

DREAM GALLERY: ONLINE DATING AS A COMMODITY

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Summary

This paper presents a recent study focusing on how Internet users introduce themselves publicly in cyberspace through personal web pages, personal diaries and web sites where they can search for relationships, love, or friendship. Our goal is to analyse the extent to which personal relationships are considered from a marketing standpoint, and in what sense we can talk about how personal relationships are “consumed” over the Internet. To achieve this purpose, we conducted a case study from which to approach the personal presentations exhibited in these environments, either in the form of visual images or textual descriptions. Specifically, we will analyse those found in the user profiles of a partner, relationships and friendship search engine in a virtual environment called *Match.com.es*

Dream Gallery

The search for new relationships is one of the most popular and widespread uses of the Internet. The web is used as an opportunity to “flirt” or, simply, to look for companionship. Indeed, the Internet promises to be a real alternative to find friends, our “better half”, our “soul mate”. It also offers a new form of personal relationship that emerges and can be maintained exclusively online, and that may even evolve into different forms of eroticism or virtual sex experiences.

The Internet social-technical architecture enables different interpersonal relationship strategies taking advantage of the media features, especially the chance to interact anonymously. However, besides the privacy, users consider the relationships over the Internet in terms of “ease” and “convenience”, as it offers a reliable and easy way to establish contacts, and at the same time, it opens infinite opportunities to find an interesting relationship. A user put it this way:

In this society we live in, where everything spins at high speed, it is already possible to meet new people from your own place, dressed in comfortable clothes and wearing slippers. It is no wonder, then, that this new form of relationship is on the increase. In a matter of minutes you meet someone and, if you're not interested, you just have to press a button to replace this companionship with another. And so on, until you find the person of your dreams, that person that can stop the pass of time. (Morfeo)

For many users, the Internet offers a practical, fruitful, instantaneous, convenient and inexpensive system for developing interpersonal relationships that preserves our identity if we so desire. It is a system where our dreams can become true at a low price and at low personal risks; a system that responds to the current needs of our hectic daily lives and the compartmentalization of our social interaction. Núñez (2001) argues that if playing and dreaming allow for the re-enactment of social events in which we may be players without the risks of suffering the consequences. In that sense, anonymous virtual interaction, unlike a real relationship with other people, allows users to interact with others and at the same time control the degree to which they are involved in the relationship. Similarly, users can experiment with their otherness, playing with the heterogeneity of ethnic, social, geographical and gender background from an aseptic standpoint, without the risks and commitments these relationships entail when being held face to face.

Interpersonal communication through this system seems to offer a mode of relationship that fits into a lifestyle in which individuals consume technology and are curious to meet new people outside the closed circle of the usual family, educational, and professional relationships. Online dating may be understood as the beginning of an adventure without leaving home, or it may be used as a way to establish new relationships for those who have moved to a new country or city.

Well, here I am, at the dream gallery... section La Coruña news... I've returned to my homeland after some rather tiring years. My old friends are all married! After a couple of unsuccessful dates they have set up for me à la Woody Allen, I think the best is meeting new people through this channel, something different to the kind of anti-relationship that emerges in a club... (Var38)

This user, that describes himself as a 38-year-old male, uses the "dream gallery" metaphor to refer to a dating web site as a new, alternative and distinct public space which offers greater opportunities than the "traditional" club. But how are these new relationship spaces organised on the Internet? Leaving aside the myriad of chat channels specifically devoted to personal relationships (love, friendship, sex, etc.), there are uncountable web sites specifically devoted to facilitate contacts over the Net. These web sites offer users the chance to meet people with similar hobbies or common interests in search for friendship, love or sex, and there are many Internet users participating in them that find this way of establishing relationships appealing.

The specialized nature of these web sites means that a particular model for channelling contacts, a way to regulate the user's presentations and guidelines to establish communication needed to be designed. The web architecture shapes social interaction. Although several studies have focused on interpersonal relationships in chats, there are few references to studies related to web sites specifically designed to facilitate contacts or dates, either free of charge and maintained by apparently altruistic individual Internet users, or sophisticated web sites, which are clearly sponsored by for-profit companies.

Mach.com. is an international company dealing with personal relationships over the Internet and connected to instant message services that claims to have more than 15

million subscribers worldwide and more than one million in Spain. *Match.com.es* is one of many partner search web sites on the *Worldwideweb*. Although it is conceived as a business, it presents itself as a public service. How does it work? The web site combines a free-of-charge and subscription mode. Users may register free of charge to post their own pages, although to communicate with another "gallery" user, they will have to pay a monthly fee. The system allows a free of charge possibility of contact: the user, subscriber or not, may send a *virtual kiss* to any other user and receive one from any other user. This kiss shows an initial interest in making contact, and the company advises that you reply. Nevertheless, to do so, you must be a subscriber. This means that the free-of-charge service users are, essentially, passive users, although they may send and receive *virtual kisses*, they can't go "beyond" that if they have not subscribed to the pay services. In addition, the web offers another participation mode called *wink at me free*, by which users pay a little more so that any other user may reply to them at no cost. The free-of-charge mode invites new members to a system trial. This mode may give some partial satisfactory results, as for example, to find some *virtual kisses* in your mailbox. But in such a way that users discover that in order to answer the invitation or in order to be able to select who they will be contacting, it is necessary to subscribe. The free-of-charge options lead users into dead ends where, in order to be able to follow "the game" and achieve a maximum level of involvement, a subscription agreement with the company is needed. Some times there are "special offers" as the three days trial. But soon or later, to make up one's mind, it is necessary to estimate the benefits. According to a user:

If we consider the matter under a management and manufacturing focus we can see that this new method means a remarkable productivity boost compared to the classic system. The number of contacts per hour is noticeably superior to that of the classic systems of discos and clubs. Concerning the associated costs, they are quite lower than the traditional ones. (You don't have to pay for drinks or tickets, and you don't have to spend money on perfume or dress for the occasion, there are no taxis, or restaurants, etc.) High productivity, costs similar to those of companies that employ Asian labour, but... What about Quality? (Morfeo)

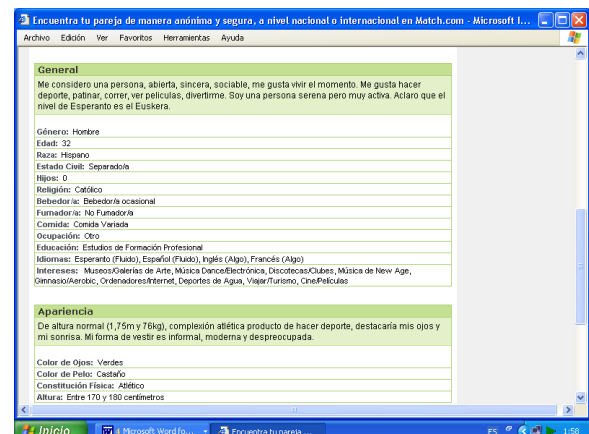
Therefore, in these environments users consider interpersonal relationships not only in terms of playing and fantasy, but they also estimate their investment in terms of productivity, benefits and product quality.

How are the terms of interaction defined in *Match.com.es*? The web site we have chosen for our analysis offers the potential user a context defined as *Love and Friendship*, that encourages participation: *Open to dating? Meet your partner in an anonymous and safe way*. The site is organized as a database, a gallery with a series of fields that the user has to fill in, known as the user *profile*. In it, the players define the image they will project to capture the attention of the potential partner. It should be noted that the information in each profile is subject to censorship by the web masters and to previous authorisation. For example, descriptions considered to be offensive or pornographic are not permitted. All of this seems to have been designed in order to give confidence to the users, in order to reassure them concerning the authenticity of the profiles, to reaffirm the "seriousness" and the "privacy" of the web site, and to ensure that the company's commitment to user confidentiality and security are met.



When we log onto *Match.com*, we may enter a *quick search* by age and sex that leads us to a first view with a profile list in which a picture of the candidate (optional) and a brief self-description are highlighted, together with the data considered to be most relevant: *nickname*, *sex*, *age*, *marital status* and *place of residence*. Clicking on the nickname of the profile gives access to a complete record, provided that the Internet users have previously registered, i.e., they have created their own *profile*. This action, totally free of charge, means to open new user record. For the company, it means recording them as new potential customers, and increasing the “galley offer”. Doing this means that the users have “taken the bait”, i.e., they accept the rules of the game in a reciprocal move, so that to see the others, they have to be seen too, and... welcome to the *virtual kiss Wheel of Fortune*!

The complete *profile* is divided into three main sections: *My Basics* (personal self-description, plus 13 fields associated to likes, preferences and educational background), *Appearance* (self-description about physical appearance and clothing style, plus 4 fields about physical appearance), *About my Date* (self-description about the kind of relationship the user is looking for, plus 4 fields specifying the kind of relationship). Visually, the profile highlights the picture and the basic data: “*I am*”, includes sex, age, race and marital status; “*located in*”, includes city and country, and “*looking for*” indicates the candidate’s sexual preferences and age.



The form consists, then, of a self-description section and a series of fields with preset categories that must be filled in to complete a profile. They ask for quite varied data,

such as favourite food, religion, hobbies, whether the user is a smoker or not, a casual drinker, etc., that deserve a more thorough analysis of the kind of “person” they depict. You cannot leave any of the fields empty and all of them have closed categories. As a result, these profiles “sort out” the individuals standardizing them under a “western” view of the persona, apparently “universal” and adapted to the most heterogeneous local cultural contexts. A comparative study of the cultural differences that match.com present on its pages could be also of interest, as for example, in the United Kingdom version, you cannot send “virtual kisses”, as in the Spanish site, but “winks”.

In fact, *Match.com* is a US-based company that offers this service to Internet users worldwide¹. Its transnational ambition may be observed, for instance, in the 53 languages users can choose from, including Esperanto. This list, however, does not include “local” languages such as Catalan, a language spoken by more than 7 million people, mostly in Spain. Similarly, one of the relevant pieces of data highlighted in the profile is *race*, a category with somehow blurred boundaries that offers 11 options from which to choose, including “Mediterranean”, “Latin” and “Hispanic”, as well as that of “mixed”. Although the term “race” is commonly used in the USA, in the Spanish cultural context it is a controversial concept that may raise righteous questionings as, among other reasons, the Spanish Constitution prohibits discrimination based on race, and it is not well received to ask someone about his or her “race”. Apart from that, the Spanish user may well be confused about where to choose among the “races” available in the questionnaire. For example, Barcelona residents tend to fill in the “race” box with the *Mediterranean* category, while Madrid residents identify themselves either with the *Hispanic* or the *Latin* “races” (very few of them select the *mixed* category).

There exist two ways for searching the profile that possibly is the best match to our expectations: *quick* or *advanced*. We have to emphasize the fact that the quick search is based on the preferred sex and desired age criteria. Curiously enough, gender is not defined by a category such as heterosexual, homosexual or lesbian, but in an indirect form, using a wording of the desired relationship: *man looking for woman*, *woman looking for man*, *man looking for man*, or *woman looking for woman*. This controlled freedom eliminates the need for gender categories such as bisexual, transsexual, etc.

In the *advanced* criteria section we may, as well, indicate as many search conditions as we like based on the information given in the questionnaire. A nickname, which is extremely useful in cyberspace, is used here as a resource to identify the profile and preserve privacy. As the profile does not contain the user’s email, the initial contact is handled by the web site, which re-routes the message to the email account preset by the user whose profile has been chosen.

The guidelines of the program design in building these profiles are very strict, leaving little room to improvisation. It involves constructing a customized identity, based on the

¹ According to the information offered in its web site, Match.com is a subsidiary to Soulmates Technology Pty. Ltd Match.com in terms of online contacts in MSN in Europe, Asia and the United States, and has established alliances with AOL (United Kingdom and Japan), Tiscali (United Kingdom, France, Spain and Italy), Wanadoo (Spain) and T-online (Germany). Match.com has subscribers in more than 240 countries that use this web site in 17 languages and has a staff of more than 250 people in offices worldwide. The company is an IAC/InterActiveCorp (Nasdaq: IACI) enterprise.

decisions taken by the user among a limited range of choices. The pre-determined fields guide users in the selection of personal characteristics based on standardized categories and social attributes that make up their online introduction creating a clear and ordered picture of that person, which resembles and at the same time differs from other profiles. The feeling is that you have been presented with an almost infinite catalogue of “products”, of “dreams” among which you may find that special someone...

What do these subscription sites offer that free sites cannot provide? Studies on love in chats indicate that the most users claim that they are looking for amusement and fun in the first place, and that loves appears in an unforeseen way, if it does. Nevertheless, opening a record in web sites such a *Match.com* is a voluntary act to introduce oneself, to display oneself in a context explicitly devoted to dating. It means accepting certain rules of the game, such as the censorship of pornographic images, and defining the image that you want to project according to the specifications and within the constraints established by the script.

In return for registering and creating a profile, this web site provides a double security system based on the privacy and the re-routing of email messages. In this way, email communication is enabled by the company, which acts as a mediator, preventing users from receiving email from another member, provided they had not given it to that person in the initial contact.

The system provides an easy and convenient way to introduce oneself, and even offers suggestions and advice about what to say and how to say it in the "self-description" sections. Registration gives access to a well-arranged gallery of profiles in different languages, of users that claim to live in different parts of the world. In addition, it provides users with an indirect way to make contacts that allows them to pre-select a candidate with no commitment, and allows the recipient to look up the profile record associated to the message received before deciding whether to reply or not to the invitation. Unlike chat channels, this is a deferred system and the relationship is established through private emails provided by the company, without the user having to provide a personal email address.²

Someone special

One day, at any given time, we fancy having an adventure without leaving home. We turn on our computer, we log onto the Internet... and the quest for that special someone begins. (Morfeo)

As we have already seen, the profile is the user's “calling card”. It is a display of physical and personal attributes, of worries and hobbies, focused on finding the right person. Within the profile, the self-descriptions are the sections that users of this web site create freely, in their own words, with the aim of raising someone's interest with the

² Yet, it is always possible to cheat and to find a way to bypass the system. For security reasons users are not allowed to enter their email addresses. This has the twofold effect of preventing users from establishing contact between each other and eluding payment and at the same time ensuring users that their interaction is completely anonymous. Some users have discovered that the program does not always detect their email address if they leave out the @ symbol, for instance.

purpose of eventually consolidating the friendship or romantic relationship. There are also boxes that the user must fill in, and they often convey confusion for having to define oneself, for having to say a few words about “what you are like”:

to be or not to be, a real question
to describe oneself is a task for others not for me, well, for the moment I am able to say I am an open person and my friends always count on me (when it's time to wash the dishes jejej). (Jose)

Now it's time to talk about me, well, how do I begin, mmmm I am an average shy guy that prefers letting others know and judge him rather than putting down in words what I think I am like. I would not be objective and surely I wouldn't include the shortcomings (Manuel)

This is the hardest part... this bloody description!!!!
Well, I should say something, shouldn't I???? (Zintia)

Let's see!..... I can be many things but others not so much, I can be white or black, and also the entire range of grey, maybe red, orange, green, etc... What I am not is the kind of person who I wouldn't like to run into. And, at least, I think that I like giving everything a touch of light, colour and smiles..... (Estrellademar)

Richness in the variety of these self-descriptions seems to support the idea of a co-existence of different ways to understand “who am I”. This variety may be understood, according to Gergen (1992:26), as a characteristic of modern personal identity, defined as a “saturated self”. Our selves are subject to a plurality of social contexts and to multiple unique opportunities to relate to others, which means we are not able to define a stable identity of ourselves, and our bonds to others are more elusive and ephemeral, as are our passions and deep feelings. Nevertheless, we may find certain recurring patterns that prevail in one description or another. Users define themselves: a) based on psychological and moral character and temperament (shy, friendly, good person); b) based on how they are seen by others (their friends); c) based on activities, interests and hobbies (I am a clerk, I like laughing and going to the cinema), d) indirectly (I am looking for you). Examples:

a) I am passionate, committed, a hedonist, a good person, or at least I try to be one, friendly, deep, curious, spiritual, happy, rather insecure, loving... (Perlika)

b) I am a sociable person, with an affable personality, so my friends say. I don't know what else to say, just that I would like to start new friendships and then if something happens... we'll see. For the moment, that's not my intention. (josean)

c) I love travelling (the farther, the better), reading good books, listening to almost any kind of music, watching almost any kind of movie and, obviously, attending the motorcycle G.P. whenever I can. (Rosita)

d) How will I explain to you, so that you understand that I am addressing myself to you, my love, when the offerings that I'm sending to you from my concealed loneliness reach the world?... Here I am, awaiting on a rock the arrival of the one that my soul adores; why wouldn't she come when the nest I made in case she came is so wonderful? (Enlin)

These relations give information about the qualities sought after in relationships and indicate the social values by which we judge others and ourselves:

I don't like talking about me at all, but I'll tell you that I like listening (I think that's my greatest virtue) and I am honest, sometimes too much. I am sensitive and I am not ashamed to say it. I am really imaginative and fanciful, although serious when I have to be. As for the rest, the ones who know me will tell you ;) (Zenkimura)

A difficult matter that of describing oneself, I can't do it, it's better for you to write to me and we'll have coffee together someday to get to know one another. We cannot describe ourselves in a few

lines, we are much more complex than that. Moreover, I suppose that I am like everyone else: a good person, a hard worker, a friendly guy, etc... a real treasure, of course. (Luzdefuego)

Wouldn't it be better if you uncovered it? Well, some hints.... I am a good guy, a good friend of my friends, and really feeling like meeting new people... do you dare to?? (big_castillo)

Self-description acts as a mediator between the subject, as represented in the profile, and the target audience. It is a way to appeal to the potential reader, using formal or colloquial language or even the type of language used in a chat room or that of mobile phone text messaging, also indicates users' knowledge of the technological medium and their experience in online interaction and dating.

The decision to contact the user behind the profile depends to a great extent on the assessment of these self-descriptions that supposedly offer tacit information about how the person behind the profile speaks, feels, lives and behaves. Discovering the special person hidden behind this picture depends to a great extent on our projections and implications based on this scarce information. But, precisely because it is scarce, it turns any little detail into the significant, appealing, element that seduces you into clicking the button to make the contact. Here again, the consumer relationship of the dream gallery comes into play, and also its playful nature, its gaming component and its detective side. Suddenly one of the products offered seems desirable, an unusual detail makes us realize that we may have found what we were looking for. Maybe investigating it would be worthwhile!

A body, an identity

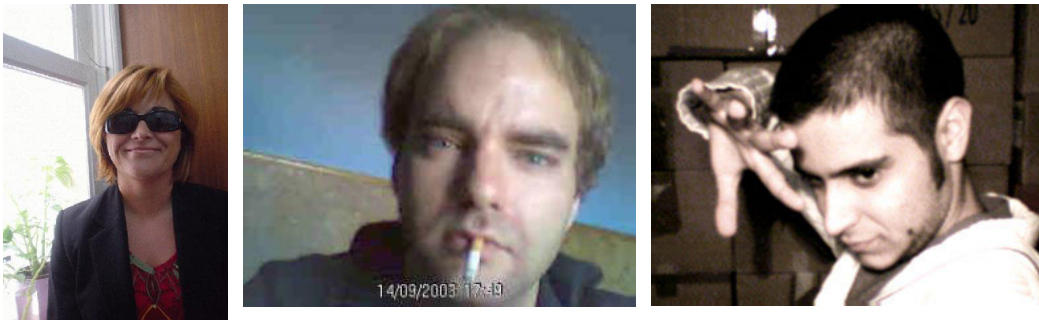
Imagine your self searching for dreams! I finally you'll find it! So this is me.... I spend my life searching for my dreams... Maybe you'll have to be one of those dreams! (Viper)

According to many authors, the Internet offers the possibility of a "pure relationship", following the term by Giddens (1991). Other authors refer to a "pure Platonism", arguing that human beings are able to fall in love only with words, because in the Web "nobody knows who you are and they don't know what you look like". Nevertheless, the most frequent questions in chat channels, and also in dating web sites, as we have already seen, are those referring to age and sex, followed by nationality and those concerning physical description (hair and eyes colour, measures, etc.). Although people may lie about their appearance, it seems that for Internet users, the body is important. *Match.com* devotes a good deal of its questionnaire to physical descriptions and, also, you may include a picture, but only under very specific guidelines that are strictly enforced by the site's censors. Each modification in a user's profile must be reviewed by the company before it may appear on the screen. As we have already said, this web site does not accept unseemly images, nor does it accept caricatures, images coming from dubious sources or copied from the Internet, or photos of landscapes or objects in which there is no human figure. In sum, the photos attached to the profiles should be of a human body, and the site recommends that the photos should have been taken by the users themselves and they should depict the users' true appearance. Notwithstanding, the kind of figurative and realistic representation required by the web site does not mean that the photos used for profiles are really a portrait of the user. Indeed, it is possible that some photos were "borrowed" from magazines, for instance, and that the program has not detected them as such. In any case, the aim of the photos is to offer a bodily description linked to the personal identity described in the profile.

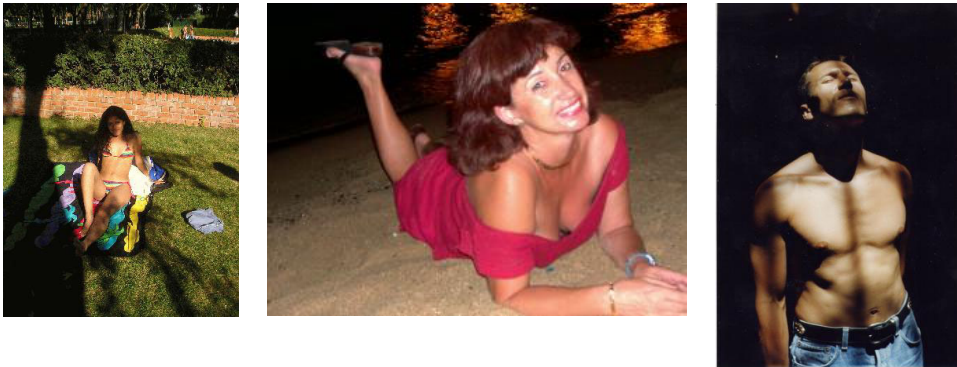
If, as suggested by Giddens (1991), the body is part of a personal identity development project that is linked to consumption in our modern societies, how will the relationship between the image of a body and the self-description be established in these public spaces of virtual communication? What choices do people make when deciding how to represent themselves? What is the image you attempt to project of yourself?

Among the wide range of possibilities of personal representations found in *Match.com.es*, we may establish a initial typology according to the composition of the photo, including: a) the face, i.e., a close-up of the subject, usually the face or down to the waist; b) the whole body, but without a context, so that the representation emphasizes the physical look; c) pictures that enable positioning the body in a specific context –landscape or travels, house, living room or bedrooms; d) the body related to recognizable objects –a car, a glass of wine, a ship; e) pictures edited, disquieting or ambiguous in which the subject appears in disguise, double, multiple, indefinite or cut.

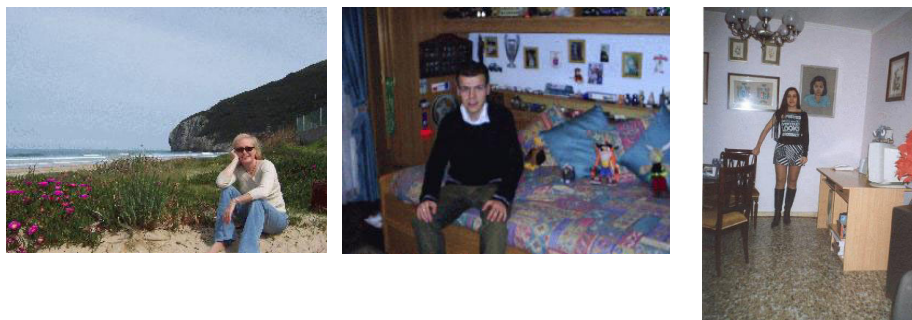
a) Face



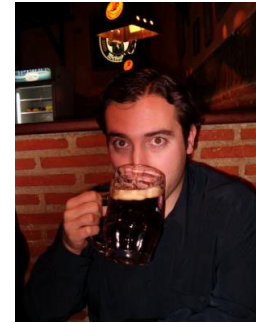
b) Body



c) Locations: Travel, home, the bedroom



d) Objects



e) Ambiguity: cuts, multiple selves and doubles



While in chat channels photos often are exchanged in a more or less advanced phase of the relationship, in these web sites they are an appealing or dissuading element that helps the user in deciding whether to contact the other person. The image projects resonances in our subjectivity that help us in our choice, not only by the physical traits we are observing, but also by the composition of the photo and the objects, contexts, persons and relationships it includes or excludes.

The web site design, goals and profiles construct a representational context in which every profile corresponds, in theory, to one user. But this is not always necessarily so. A person, for example, may have designed more than one profile or there may be real actors, who are there merely to make the gallery appear large and who are only there as filler, or people that have long ceased to participate in the web site. Moreover, although there may be a match between the picture and the description of the "true" physical, social and psychological traits of the person behind the profile, only the "newcomers" succumb to the illusion that this is really so. To correctly interpret these online introductions, we should not assume that the person in whom we are interested matches exactly the profile of the picture displayed. The introduction creates a look, a first impression, but you have to investigate by means of direct communication to know who the person is. The more seasoned user learns that you don't have to take something for granted until you see it for yourself. The page description, arrangement and context induce the application of the interpretative rules of the real world, envisioning a match between body and identity, between the description and the person represented. Nevertheless, following these same rules in the virtual world means that if reality doesn't match what is interpreted or envisioned, the dreamer may become seriously disappointed. The dream may even turn into a nightmare.

Usually, individuals introduce themselves online based on representations that render the looks by which they are known in the physical world, building up a stable identity, as expected from them (Cheung, 2000). In some cases it is so, but not always. The picture may be faithful, stylized or completely false –and deceitfulness may be brought to the physical encounters. Authenticity certificates, codes and passwords are not enough to provide credibility and security to the users in terms that they are interacting online with someone that may reply offline. They just assure, at the best, that only the users themselves can enter and modify their data or that they are the only ones to access the information displayed or sent to them. Concerning credibility, the only way to know that there are no false profiles is verifying it by direct communication.

The fact that a person may have different “self-representations” on the Web, and may have, for instance, a professional and a personal web page, and participate virtual forum about a TV show, and also introduce herself as “Kitty” in her personal ad on a web site, when in real life he is a mature man, does not mean, in principle, any risk for his believing in a unique self and an essential identity. Nor does it mean that he has lost his mind. The ubiquity of the Web does not necessarily take for granted a questioning of the modern notion of identity, but it introduces the idea that play, duplicity, lies and simulation are a part of the social and psychological experimentation allowed and carried out by Web users.

The uncovering of the fact that “Kitty” does not match a woman in the physical world, but rather a man, may be construed as deceit, usurpation of someone else’s personality or an adolescent identity game (Donath, 2003), but it is only one of the many things one may encounter surfing the Internet, where you mustn’t let appearances deceive you. Anybody searching for a partner on the Web want to meet people, establish long lasting friendships, give vent to worries or have an unforgettable time, but they also learn how to do this along with the rules of the game, whether it is kept on the virtual level or taken to the physical world.

Personal relationships online are created in the realm of fantasy and play. In this sense, they are static relationships. On the level of intersubjective experience, they suspend time and space, creating a new framework for social rules and hierarchies. Online dating in turn, following Victor Turner, can generate a *liminal* context, as in the static rituals of religions, that arouse, when successful, a sense of community with others (*communitas*). According to Francesc Núñez (2001), all participants in a chat room know it is a game, and that lying and pretending are accepted. But lying, in this context, does not have a moral content, and pretending does not aim to conceal reality. It is rather about building a special kind of relationship, according to Núñez, about weaving a common context for interaction where there are no physical cues, which leads to the creation of an image of oneself that may be unknown even to the players themselves. One can be astonished by oneself.

One day you start talking about your life, about yourself. You involve yourself and start receiving email messages from people. You learn new things and have new sensations. Then you start to exchange email messages and more details... And eventually you realize that something nice, beautiful has been built... Without noticing it. (Everlin)

Victoria Bescós adds that between the relationships created in these virtual environments and those originated in physical contexts there is an overriding gap. Virtual love affairs are platonic relationships in the sense that, obviously, they do not allow a full satisfaction of desire. When virtual relationships derive into physical

relationships, she claims, they stop being one thing and turn into another. In virtual relationships, only the relationship matters, and not people (2002). However, this statement contradicts the experience of those users that have crossed the border between both worlds and have integrated their virtual relationships into their daily lives:

Whoaaa! When virtual relationships are an essential love (wrongly termed by some as platonic) they derive into physical actions, there is a combination of the spiritual part with the physical that gives birth to a new concept of relationships. And, although the encounter may not endure, it will have created very strong links, practically unbreakable over time. This pureness in complicity and passion has created a new concept of fraternity. (Morfeo)

The purported differences between virtual and real world create endless misunderstandings. On the one hand, the different relational contexts found on the Internet and in daily offline life are homogenized and generalized. On the other hand, it is obvious that the feelings we experience with online relationships are as deep and real as those we may experience in physical interaction... or in a dream. The subjective experience shares properties of both worlds: that of fantasy and that of vigil state. Only that in the interaction online there's someone else behind the fantasy, it is a shared dream. When you find someone really interesting on the Web... you want your dream to come true.

Making the dream come true

...but I fell in love with one of them...and well... although everybody tells me that it is impossible, I won't stop loving him and I won't rest until I can kiss him. (Melomana)

Although not all the users registered in the web site have the aim of finding the woman or the man of their dreams, the purpose of the web site is to help the customer find a partner, i.e., that the user takes the contacts initially made online to a physical level. On its home page, *Match.com.es* displays a section with messages sent by people that had a successful experience, that is, found the ideal person, established enduring relationships, rebuilt their lives, found a friend or a loving mate, or even got married. These stories provide a realist image of the virtual space as a path into the real world.

The process, that goes from online flirtation until the first physical encounter, may be more or less different or original, but follows a recurrent path that goes successively through sending pictures, talking on the telephone, sending mobile messages, etc. until the participants go on a physical date. The same person may cross this path several times, creating a tacit knowledge of the rules to follow, the risks to avoid and the precautions to take. This knowledge expands over the Web and generates its formulas, and its reputed success, failure and disillusion.

We need to take in account an unwanted effect, although predictable, from the lack of initial context and social support in the virtual relationship: disappointment. Not to give a negative sense to disappointment, it is something we have to foresee, as well as –and proportionally– the imaginative use of the medium (to arouse feelings, to exorcise the social world or to experiment with personalities), disappointment will take place, the collapse of the effectiveness of what we have built, provided that it won't be somehow integrated in the daily life (Núñez, 2001).

Love affairs over the Internet still have a flavour of the forbidden. Some users discuss about the feeling of being in front of impossible and unimaginable things, and of the absurd situation of feeling affection for an unknown person. Online dating present a problem of social legitimacy that translates, for instance, into questioning the sanity of the subject that has fallen into so paradoxical experiences between what they believe to be in between fantasy and reality.

Of course you have deeper feelings... I thought it was impossible... And I realize it is possible and it is real. There are days in which I feel crazy... a lunatic, because this can't be very normal... or at least it is not very usual among the people I hang out with... and clearly... you can't believe it until it happens to you. (Encadenado)

The initial taboos about this kind of relationship have gradually disappeared in light of the evidence that it is a path that many people go through, as any other related to the establishing of emotional bounds, with its disillusionings, lies and romance; the same as with ordinary love. But, in spite of this, it still is a socially debated issue, both by those who have experienced it and by those who do not know it yet, and are not planning to try it.

I think that the advantage of these kinds of relationships on the Web, is that at first we meet the person for him- or herself, as we usually remove that wall which separates us from the others. In these cases, I don't know if it is due to the security our computer screen offers us or whatever, but we usually bare our souls to our friends, who come to love us for what we really are. (Luna)

So what's wrong with this? It is not, as may be the case in other countries and cultural contexts, a kind of forbidden relationship (Galal, 2005). The concern is centred, specifically, on two weaknesses in the chain of social reproduction system: teenagers and marital stability. On the one hand, we are worried about the impact that the possibility of establishing uncontrolled relationships with unknown and potentially dangerous people may have on adolescents or that they will fall in love with unscrupulous people. Online dating evades family control. On the other hand, some newspapers alarm about the possible increase of divorces due to this hidden relationships on the Internet. But, leaving aside this issues related to the integrity of youth, and also related to marital uses, the kinship system and the social values which revolve around the concept of love, the main discussion in online forums about online dating focuses on the "reality" of the relationship.

The problem seems to be, rather, how to label these relationships. Fanciful? Unreal? Created in a void, based on a dreamed image? Some users say that feelings generated in online interaction are not real or they are not fully true, but the result, in any case, of a mutual psychological projection. However, the ones having experienced such feelings usually claim while showing perplexity, that they are real feelings, more real and honest than the ones that can be aroused by a physical person. One of the justifications for this subjective impression is that in online interaction we get to know the other person better and what he or she "really" is like.

The discussion surrounding the authenticity of these situations divides reality into two levels: inner reality, what we feel the person really is; and physical and social reality, appearance and mask. Physical reality not only embraces the body, but also the social context in which it is inscribed, to which it belongs and where it is accountable. This social body and this physical appearance are perceived in the virtual relationship as incidental, alien to the “real” relationship. However, the body emerges when “platonic” love is transformed into physical love:

And if now someone asks me if I believe that one can love another person known only through this medium.... I would say yes, what's more, I've experienced it, I love my friends. But, as for romantic love, as such and therefore any romantic relationship, for me it's very hard to believe that it is possible, as we all have the occasional need to feel a body by our side, to feel the warmth of a loved one, to feel their skin, their smell, their presence, their caresses, so I think that if two people only know each other through this channel, the relationship doesn't fully satisfy what we as beings, who have not only a soul, but also a body and senses, need to feel. (Jana)

The world of the Internet cannot replace the real world. If you feel a strong attraction for a person you only know over the Internet, take it easy and when it comes time to talk about love, act as if you didn't know the person at all. Because it is so, until you meet someone in person you won't know what you really feel. (www.enplenitud.com/)

From this perspective, discrimination between the real and virtual worlds does not sustain, for in the reality of the lived experience, social interaction in both worlds is equally "real" and the feelings they generate are “true”. But it is the juxtaposition of both experiences that returns the users to the commitment with their social environment and with themselves. Virtual romantic relationships are lived as a dream that can become true.

Consumer society and risk society

In these pages, I have attempted to present some of the major areas in which current research is moving, pointing to the initial hypothesis, which sustained that the practice of searching for relationships online may be understood as a new consumer habit. In this sense, personal relationships on the Internet do not constitute a social transformation by themselves, but they magnify contemporary society's trend towards organizing social relationships based on market models (Campbell, 1994). There is reification of interpersonal relationships and of identity in a medium that in effect hides the body and blurs the relationship between body and identity.

The analysis of this “daydreaming” points as well, as indicated by Baudillard (1985), to a structural change in social reproduction mechanisms. Consumer rules would be the new code or integrated system, similar to kinship systems, which regulate social relationships. Following this argument, a social model in which the accepted thing to do was to look for a partner among the members of related lineages following the parents recommendations and with the aim of achieving high social standing by means of marriage, has become an individual exogamic search whose imaginary ideal is to find someone to share your life with. The model now approaches the consumer saying: “shop and compare”. These new social parameters also focus users' attention on physical appearance and on individual qualities in the search for a romantic relationship. Beauty is an increasingly valued asset; the body and personal appearance form part of

the new marital imagery. Social pressure for choosing a partner does not come so much from parents as from the users' age group. Youngsters are the ones that signal trends and adolescents censure or approve a relationship (Schofield Clark, 2004). May be the new social trends are pointing to a model where personal relationships are considered as a dating portfolio.

Finally, this study focusing on personal relationships on the Internet points to another key issue of modern society: the breaking down of the relationship between reality and representation. Creating images that act as mediators in interpersonal communication means a breaking down both of the conception of the image as a mirror on the world, as of the magic, symbolic image that incarnates the properties of the subject or the thing, towards a conception of the image as simulation (Turkle, 1995). We must not understand this as a necessarily a reaction or as alienation of the person, but as the emergence of new game rules and as a means to understand the relationship between power, knowledge and experience.

This new rules of the social game on the Internet are in line with the definition of a cultural model based on the consumer satisfaction, in a production and distribution system of goods and services which is characterized by its symbolic contribution to personal wellbeing. But it is also in line with the "risk society" defined by Ulrik Beck and Anthony Giddens, which promotes an effective responsibility of the self based on individual self-reflection. As Beck puts it: "Living in a risk society means living with a calculated attitude toward the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted continuously in our contemporary social existence" (Beck, 1986, quoted in Giddens, 1991:28, quoted in Schofield Clark, 2004:183).

Methodological notes

This research project, now underway, aims to contribute, from the empirical analysis of online interaction contexts in Spanish and Catalan languages, to the analysis of the three considerations mentioned before and their interrelations. The study is currently in an initial phase, of prospective field work. The field work conducted has followed the model of virtual ethnography developed by Hine (2004), using a method of participant observation and analyzing various web sites of a similar nature. This exploratory study has been carried out during six months approximately. During this observation and learning period, the author registered in the dating page analyzed –as was required, as we have seen, by the web site- and found herself spontaneously participating in personal interactions derived from that, without following any established pattern or system. Portions of the conversations held with different users have been included in this text. For the time being, no formal interviews have been carried out. The fragments quoted (the nicknames have been changed) come mostly from the self-descriptions of the profiles in *Match.com* and from a discussion forum in which the subject of personal relationships on the Internet was raised, an excellent source of data that is available at *Los foros de Proverbias.net – El amor en los tiempos del Internet*.

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Field web sites :

Encuentra a tu pareja de manera anónima y segura, a nivel nacional o internacional
<http://es.match.com/match/mt.cfm?pg=home&tcid=1086>

El amor en los tiempos de Internet
http://foros.proverbia.net/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=5382&whichpage=1

Buscar todo tipo de relaciones en la Red
http://www.ociototal.com/recopila2/r_aficiones/contactos.html

Los internautas buscan amor antes que sexo en la red
<http://www.marketingdirecto.com/noticias/noticia.php?idnoticia=13664>

Encuentre a la mujer de sus sueños con la computadora
<http://www.enplenitud.com/nota.asp?articuloid=7087>

Eugenia Rico defiende la vuelta al amor epistolar que ha provocado Internet
<http://www.el-mundo.es/elmundolibro/2002/07/04/anticuario/1025805102.html>