

A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PROFILE INFORMATION ON IFLIRT DATING SITE

Ifensor Egwuchukwu

Department of Languages, General Studies Division
Federal Polytechnic Oko

&

Dr. Bridget Ngozi Madu

Department of English, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University
Email: madubridget@gmail.com

&

Dr. Ikechukwu Asika

Department of English
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus
Email: asikaikechukwu@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper investigates the meaning-making potential of the combination of layout, image, and text used in the design of profile information of users on iFlirt dating site. The study is anchored on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and adopted a descriptive survey method to sample four profiles randomly selected from the dating site. The metafunctions of both Halliday's SFL and the visual grammar of Kress and Van Leeuwen were used to analyse the synchrony of layout, image, and text used in the profiles. The criterion for investigation was multimodal analysis of image/image properties and text/text properties. The analyses found that more positive attributes occurred in the images on each profile while less positive attributes were ascribed to the textual component. The study concludes that pictorial information was presented to attract friendship for the profile owners more than the verbal resources. The study recommends, among others, that profile account holders should be given fewer options of not responding to questions such as whether they smoke or not, because the reader loses the chance of building attraction each time the writer chooses not to respond.

Keywords: Dating sites, Online dating, Multimodal discourse analysis, Systemic functional linguistics

Introduction

Online dating applications, popularly known as dating apps, were developed to form a community of internet citizens ('netizens') who are interested in finding love and building relationships. This followed a match-making service first invented by Jeff Tarr and Vaughan Morrill at Harvard University where students were asked to submit questionnaires through which their interests were matched with those of potential friends. Kiss.com (1994) and Match.com (1995) are credited to be the earliest established modern dating websites. From this humble beginning, online dating websites have grown so much that 'there are now over 1,500 dating apps or websites looking to draw single men and women to their product, and to match them with one another' (Lin, n. d.,n.p.).

Online dating is firmly established as popular culture as it competes favourably with traditional modes of match-making and courtship between men and women. Traditionally, match-making is conducted through friends and families or through meetings in the neighbourhood and religious/educational/social groups. In the past, going on blind dates or with someone you met online was considered irrational. Going on a date with someone you met online is no longer viewed as abnormal and reckless behaviour. Many marriages are also contracted among couples and partners who met online. Shashkevich (2019), in reference to Rosenfeld (2018) stated that online dating has become the preferred means of match-making, rather than the traditional meeting through friends/family. In an interview for Stanford News, Rosenfeld explained that meeting a significant other online has replaced meeting through friends. People trust the new dating technology more and more, and the stigma of meeting online seems to have worn off. She

expressed surprise at how much online dating has displaced the help of friends in meeting a romantic partner. Our previous thinking was that the role of friends in dating would never be displaced. But it seems like online dating is displacing it. That's an important development in people's relationship with technology.

Rosenfeld's opinion above underscores the growing popularity of online dating across the world and this paper seeks to investigate how online daters are able to both portray attractive personalities of themselves as well as determine and select personalities they admire from the large pool of profile images on dating websites. This is especially important because online dating profiles do not present elaborate information on users, and so, persons seeking to hook up must combine verbal and visual elements on the profile to determine attractiveness.

The Problem

In recent times, dating sites apparently have displaced the help of friends/families in finding romantic partners. Online dating sites don't discriminate against unconventional sexual orientations, rather they have provided an efficient avenue for individuals seeking many different kinds of companionship. People of all sexual persuasions are encouraged to join these sites and find their soul mates in both 'hook-ups' and more meaningful dating. Previous studies on online dating focused mainly on its sociology and on the analysis of the discourse structures that emerge from online dating. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is a dearth of studies focused on the multimodal discourse analysis of profiles on iFlirt dating site, and how users both present their personal profiles as well as determine attractiveness of other users through their profile data. The present research seeks to fill this gap in the literature of language in general.

The research aims at analysing the profile information of users on iFlirt dating site using multimodal discourse analysis. Its objectives include:

- i. To determine how verbal resources are used in the profiles
- ii. To determine how visual resources are used in the profiles
- iii. To determine how verbal and visual resources are combined to convey information about the profile users.

This study contributes a new perspective to the body of knowledge on the interface of language (English), online relationship and communication. It provides a framework of evaluation of social media content in relation to companionship, building online community and English studies. Its specific focus on online dating profiles is also significant because it applies theory to the explication of real-life issues of companionship, communication and society. Results from the study will expose online daters more on the importance of both verbal and visual resources in attracting partners to themselves. The present study will also serve as a reference material to other researchers.

The study focuses on how verbal and visual resources are utilized in representing information about individual account holders on dating sites with a focus on a specific site, iFlirt. It covered samples of profile information purposively sampled from four online dating profiles of heterosexual individuals. The study discusses multimodal discourse analysis of profile information available to the public on the selected dating site.

Research Questions

The key research questions this paper addressed are:

- i. Are there verbal resources that convey information on the user profiles?
- ii. Are there visual resources that convey information on the user profiles?
- iii. Do verbal and visual resources combine to convey information about the profile users?

Conceptual Review

Online Dating Sites are computer mediated match-making applications. Online dating websites developed out of the advances in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the Internet in the 1960s and 1970s, primarily in the US and parts of Northern Europe (Orchard, 2019). Also known as internet dating, online dating is a network that enables account holders on a platform to connect with other account holders for relationships. Online dating, according to Elliott (2010), is one of the popular means through which people meet and may be ranked only third in popularity behind meeting in work or school and introductions through family members or friends. Traditional courtship can therefore be said to have changed significantly by the increased courtship activities on online dating sites.

On these sites, photographs and profile images are displayed and members are encouraged to connect with others in the network. Examples of online dating sites include: iFlirt, Friendite, AGA, GAYADAR, Sweet Meet, Sexy Naija, Tinder, Naijaplanet, HER, and Meet Nigerians. Nagarajan and Hearst (2009) stated that self-expression tends towards attempting homophily in online dating profiles. To them, self-expression which is synonymous with self-presentation or advertisement aims at attracting potential dating partners. Recent technological innovations according to Rosen, Cheever, Cummings & Felt (2008), have produced a sharp increase in the number of people who use online dating websites, which have provided an efficient avenue for individuals seeking many different kinds of companionship. Through this means, the Internet has opened a new avenue for romantic interaction.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal discourse analysis, according to Xu (2018), is a new and rapidly developing research hot spot in discourse analysis field. It has become popular in the Western world since 1990s. Since then, discourse analysis has laid emphasis on linguistic sign, the mono-modality. In the recent times discourse analysis, as stated by Xu, has changed its field from static to dynamic multimodal discourse analysis by including sound, language, image and action. Multimodal discourse analysis refers to using multiple modes such as text, image, sound and colour to make meaning (Kress, 2010). It is a method of discursive analysis that looks at not just how individual modes communicate, but how they interact with one another to create semiotic meaning. Multimodal discourse analysis, an emerging area in discourse studies, is proposed as a valuable contribution to the current study and to the field of language in general.

Empirical Review

Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn, and Hearst (2008) conducted a study on the online profile information of 50 men and women to determine the factors of attraction of the opposite sexes to each other. They allowed participants to either view partial information (such as profile pictures, free text portion, attributes, etc.) or complete information of an account holder and then determine how attractive they consider them to be. The participants were made to rate the attractiveness of their opposite sex only. The rating components were attractiveness, trustworthiness, femininity, and masculinity. The study found that participants chose the profile photographs as the strongest predictor of attractiveness and that the free-text portion also played significant roles in overall attractiveness. The female participants rated men's photos and free-text components as more attractive when they were perceived as more feminine. In the researcher's view, this raises interesting questions of the expected degree of femininity in view of abundant standard assumptions and researches documenting the differences between male and female use of language (Reik, 1954; Labov, 1966; Levine & Crockett, 1966; Trudgill, 1972; Kramer, 1974, Ahaotu, 2018). Interestingly, the male participants in the study considered masculinity in females as a negative predictor of attractiveness. This study relates to the present study because it equally sees profile photos and free-text as important predictors of attractiveness. One difference in the two studies is that the present study is not specific on any sex but the reviewed study is on the opposite sex.

Nagarajan and Hearst (2009) conducted a study on self-presentation on online dating systems by performing a factor analysis on the text portions of online profiles. The findings they made include a similarity in the overall factor structures between male and female profiles, including use of tentative words by men. They also found contrasts between sexes in a cluster analysis of the profiles using their

factor scores and similarities in frequent words used by the gender groups. The study identified patterns of similarities in lexical choice between male and female profiles on dating sites. The reviewed study just as the present study looked at how online daters present themselves in their profiles, but the studies differ in their method of analysis. While the former used factor analysis the later used multimodal discourse analysis, thus the need for the present study.

Elliot's (2010) study sought to determine how to predict someone's true identity through linguistic norms and cues in online personal profile information/advertisements. The study created an online quiz-like survey using Craigslist to assess the similarities and differences between genders and sexualities in online personal postings of participants. The study concluded that people are able to predict the sexual orientation and gender of a writer based on linguistic cues gathered from their postings. Participants were able to determine whether someone is heterosexual or bisexual by analysing linguistic cues from their posts. This finding is similar to popular findings of other researches that submitted that gender is discernible in the linguistic analyses of interlocutors, including fictional characters (Trudgill, 1972, Oha, 1996).

Fullick (2013), investigated gendering the self in online dating discourse. He used discourse analysis to explore the use of language in the construction of gendered identities in twenty online profiles. Findings from the study showed that though online dating profiles were designed to attract romantic partners, there were very few explicit or direct references to sexuality. The study concluded that dating profiles are not trivial texts, rather they are also part of a reflexive process of identity creation and formation. Fullick's study and the present study are related in the sense that both acknowledged that online daters use their profiles to attract partners. One of the differences in the two studies lies in the analysis of data. The present study used multimodal discourse analysis while the reviewed study used the normal discourse analysis.

Ariely, Hitsch and Hortacsu (2004), carried out a study on 'What makes you click: An empirical analysis of online dating'. The data for the study was collected from thirty thousand users on Tinder dating site. The study investigated different behavioural models that allow browsing and e-mailing of site users in a revealed preference network. Result from the study revealed that women's choices depend strongly on the income and education of men while those of men depend more on physical appearance of women as shown in their profile pictures. The above study is related to the present study because both considered profile of users as contributing to the attraction of users. The present study, on the other hand, differs from the reviewed study in their method of analysis. While the present study used multimodal discourse analysis, the later used empirical analysis. The present study collected its data from iFlirt dating site while the reviewed study collected its own from Tinder dating site. From the studies reviewed so far, none has looked at the multimodal discourse analysis of profile information on iFlirt dating site which is the main focus of the present study.

The Theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics

This paper is based on M. A. K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach to the study of language (Halliday, 1978, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004/2014). The Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory accounts for the functions that language performs to communicate meaning among language users. The Systemic Functional theory stipulated that language is a systemic resource for human communication in diverse contexts. Halliday (1985) has noted that language developed in response to the communicative needs of human societies: which contexts of situation and culture determine how the language is used. Indeed, the different human languages represent different linguistic choices made by each linguistic group from the general human capacity to use language. This view corroborates an earlier proposition by Chomsky, who had theorized in the 1950's that all normal humans are capable of using language because they are naturally endowed with a capacity to activate language acquisition in a linguistic community and he described the capacity as Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Cultures and social backgrounds play significant roles in the choices. As a meaning based theory

of communication that analyzes how language users communicate meaning, SFL studies language with reference to its functions in the society.

Halliday (1985) explained the functions of language in three categories of generalized function/metafunction and these are:

- i. Interpersonal metafunction
- ii. Ideational metafunction
- iii. Textual metafunction.

The interpersonal metafunction refers to the grammatical resources that determine social roles in communication. It explains the social relationship and the interaction between participants in discourse. The ideational metafunction accounts for how speakers express their experience of the external world or real-life consciousness. In other words, the textual metafunction synthesizes the interpersonal and the ideational metafunctions to create texts. Such texts occur in a context of situation and utilizes sociolinguistic factors for interpretation. In this paper, the SFL theory and Kress and Van Leeuwen’s visual grammar provided the framework and tool of analysis for the profile information of the selected users on iFlirt dating site.

Methodology

The study is a descriptive survey, which blended a descriptive desk review and an analytical SFL approach. First, the study sourced for academic publications on the subject and identified both online and offline resources that address the topic in line with Dr Johnson’s (1775) popular view that knowing the source of information is a part of academic knowledge (cited in Altick, 1963). The study further selected and analysed four sample profiles to determine the profile information of users on iFlirt dating site. The study collated data through a purposive sampling of four online profiles from iFlirt, a free online dating site. All four samples profiles chosen for the study are heterosexual. Only profile information available to the public was analyzed to arrive at the study findings. The data were analyzed with a combination of Halliday’s SFL (Halliday, 1978, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004/2014) for the analysis of verbal meaning-making resources and Kress and VanLeeuwen’s visual grammar (2006) for the analysis of non-verbal resources. Both image and text used in the profiles were analyzed to determine whether they aided or hampered meaning-making.

Result

Raw Profile Information collated from iFlirt.com

The following four sets of data were chosen to represent the raw data obtained from the sampled four profiles used in the study. Pictures are removed for anonymity.

<p>Data Set 1. Name: Victoria (female) 48 years old from Ilorin Looking for: Men Interested in: Flirts Relationship status: No Answer Height: 173 cm Body: Normal Kids: Two Kids Smoker: No Answer Alcohol: Sometimes Education: Apprenticeship Profession: No Answer Language: English</p>	<p>Data Set 2 Name: Bintou (female) 35 years old from Ilorin Looking for: Men Interested in: Chats Relationship status: Single Height: 165 cm Body: Normal Kids: One Kid Smoker: No Answer Alcohol: Never Education: Secondary school Profession: No Answer Language: English</p>
<p>Data Set 3 Name: Akia (female) 44 years old from Ilorin</p>	<p>Data Set 4. Name: Patrick (male) 32 years old from Awka, Anambra state</p>

Looking for: Men Interested in: Dates Relationship status: Single Height: 155 cm Body: Normal Kids: More than Three Kids Smoker: No Answer Alcohol: Sometimes Education: Apprenticeship Profession: No Answer Language: English	Looking for: Women Interested in: Dates Relationship status: No answer Height: 185 cm Body: Muscular Kids: No answer Smoker: No Answer Alcohol: Sometimes Education: Apprenticeship Profession: No Answer Language: English
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Data Set Number	Image Properties	Image	Text Properties	Text
1	+foregrounding +large +full colour +alluring pose +sleeveless top +lateral headshot	Victoria (female)	-foregrounding -large -full colour -sentence +optional answers	48 years old from Ilorin Looking for: Men Interested in: Flirts Relationship status: No Answer Height: 173 cm Body: Normal Kids: Two Kids Smoker: No Answer Alcohol: Sometimes Education: Apprenticeship Profession: No Answer Language: English
2	+foregrounding +large +full colour +headshot zoom +make-up	Bintou (female)	-foregrounding -large -full colour -sentence +optional	35 years old from Ilorin Facts Looking for: Men Interested in: Chats Relationship status: Single Height: 165 cm Body: Normal Kids: One Kid Smoker: No Answer Alcohol: Never Education: Secondary school Profession: No Answer Language: English
3	+foregrounding +large +calm romantic background +full colour +comfy pose	Akia (female)	-foregrounding -large -full colour -sentence +optional	44 years old from Ilorin Looking for: Men Interested in: Dates Relationship status: Single

	+			Height: 155 cm Body: Normal Kids: More than Three Kids Smoker: No Answer Alcohol: Sometimes Education: Apprenticeship Profession: No Answer Language: English
4	+foregrounding +large +full colour +frontal headshot +background	Patrick (Male)	-foregrounding -large -full colour -sentence +optional	32 years old from Awka, Anambra state Looking for: Women Interested in: Dates Relationship status: No answer Height: 185 cm Body: Muscular Kids: No answer Smoker: No Answer Alcohol: Sometimes Education: Apprenticeship Profession: No Answer Language: English

Data analysis: Data set 1-4

The Following four sets of data were sampled out of the population of iFlirt profiles and were numbered as Data Sets 1-4. The samples were added as appendix at the end of the work while the relevant data are presented and analyzed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Analysis of profile information of four iFlirt dating site users

Table 1 above presents findings on profile information of daters on iFlirt dating site. The data clearly indicated the verbal resources shown as text properties and visual resources shown as image properties. The data clearly indicated the presence of visual resources of the daters such as; their size of photo, facial appearance, make-up, posture, background, dressing and so on.

The verbal resources represented as text properties include interests, relationship status, height, body, kids, education, profession, language and so on. Based on the visual and verbal properties of selected daters, it was found that;

- (i) Self representation through pictures is more correlated with one's relational success which is the assumed goal of online dating.
- (ii) The layout and navigation structure particularly suggest that pictorial information is favoured more than the verbal by placing the former on predominant positions in the profile.
- (iii) Among the eleven fields of verbal information, the fields that exposed one's physical attributes were more preferred.
- (iv) The daters showed more emphasis on their profile pictures by appearing romantic, alluring and attractive on the pictures than the verbal information represented in few sentences.

These findings indicate that verbal and visual resources combine to convey meaningful information about the users' profiles in conformity with Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. The following are further analysis and discussion on the above findings.

Discussion

The data presented and analyzed above produced evidence of two major types of resources that freely occurred in the profiles. These are verbal and visual elements that were utilized in conveying meaning in the profiles. These have been already analyzed in binaries of either presence or absence of identified properties; discussions on which are as follows:

Image properties

All four selected profile images are full-colour photographs of the profile owner which are foregrounded for attention. The images appear first, are larger than the profile verbal text, and attract more attention through their colour display in contrast with the black verbal text. A first glance on each profile would be drawn to the colourful image and may hover there longer if it is pleasing to the reader; whose decision to contact the user would greatly depend on the impression formed by the picture because sexual appeal is primarily a physical attraction. Three of the images are zoomed-in, frontal, and semi-frontal headshots that clearly announce the facial comeliness of the profile owners. These pictures may have been carefully chosen or taken to impress potential admirers and therefore may be considered as flirtatious.

The image of Data Set 1 presents a middle-aged woman smiling confidently in an alluring semi-frontal headshot to displays part of her shoulders and upper chest. She looks directly into the camera and her sleeveless blouse gives the hint of a well-nourished chocolate-brown skin. Data Set 2 presents a young woman whose uncommon beauty is displayed in a frontal zoomed-in headshot. In the picture, she looks confidently at the camera; which captured her high cheek bones, full sensuous lips, and beautiful black eyes. Her nose is well-formed and her overall beauty is enhanced by a soft-themed make-up on her youthful beautiful face. Data Set 3 presents another middle-aged woman in a comfortable sitting position on a white sofa with purple and coffee throw pillows beside her. Two sides of the wall of the room are exposed in the background; the side on the right hand side of the image is painted white with horizontal coffee patterns while the side on the left hand side of the image is painted purple with a horizontal coffee pattern on the lower part. Of all four photographs in the sample profiles, hers is the only non-zoomed-in head shot as her profile image displays her body except her ankle and feet. She is dressed in blue jeans trousers and a black T-shirt. The woman's right leg is crossed over her left leg, her two hands rested casually on her laps, and she smiles confidently. Her comfortable posture and the beautiful combination of colours in her clean room heightens the romantic attraction of the image. Data Set 4 presents the only male profile user in the study. It is a frontal headshot of an apparently middle-aged man with a stub of beards. The photograph was taken inside a car and the interior of the car forms a background for the man's image. He wore a black T-Shirt and looks ahead with an expressionless face; which is remarkably handsome.

The foregoing analysis indicates that profile owners in the study carefully and deliberately present admirable images of themselves to attract potential friends on iFlirt. This view corroborates Kress and Van Leeuwen's concept of the role of visual grammar and Halliday's concept of ideational metafunction of language. The images conveyed non-verbal intentions of the users to advertise an attractive image of themselves and use it to connect to other people in the real world. The analysis is also in line with the studies of Fiore, Taylor, Mendelsohn and Hearst, as well as that of Fullick which saw profile photos as a strong predator of attractiveness.

Text and textual properties

All four analyzed data sets of the profile owners are placed below the foregrounded profiles images. The verbal texts are all of black colour in contrast with the full colour of the profile images. Each profile verbal text comprised of two parts:

1. Implied questions through which iFlirt elicited profile information of the profile owners. These include text such as: interested in, relationship status, height, body, kids, smoker, alcohol, education, profession, and language.
2. User responses to the questions.

iFlirt.com restricts the verbal text through its structured question types while the user generates relevant responses to the questions. There are thirteen textual fields of implied questions and the same number of responses on each profile. Some of the questions are optional as users chose no answer as their responses.

The verbal text of Data Set 1 responded to ten out of the thirteen questions. The profile owner chose 'No Answer' for fields of 'relationship status', 'smoker', and 'profession'. The verbal text of Data Set 2 and Data Set 3 each responded to eleven out of the thirteen questions. The profile owners chose 'No Answer' for the same fields of 'smoker', and 'profession'. In Data Set 4, the profile owner responded to nine out of the thirteen questions. He chose 'No Answer' for the same fields of 'relationship status', 'Kids', 'smoker', and 'profession'.

The above analysis indicates that verbal text contributed to presentations of the users' profiles in the study. However, the study noted that all questions and their responses were provided in short phrases. No sentences were involved in either the question generated by iFlirt or the answers generated by the users. This enabled the users to reserve aspects of their personal profile that they do not wish to share with the public. This view corroborates Halliday's concept of interpersonal and textual metafunctions of language. The above analysis also conforms to that of Nagarajan and Hearst. The verbal clues enabled the profile owners to communicate their intentions of attracting friends to themselves and define the role they would play in the relationship.

Conclusion

The internet has provided new arena for social interaction and romantic relationships. Online daters present themselves through their profile information. Both linguistic and non-linguistic elements contributed to how meaning was shaped in the profiles. For instance, visual elements such as text layout, use of colour, images, etc. contributed to the presentation of each profile owner. This study exploited multimodal discourse analysis, an emerging area of discourse studies, as a basis for the investigation of the combination of verbal and non-verbal resources in dating site profiles. Overall, the study found that both visual and verbal resources were used by all sample profiles to present users, but that visual resources tended to contribute more significantly to the presentation. The study concluded that the consistent use of visual and verbal resources indicated a conscious pattern of the presentation of profile owners on the dating sites.

Recommendations

In view of the foregoing findings and conclusion, the researchers make the following recommendations:

- i. Online daters should enhance their profile images more with regards to make-up, posture, size of the photo, background and so on, so as to attract more partners.
- ii. Users of dating sites should discreetly evaluate information on dating site profiles because the verbal texts are sketchy and often inadequate to determine attractiveness of the profile user.
- iii. Profile account holders should be given fewer options of not responding to questions such as whether they smoke or not because the reader loses the chance of building attraction each time the writer chooses not to respond.

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