"I’m straight, but": Balancing Conflicting Identities and Desires through Language, Time, and Space in Online Personal Advertisements

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Research on internet language has proliferated in recent years (e.g. Crystal 2001, 2004, 2011), with interest also growing in ethnographic work on internet communities (e.g. Nardi 2010, Boellstorff 2011). The subset of research focused particularly on internet dating in queer communities has been quite modest in comparison, although such interest has recently proliferated, focusing mostly on issues of masculinity and race (e.g. Baker 2013, Rega 2013, Bogetic 2013), with some related exploration of heterosexuality and desire (Mortensen 2010, VanderStouwe 2014). Building on previous work exploring online advertisements of men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay (VanderStouwe 2013, 2014), this paper explores ‘male-for-male’ online personal advertisements from a small city in California as part of a larger project about language and safe spaces. Using data collected from the popular American classified website Craigslist, I investigate ways that individuals posting in this forum balance a self-presentation as a straight male while simultaneously seeking same-sex partners. This goal is accomplished through a negotiation of both temporal and spatial dimensions to allow one to maintain a public straight identity while using private and online spaces to search for and engage in same-sex sexual activities. Temporally, posters claim a longstanding desire toward the same-sex while imploring that action can only take place immediately. Spatially, they linguistically negotiate identity and desire distinctions by maintaining a public straight identity and a private exploration of same-sex desire. These discursive negotiations serve to separate one’s identity from one’s desires in ways that complicate current notions of the role of identity versus desire in the linguistic construction and presentation of the sexual self.

Keywords: identity, heterosexuality, desire.