Happily Ever After? The Persuasion Effects of eHarmony.com

A conservatively dressed man sporting a jacket and tie with a full head of white hair smiles pleasantly and warmly, looking as if he knows the "secret". The secret to what? The secret to "compatibility matching". The man, Dr. Neil Clark Warren, is the founder of eharmony.com. eHarmony is touted by Dr. Warren as the fulfillment of every single matrimonially-minded adult's dream. With a few well-chosen clicks a lonely heart can complete a free $40 personality profile and be on their way to finding their "soul mate". Such is the promise offered by eharmony.com: love, friendship, or even a compatible marriage partner. eHarmony states there are 'right reasons for falling in love' [although these reasons are not disclosed – they are sold on another site offered by Dr. Warren] (eHarmony). eHarmony’s claim to be a successful online dating service provides pictures of smiling couples with dates of engagements and nuptial bliss listed on the screen beneath their lovingly poised entwined bodies. By appealing to carefully chosen symbolism aimed at a specific targeted audience and the well-placed use of form, nonverbal elements, and language, eHarmony offers the persuasion of the fulfillment of that all-American dream of meeting one true love and living happily ever after.

Mary Rose Williams and Martha D. Cooper offer the definition of symbolic persuasion as "the process by which we become motivated to act or believe in a particular way through our communication with others, [as] we interpret our world and respond to it symbolically" (108). This process of persuasion as audience-centered is tied to the concept of identification, defined by Williams and Cooper as "the means by which humans influence others" (108). Clearly,
eHarmony relies on the persuasive influence of audience identification to promote the coupling of single individuals yearning for love, friendship, and possible marriage.

Who is the projected target audience of eHarmony? Patti Valkenburg and Peter Jochen offer a demographic of online users with the highest concentration between the ages "18 to 24 years," and a low concentration of users over 55 years of age (9) with the primary audience age to be "between [the ages of] 35 and 44 years old" (5). In addition to these ranges, ProfileHelper.com states the targeted audience "groups range everywhere from 18 all the way up to 87" with confirmation of the primary audience range of 35 to 55 years of age. Valkenburg and Jochen note studies indicating more men than women frequent online sites and that most of these men are single. In viewing picture profiles on eHarmony, one can easily be led to believe that the target audience of this particular site caters to the middle-to-upper class white ethnicity, with white couples outnumbering minority matches twenty-to-one. Additional demographics required by eHarmony as noted by aLoveLinkPlus include sexual proclivity [you must be heterosexual], over the age of 21, and a non-marital status of either single, or divorced.

Besides demographics, eHarmony targets their audience goals of identification, which Burke explains as "result[ing] from [a] shared understanding of the form of symbolic action" (Williams and Cooper 182). On eHarmony, the "psychology of form" – the Compatible Matching System™ is a free personality profile that can be achieved by answering 400+ questions. These questions rely on answers based on preferences, values, interests, mutual goals, and faith-based beliefs deemed pertinent to finding a "soul mate". Next, eHarmony shapes the inputted data into a recognizable profile that resembles the desired potential match. In using this form of audience identification, eHarmony works to achieve a concept noted by Williams and Cooper as closure. This form of audience identification works to "make sense of [the] environment (both real and symbolic) by finding a coherent message" which Burke...
clarifies as "the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite" (Williams and Cooper 185). The use of the personality profile requires the user to believe that a process of scientific evaluation is used to perfect their quest for their desired future match. As personality profile questions are answered, the level of anticipation begins to rise within the user, culminated by the final pairing with other searching singles who have also labored through the necessary processes to provide their desired expectations.

In discussing closure expectations, Williams’ and Cooper turn to a list compiled by Richard Gregg, a rhetorical theorist (185). Gregg notes three types of expectations that complete this process. First, the use of association patterns that recognizes similarities arising "from two or more [related] phenomena" (185). Second, the use of classification to allow an "understand[ing] [of] something as part of a group or class” (185). Finally, there is the use of abstraction that "occurs as result of the classification so that we can symbolize about the group or class without imaging particular instances" (185). Each of these expectation types are built upon by the use of the completed questionnaire and the type of individual one can imagine responding to their search. Through this use of expectations and identification, the perspective of self-persuasion has occurred.

In analyzing the perspective of self-persuasion on eHarmony's targeted audience, three of five important Symbolist perspective characteristics are used. First, eHarmony's persuasion of the love-seeking user is intentional; their goal is to provide a method to secure love and belonging. Second, their message is intended; eHarmony comes right out and states that their goal is to provide their user with an "experience of a lifetime of love". Third, their use of persuasion emphasizes both "the content of the messages [and] also their form" (Williams and Cooper 114). eHarmony's site is laid out to lead the user by words, tabs, and pictures through the process of acquiring their desired goal, gained by their actions of completing
questionnaires, providing essays and attaching attractive pictures of themselves. In participating in these guided steps, the user serves as his or her own persuasive power.

In guiding the user towards his or her goal, eHarmony's website is well-laid out. The site uses specific tabs to offer the user the opportunity to provide and gain more information, both on him or herself and his or her potential match. Informational tabs contain the substance of the site, "the presentation of and actual arguments or informational content" that eHarmony uses to persuade the user that their site is exactly what the lonely heart has been seeking (Williams and Cooper 181). “Form”, according to Williams and Cooper, is "a message's internal quality – its essence, the intangible, psychological meanings an individual assigns to it" (181). Tabs placed in syllogistic progression take the user from one level of information to the next. Additionally, eHarmony uses the form of qualitative progression, validating the user's search for happiness and belonging with each example of happily matched couples and their shared testimonies. A final category, as noted by Burke, is the use of the conventional form (Williams and Cooper 187). This form is announced by offering the tab entitled, "success stories" that show couples either matched or married; the final goal perceived for those using this site.

Gary C. Woodward and Robert E. Denton further note the use of psychology of form in persuasive ads such as the online marketing techniques of eHarmony's use of appeal to the single person. Woodward and Denton note a "…general orientation …that plays on individual strengths, weaknesses, hopes, and fears" (295). In advertising to provide "expert guidance,” eHarmony relates to the individual's hope that is based on "[the] deep and important ways that truly matter in a relationship" (Clickfire). Their product, that of satisfying intimate relationship needs and desires, tied together with eHarmony’s service of compatibility matching, completes the link of connecting "the existing beliefs, ideas, goals and desires of the consumer” which
Woodward and Denton note are essential for the appeal of the psychological form of persuasion (295).

In addition to psychological forms of persuasion, eHarmony uses well-placed nonverbals to support their goals. While few nonverbals are used on eHarmony, those employed speak volumes. Upon entering eHarmony's site, one is greeted by nonverbal elements meant to draw and hold the audience's attention. eHarmony relies heavily upon the use of nonverbals as emblems, which include body movement, noted by Williams and Denton, having "a shared meaning throughout a culture" (159). Happy couples greet the online user, flashing dazzling smiles, bodies pressed close together in affectionate and loving poses. These carefully placed images dominate the upper right corner of the screen, promoting a constructed synthetic reality easily identified by the viewer. Isolation, according, to Woodward and Denton, is a common advertising motive (311). While smiling couples do not directly promote isolation, they do promote the resolution of this basic human longing, "to be liked and accepted…a powerful appeal" (Woodward and Denton 311). eHarmony definitely gives the user the persuasive message that their hopes of being part of a couple can be fulfilled by following their "expert guidance" which is based on many years of scientific research [although this research is not made available through the site.] Additionally, eHarmony 'sells' its product, love, as "individuals …accept…the norms in the message based on their values and experience" (Woodward and Denton 311). Other norms played upon by eHarmony are based on spiritual beliefs which are never directly stated on the site but left to the personal interpretation of the user.

Although the use of nonverbals is limited on eHarmony's site, mostly to that of couples posed lovingly, eHarmony also uses nonverbals to establish a sense of trust and reputability. This sense is accomplished by the use of several icons defined as "nonverbal symbols that
evoke powerful motives and interests” (Williams and Cooper 160). While most icons tend to be "religious or ideological [in] nature,” those used by eHarmony are meant to promote a sense of trust to the user (Williams and Cooper 160). These icons are located at the lower left-hand corner of the screen and announce to the viewer that their site can be trusted, their information given securely. Just in case there is any doubt in the user's mind as to the safety of the use of eHarmony's site, these icons include the words, "trust, reliability, private, and secure.” This helps to allay any doubt in the user's mind that their information or financial investment is at risk. With these icons clearly displayed on their site, eHarmony convinces the user they have nothing to fear and their site can be used with complete confidence and trust.

Other nonverbal elements of eHarmony rely upon the user's interpretation of other common cultural factors based on nonverbal behaviors. Nonverbal behaviors on eHarmony include the use of kinesics, which "include facial expression, body movements, gestures and eye movements" (Williams and Cooper 164). eHarmony achieves the use of kinesics by portraying smiling faced-bright eyed couples dressed in wedding attire or casual clothing, holding hands or with arms placed around one another. Another form of nonverbal behavior seen in this section of the site is the use of proxemics, used by the careful placement of space and distance between the couples who are shown as sitting or standing close together (Williams and Cooper 164). Couples are shown snuggling or cuddling one another to give the viewer the sense that if they use this site, their lonely days and nights will be filled with the glow of human companionship and warmth.

While limited nonverbals convey specific meaning on eHarmony’s site, the use of language is clearly their most powerful form of persuasion. As Williams and Cooper note, “language is a tool” and one that eHarmony uses to their greatest advantage (Williams and Cooper 130). eHarmony has carefully constructed their site in anticipation of the many
questions a user might ask while engaged in process of finding their match. These questions can be found under section tabs at the top of the site. Additionally, eHarmony provides a help page to answer first time and continuing users frequently asked questions. This help page also contains information on the physical location and company contact of eHarmony. In agreement with Williams and Cooper’s view that the “primary focus” of language is its strategic use, eHarmony utilizes their selection of words and implied meanings to their fullest potential (130).

eHarmony relies upon their extended use of language to convey solutions to their users’ search and desire for companionship and matrimony. This concept is best stated by the “principle of linguistic relativity, formulated by …Benjamin Whorf” (Williams and Cooper 133). This concept of language “sets limits on our perceptions, thoughts and actions…which can be easily conceived or expressed within the language we speak” (Williams and Cooper 133). While eHarmony works to impress the user with an almost unlimited ability to fulfill proposed promises, careful reading will lead the user to determine the use of ambiguity between what is actually promised and truly delivered. One statement caught by the astute reader is, “More marriages per match than any online dating service” (eHarmony). This statement can cause the reader to wonder if eHarmony is meaning multiple marriages per individual [usually looked upon as an undesirable quality in a potential mate] or multiple individual matches and subsequent marriages.

While eHarmony would like the reader to be lulled by their elaborate and well-placed wording, a discerning reader will begin to notice that the linguistic relativity principle is merely attempting to structure the “possibilities of [their] thinking and acting” (Williams and Cooper 133). Furthermore, eHarmony is depending on the user to add connotative meanings to words used on their site. Connotative meanings, “individual associations…for a word,” used by eHarmony rely heavily upon the user shaping and evaluating meanings based upon their
personal experience (Williams and Cooper 135). eHarmony works to accomplish the connotative meaning of words by using “god terms,” which, according to Williams and Cooper are “term[s] whose power to command your assent is so great that virtually anything may be justified” (138).

In using “god terms,” eHarmony conveys positive meanings associated with their service. While the user might be pressed to apply a ‘godlike’ quality to the words repetitively used on the site, the very nature of their use conveys positive outcomes for the potential dater. Terms used to convey ‘godlikeness’ to users include phrases such as, “share deep levels of compatibility,” “passion,” “a lifetime of joy,” and the “joy of falling in love” (eHarmony). These terms are carefully crafted to convey positive, pleasant, fulfilling matches for the user. Additionally, eHarmony uses the term “science” repeatedly to denote empirical support of their matching service. However, no links to this scientific process, tests, or outcomes are provided by eHarmony to allow the user to do follow-up research. Williams and Cooper explain that these types of specific language terms “go a long way toward gaining public acceptance of that thing simply because of the use of that term to describe it” (138). With their continuous use of the word ‘scientific,’ it would appear that eHarmony is hoping to capitalize upon this acceptance.

A final analysis offered for examination in the use of language of eHarmony looks at the concept of figurative uses of language (Williams and Cooper 139). Williams and Cooper discuss that this type of language use involves “word choice and sentence construction” (139). Attentive reading by the user will show that eHarmony is quite selective in the terms and phrases used in testimonials and comments meant to guide the user to buying their service. Two of the aspects of figurative language are clearly used on eHarmony’s site. First, the concept of using language for the purpose of aesthetic pleasure (Williams and Cooper 139).
eHarmony’s well-chosen testimonials serve to intrigue the user’s longing for companionship and coupling. “Godlike” language terms used throughout eHarmony’s website offer the comfortable picture of a caring, benevolent friend, aiding in the search for a lifetime mate in an effort to address the user’s “perception [of] relationship” with Dr. Warren and his staff (Williams and Cooper 139).

In further evaluation of eHarmony’s online matching service, Michael Hardey, in his examination of mediated relationships, notes that computer dating services have been around since the 1960s (208). Hardey notes that computer dating can ‘reduce the risk of meeting ‘undesirables’” which he fails to define and can increase match-ability by “increasingly complex screening and profiling criteria” (208). This “match-ability” is at the heart and nature of the business that eHarmony strives to create with their online dating service. Hardey also states that few sites truly make use of the “matching technology” tests claimed to be in use intensively by eHarmony. In support of the “match-ability” effect of eHarmony’s services, Rebecca D. Heino, Nicole B. Ellison and Jennifer L. Gibbs, state that “12% of newly married or engaged couples [referenced on WeddingChannel.com] met online…” (2).

What, if any, are the risks to the potential dater in using eHarmony? Well, for one, eHarmony’s service can be quite costly. eHarmony offers the first-time user a free seven day trial period, but this comes with extensive conditions the lovelorn user might not catch in his forlorn frame of mind (aLoveLinkPlus). Additionally, eHarmony states that it may take several months to build contact a list and to allow for at least a year of service to fully establish this potential list and make contact with other searching users. Costs can range from $49.95 a month up to $249.95 a year, which can become a bit pricey for users on lower and limited incomes, hence supporting the impression that the site is intended for middle-to-upper class users (aLoveLinkPlus). While eHarmony’s service offer includes a full refund, a cancellation
request must be made within the first seven days of membership, bypassing the suggestion that it takes at least a month to receive the first potential perspective matches.

Another hidden risk to the consumer is the “patent-pending scientific matchmaking process” that eHarmony claims to have exclusive insight to (Online Services). This patent-pending process takes a lengthy hour or more to complete, producing a profile claiming to match “29 Key Dimensions of Compatibility necessary for a long-term relationship” (eHarmony). But, who has determined that these are the most important 29 dimensions to a relationship? eHarmony leaves this unsupported claim for users to simply accept at face value while paying for the luxury of using their exclusive service. While Newsweek reports that eHarmony claims to rigorously screen its members, this claim, too, is not supported by any empirical evidence other than the posting of words on eHarmony's overview tab (eHarmony).

After spending the necessary amount of time cruising eHarmony’s site, thoughtfully completing the lengthy Compatibility Matching System™ profile analysis, posting an alluring picture and paying the required dues, does eHarmony deliver what it promises? Perhaps. According to eHarmony, 4 million users can’t be wrong… or can they? Perhaps they are just being misled through the careful use of symbolic persuasion based upon their own identification and self-persuasive desires. Mislead with well-placed nonverbals added to the structure of form, psychologically lulling the user with carefully constructed language. Figurative language, with godlike terms, that fills one's mind with visions and dreams of coupling and wedded bliss. Symbolic persuasion so artfully woven by the “fastest growing dating service on the planet": eHarmony.com (Online Ad).
Works Cited


