “middle aged” category tended to sound more like a self advertisement; whereas, the profiles in my “young adult” category sounded conversational and/or essay like. On an interesting note; one of the subjects said that they are a professional matchmaker; “As a professional matchmaker, my life is devoted to finding love for others...and now I’m ready to make a match for myself”. I am interested to know how successful she has been with Internet dating.

Synthesis

I came into my research with Grounded Theory; that is to say that I approached my research without a prediction of what it was that I was going to find. My research question or rather my research inquiry was concerned with finding trends and patterns in self-presentation on Internet dating profiles. I conducted a content analysis and through analyzing my data found patterns that are applicable to Symbolic Interactionism and Post Modern Theory.

I reason that symbolic interactionist theory can serve as a baseline description for what individuals communicate on their profiles. Goffman said that, "Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain" (Appelrouth & Edles, 2007: 189) What I found in my research is that the "given way" my subjects expressed themselves were in the form of a self advertisement on an Internet dating profile. Even the profiles that had a more conversational tone to them, served to advertise self.

Individuals choose what they say on their profile based upon what meanings they want to convey to others. Their prior interaction with people is what is used when deciding how to get across who they think that are and what they want in someone else. For example; throughout my life I have needed to articulate my Jewish identity to others; with that experience already in hand, I know what symbols or words to use in order to convey that identity to someone; even if I cannot see them through the Internet. What is important for a me as the researcher to note is that the words my subjects choose to use in their profile are the symbols that the reader of their profile will interpret meaning from.

The word love was used by 85% of my subjects and in many different contexts. The meaning of the word love clearly holds many different interpretations. A few examples of how it was used are; "I love the idea of love", "I love to laugh", "I love to cook", "I love good entertainment" and "I love my family". The various meanings of love can be explained by Post Modern theory. The theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard discussed the decline of metanarratives or universal truths. What I found was that "Love" is not a grand narrative or universal truth; that it holds various meanings and is used in different ways. To say that you love to cook does not hold the same meaning as when you say that you love a person. With the emergence of computer-based technology knowledge can no longer be legitimized by metanarratives. What I found through the virtual tool, JDate, is that different people apply diverse

definitions to love. One reason as to why love holds different meanings, is that it is in the interest of capitalists to apply a given meaning to it for profit; “...knowledge is commercialized, subjected to the whims of the capitalist marketplace, easily fragmented, and often sold piecemeal” (Appelrouth & Edles, 2007: 430). Love is a concept that has been commercialized for profit; we can take Valentine’s Day as an example of how love is sold.

I found the use of the term, “I am” in my subject’s self descriptions to be the intriguing. There seems to a pressure to define ourselves in absolute terms. We state who we are with all encompassing eternal personality characteristics rather than in situational or aspirational terms. An example of one of my subjects not putting it in situational terminology is, “I am independent”. This statement is quite fascinating because it is impossible for us to be completely independent; I depend on my boss to give me my paycheck, the grocery store to have the food item I need, the mailman to deliver my mail, etc. It would be more accurate to state, “I strive to be independent” or to describe in what ways they reason they lack dependence on someone else.

If we look at Cooley’s looking glass self we could theorize that my subjects describe themselves in absolutes because they are creating their profile based upon one way communication; in other words, they must give information without any feedback or interaction from someone else. Cooley reasons that, “Each of us carries our conception of self as a form of baggage, and each of us continually updates a portrait of our situational self, reflecting how we feel we are doing in the eyes of others.” (Powers, 2004: 111) When creating a profile, we aren’t receiving any responses on how we are doing in the eyes of others in real time; therefore, we cannot update our situational self. If I stated that I was independent, I do not have the option of responding to the question of what I mean by that; because, I am not having a conversation with someone else as I describe myself. It is clear to me that the pressure placed on us by virtual communication techniques to describe ourselves in a given number of words, is a

reason why my subjects used absolutes; however, I am still curious as to why we would do that in face-to-face interaction as well. The stating of absolutes takes up less time and space when explaining who we want to be or think we are in a given situation; however I'm curious about the usage of it when sitting down and engaged in a real time conversation with someone else. The pressure to use, "I am" in person is still a mystery to me and I haven't found that symbolic interactionism can fully explain it.

An overall theme in my data findings is the use of ambiguous statements in each subject's profile. I reason that my Internet dating users utilize ambiguity as a method for expanding the number of people whom might be interested in them; for example, when someone states, "I want someone smart" they are not stating exactly what they consider smart to be. Intelligence is relative; thus, by not defining "smart" they are leaving room for a wide range of interpretations from many people. Another example is the statement, "I love good entertainment"; the person who wrote this could be thinking that they enjoy action movies but as the reader I can't know that for sure. The reader could be thinking that good entertainment consists of comedic films; however, the writer did not clearly define what good entertainment is and as a result someone may be interested in them because they do not see a direct difference in entertainment preference. Ambiguity seems to be a strategy used by Internet daters to increase the amount of interest from others in their profile.

Reflexive Statement

Overall I found that I enjoyed conducting the content analysis much more than I thought that I would, my findings were far more interesting than anticipated and if I were going to graduate school for sociology, I would be interested in expanding this study. I think that the pressure to define ourselves in absolute terms is still quite intriguing to me and I would love to explore the social consequences of that tendency.

I chose to research Internet-Facilitated Matchmaking (IFM) because I find the workings of the marriage market to be very interesting and I am personally skeptical of using the Internet for finding a romantic partner. I find that the extent to which people will sometimes go to make themselves appealing to a potential mate ridiculous. I understand that there are people who lack confidence in their physical appearance and personality characteristics; however, I have trouble understanding why people get plastic surgery for reasons that are purely to increase their outward attractiveness. I chose to study Internet dating because I was curious about whether or not I would see self-presentation extremes carry on through virtual space. I unfortunately did find that to be the case.

Despite my pessimism about using an Internet dating site; I found it quite easy for me to lay my bias aside during the data collection phase of my project. While analyzing my data I found myself feeling somewhat sad about the Internet dating community because it still seems disconnected and impersonal; however, my subject's hope in the method was refreshing. I must agree with some of the research about Face-to Face (FtF) versus Computer-Mediate relationships; I still reason that FtF relationships have a larger capacity for personal connection. I find that I can understand how IFM can be useful and perhaps a less empty method than say finding someone at a bar, which is a place where my age group largely uses to meet people; however, I still have no desire to use it in my own quest for a match.

Conclusion

	Age	Marital Status	Word Count	Looking for	Physical Info	Physical Attractiveness	Love/ Romance References	Uniqueness	Ideal	Jewish Identity
Women 25-35	27	One separated	213.4	No activity partner (except		2/5	3/5 Those who mention it...refer to love a lot (6-12	1/5	4/5 Words used to describe	2/5

				1), no friend			times)		are ambiguous	
Men 25-35	27	All Single	149.8	3 no marriage, children and 4 no activity partner, no friend		3/5	4/5 On average uses word less often, appeals to the "hopeless romantic" stereotype	0/5	2/5 No real pattern	2/5
Women 36-55	45	Two divorced	228.8	4 no children, no friend, no date		3/5	5/5	1/5	3/5 Looking for more a person to share life with	1/5
Men 36-55	45	Two divorced, one separated	170.4	No activity partner, date or friend		1/5 Was youngest in this age grouping	5/5	1/5	2/5 No real pattern	2/5
	27 & 45	Older more are divorced or separated	Women tend to write more, older men & women write more than younger	In general they aren't looking for a friend or activity partner	If anything is excluded it is weight and unexpectedly, that is rarely excluded	Older women are more likely to comment on their physical attractiveness.... younger men & women are more likely to comment on it in comparison	The use of the word "love" seems to be used more causally among younger ("I love this and that) whereas older use it in relationship context.	Not common for them to mention their uniqueness or individuality	They are all looking for someone who directly meshes with their interests	Interestingly some people find the need to mention on the Jewish dating site that they are Jewish and in fact looking for someone else who is

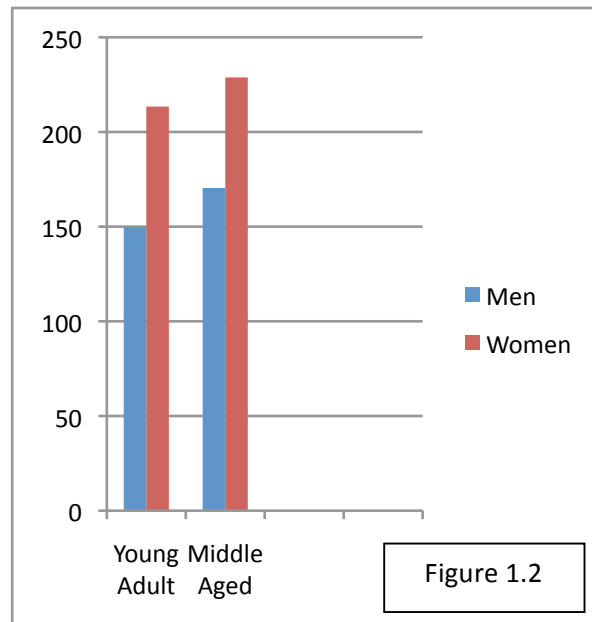
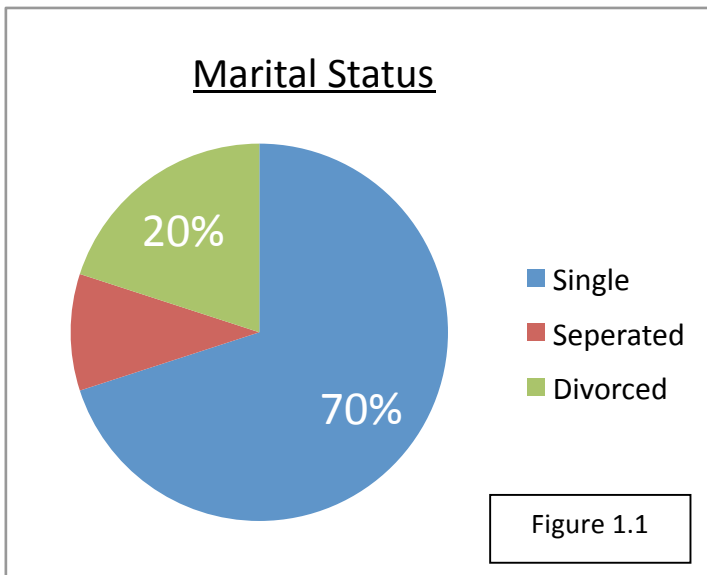
- Also looked at "I am" and clichés and stereotypes mentioned
- All information is very much on the surface...few mention occupation and not people mention their dislikes or negative aspects of themselves (to be expected)
- Ambiguous statements such as, "I love good entertainment", "Real isn't how we're made It's a thing that happens to you...Are you real too?", "I am easy going and funny", etc. Mentions of ideal are sometimes ambiguous, "she must be beautiful"
- Future things to look at....Socioeconomic indicators (i.e. gals, whole foods, etc.), additional profiles, interest based upon profile photo, etc.
- Missing from this summation is "I AM", family, & negative aspects of self.
- Quotes are on data spreadsheet

I originally thought that this study was going to show a particular significance to the Jewish community because of the importance placed on marrying within the culture; however I found that little emphasis was placed on Jewishness by my subjects. I found that if I took away

the knowledge that my subjects had posted on a Jewish Internet dating site, I could not tell from their profile that they were Jewish. I was fascinated, but not necessarily surprised, to find that there was not a universal understanding or meaning, of love and romance among my subjects. Although symbolic interactionist theory provides a clear explanation of how and why individuals may portray themselves in a given way through virtual communication; I remain curious about the pressure to describe ourselves using absolutes in face-to-face interaction.

The use of ambiguity for strategic purposes in expanding interest in each subjects profile was an overall theme throughout my data collection. Ambiguous statements made by my subjects made it very difficult for me to derive concise meaning out of their self descriptions; as a result, I am interested to know how successful that method is in creating interest from others. It is unfortunate that past studies have not focused on it; instead, they only praised the capability for anonymity in online communication. I found there to be many aspects of the Internet dating profiles worth exploring; however, the next direction I would say researchers should go is an analysis of success in the usage of Internet dating as a virtual matching tool.

Data Table



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Additional Resources Used Periodically:

- Online Yiddish Dictionary (www.yiddishdictionaryonline.com/)
- Torah.org (<http://www.torah.org/>)
- Rosten, L. *The New Joys of Yiddish*

