



University of Belgrade

# Metaphor and Gender/Sexual Identity in Digital Dating Profiles

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## INTRODUCTION: LOVE GONE DIGITAL

“Two major transitions in human mating in the last four million years” (Instraight 2019): agricultural revolution w. marriage as cultural contract, the rise of the internet w. paths of courting unprecedented in evolution

Web dating sites and mobile apps, a unique window into the shifting representations of desire



The Tinder dating app has 50 million users; 5 billion swipes daily; 1 in 6 marriages in the UK estimated to start through online dating (BRI, 2018)

### Shifting dynamics of gender/sexual identity?

- more fluid ideas of masculinity/femininity?
- hailed as less rigid spaces for construction of sexual subjectivities (e.g. Batiste 2013)

### The language of desire: Metaphor

- courting imaginary is **highly metaphorical!**
- metaphor: abstract → more concrete

“the right woman is like the right salad dressing”

“ideally, you are a cuddly seal”

- patterns of **conceptualization** and selective **representation**, unexplored to date

## THE STUDY

### Motivation

- link approaches to metaphor in discourse and socioling. approaches to gender and sexuality
- gain insights into representations of identity and desire in online dating spaces

### Focus

- **direct metaphor** (DM), 'A is (like) B'
- self and desired-other presentation

### Data

- 400 Tinder profiles, UK (200 F, 200 M)
- “women seeking men”, “men seeking women”

### Method

- corpus-assisted discourse analysis
- MIPVU (Steen 2010) metaphor identification

## FINDINGS: DIRECT METAPHOR USE

DM an important profile tool (N=104): creative, playful portrayal of self and other

I'm like **L'Oreal**... I'm worth it :)

You can't be everyone's **cup of tea**, otherwise you'd be a **mug**

### Corrective framing 'A is like B not C'

If you are a **house pup** rather than a **street bitch**, I hope you swipe right

• **corrective framing**, major communicative function of DM in discourse

Looking for a woman who actually has personality and doesn't take hours to get ready. More **Lara Croft** than **Barbie**.

• instrumental in the profiles, no longer “straightforward declarations of what one is and wants” – what one is *not* / *not* looking for

## FINDINGS: DIRECT METAPHOR AND GENDER PRESENTATION

### Framing via terms for women, not men (in self/other, male/female descriptions)

- lexical items: *woman* (N=23), *girl* (N=9), *man* (N=1), *guy* (N=2)

*woman/girl* in adopted frames

I'm a real normal girl, not a **photo machine** that seems to be a thing here

*woman/girl* in rejected frames

I am not all **girl girl**, I swear and do kick boxing xD but you should still be a **pillar** to lean on not a **woman** xD

In search of a companion for life [...], a woman, not a new age **grizzly**

I am a **fighter**, a romantic, won't be turned **woman** or a **queer potato** just because[...]

### Metaphorical collocations: existing and challenged conceptualizations

Metaphorical collocates for WOMAN		
COLL	MetFrame	No.
doll	Neg.	4
angel	Neg.	4
barbie	Neg.	3
queer	Neg.	2
kitten	Neg.	2
pup	Affirm./Neg.	2
bitch	Neg.	2
devil	Affirm.	2
whore	Neg.	2
Stella	Affirm.	1
potato	Neg.	1
dirty	Affirm.	1
fighter	Affirm.	1
Fiona	Affirm.	1
Shrek	Affirm.	1

Framing via domains of TOY DOLL, ANIMAL, ANGEL-DEVIL, DRINK, FOOD, CLEANLINESS, SEX WORKER, FICTIONAL CHARACTER

• self and desired other negotiated in relation to imagined (rejected) femininities

• being 'a man' absent as a metaphor

• **metaphorical collocations** and frames reveal the (re-)constructed associations

## CONCLUSIONS

### Metaphor and Tinder findings

- Creative negotiations of the desirable and the appropriate, within a ‘hot or not’, ‘swipe left or swipe right’ context
- Existing associations, revolving around **strength**, **romance**, **sexuality**, and **morality/purity**, reworked in corrective frames
- At the same time perpetuating stereotypes (of femininity) *and* challenging existing representations by upholding a multiplicity of femininities and masculinities

### Moving on

- We should be careful not to romanticize virtual communities as some uniform vacuum spaces freed from normative discourses
- Metaphor offers a unique window into the language of desire, as well as into the ways that the most intimate discourses intersect with culture, ideology, and power.

## References

- Batiste, D. (2013). Zero feet away. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 22(2), 111-132.  
 Instraight, P. (2019) Portraying masculinity. *Miss Man? Language Gendered Bodies*, 62.  
 Steen, G. (2010). *A method for linguistic metaphor identification*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.