

# Life beyond the screen: embodiment and identity through the internet

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## Abstract

This paper explores on-line and off-line identities and how relationships are formed and negotiated within internet environments that offer opportunities to meet people on-line and move into relationships off-line. To do this it draws on an analysis of users experiences of internet dating sites that are designed for those who wish meet others in the hope of forming an intimate relationship. Locating analyses in the context of the individualised sociability of late modernity, it is argued that virtual interactions may be shaped by and grounded in the social, bodily and cultural experiences of users. It is shown that disembodied anonymity that characterises the internet acts as a foundation for the building of trust and establishing real world relationships rather than the construction of fantasy selves. The paper concludes with a discussion of the wider significance of this for understanding disembodied identities and interactions and the impact of cyberspace on off-line sociability.

## Introduction

In his novel Gibson (1984) imagined how computers and modems could directly link to users' brains so they could participate in the 'consensual hallucination' of cyberspace. Over a decade later Stone (1996) described how 'The body in question sits at a computer terminal somewhere, but the locus of sociality that would in an older dispensation be associated with this body goes on in a space which is quite irrelevant to it' (43). When the bodies of users are left behind they are able to choose and construct their virtual form(s) and identity(ies). 'You might choose on one occasion to be tall and beautiful; on another you might wish to be short and plain. It would be instructive to see how changed physical attributes altered your interactions with other people'. (Krueger, 1991: 256). As Plant (1998) argued, 'access to the terminal is also access to resources which were once restricted to those with the right face, accent, race, sex, none of which now need be declared.' (46). The nature of on-line and off-line identity and sociability is one of the central themes in speculation and analysis about the way people use the internet (Turkle, 1985; Haraway, 1991; Stone, 1991; Rheingold, 1993;

Shields, 1996; Plant, 1998). The apparent escape from the body is congruent with the unravelling of gender and identity promoted by Haraway (1985) who placed it at the centre of her cyberfeminist manifesto for cyborgs. Imagined identities and fantasy are also central to virtual life for players within multi-user dungeons (MUDs, adventurer games) or participants in newsgroups or chat rooms. These virtual spaces have been the main focus of research about the Internet. At risk of oversimplification, this work suggests that within such spaces, where occupants are anonymous, people escape their embodied selves and the expectations and norms of behaviour within their everyday (see Stone, 1991; Turkle, 1995). In constructing linkages between real and virtual identities there is a tension between the conceptualisation of an empty free-for-all virtual social space and an approach that pays attention to the way embodied sociability anchors and shapes interactions within the virtual landscape. However, despite initiatives such as the ESRC Virtual Society programme the majority of research *about* the internet has been research *in* the internet and as Jones (2000) notes this fails to make 'the connection we truly desire, the one between life on-line and its meaning in relationship to life off-line' (22–23).

The purpose of this paper is to gain an understanding of how people construct and negotiate virtual identities and relationships within an digital space that offers opportunities to meet people on-line and move into relationships off-line. The analysis of internet dating sites provides an appropriate environment in which to examine how users negotiate the tensions between the development of virtual relationships, and the norms and conventions associated with the 'interaction order' of physical copresence (Goffman, 1983). It also serves to illustrate how virtual spaces may be shaped by and grounded in the social, bodily and cultural experiences of users. Giddens's (1992) conception of pure relationships will be used to situate relationships initiated through the internet within the broader context of sociability in late modernity. The paper finally explores the possible consequences of this study for those commentaries on cyberspace, which have variously celebrated the potentialities of the internet and lamented the effects it has on human life. First, however, it is necessary to briefly describe and contextualise internet dating within established mechanism for meeting strangers.

## **Information technology and the meeting of others**

The use of information technology to find and meet a new partner can be traced back to the mid 1960s when an attempt was made to match individuals by comparing data derived from questionnaires using a computer in the United States. Promoted as the 'scientific' matching of people the use of the computer gained rapid popularity, especially in the United States and Germany. However, the veracity of such systems is questionable and at least one of the early companies was successfully prosecuted for failing to use the

computer to actually match members (Godwin, 1973). Since then communication technologies have evolved and spread rapidly in major world cities such as New York and London, and in urban and suburban contexts in which people live among increasing numbers of strangers (Baumgartner, 1991). The context for this is the rapid expansion in one person households, especially among professional classes who are most likely to own a home computer linked to the internet (Loader, 1998; Hall *et al.*, 1999). This increase in single people has facilitated the development and expansion of relatively novel modes of establishing intimate relationships (Woll and Young, 1989). A survey of broadsheet newspapers published in Britain between 1970 and 1995 for example, traced a massive increase of advertisements for partners (Jagger, 1998). Entering 'dating' in an internet search engine will quickly provide the beginning of thousands of links to dating resources.

Internet dating is characterised by a seamless movement between reading descriptions, writing responses and exchanging messages. Compared to the effort, awkwardness, risks and physical embarrassments often associated with 'real world' dating, this points to some of the advantages of the internet. It should be remembered that what is described as 'dating' covers a wide range of social activities. The concern here is to focus on the internet as a social space that may be used to meet others rather than the nature of any encounters that might follow. Moreover, although there is evidence of on-line relationships initiated in virtual spaces, such as MUDs and newsgroups, being continued off-line (eg, Rheingold, 1993; Parks and Floyd, 1996) this paper examines sites designed to facilitate such meetings. Internet dating sites are similar to newspaper dating services in so far as they provide a medium through which individuals advertise themselves, yet their respective limitations vary greatly. Newspaper dating services usually require those advertising to restrict their text to twenty or thirty words, and often use a voice message system for those wishing to provide supplementary information. Internet sites, in contrast, are less prescriptive in content, and enable users to move seamlessly, and at no additional cost, between initial advertisement and contacting others using the service. Users are informed (as in print media) that the content of their text and pictures will be vetted and may be edited in order to achieve consistency within a site. Sites typically include a email system that allows frequent and lengthy correspondence between individuals and a 'blocking' system whereby users can choose to receive no more correspondence from specified individuals.

Dating resources on the internet reflect the diversity of human wants and desires. Specialist dating sites have been set up dedicated to those with disabilities, members of ethnic communities, those seeking casual liaisons, people with unusual sexual interests, religious preferences and diet. The majority of sites, however, operate within the heterosexual market and often advertise their services in terms of finding a 'soulmate' and that may lead to a marriage or cohabitation. These dating sites may be divided according to whether they are a free service or charge users. The latter commonly enable people to view

advertisements but only allow those who pay a membership fee to actually make contact with others through an internal email system. Free sites need to cover construction and maintenance costs and owners typically seek to do this by charging fees for direct advertising, the provision of other services (eg, singles holidays), and by providing links to other sites.

The form and content of sites vary, yet it is possible to describe an ideal type that provides a context for the interactions described in this paper. On entering a site users are presented with introductory information and a listing of new advertisers hyperlinked to longer self-description. Users can then create a advertisement, browse advertisements, or undertake searches. Advertisers may be encouraged to complete questions about their bodily appearance which is then included alongside their self-description. Above all, advertisers are recommended to be 'realistic' and 'truthful' about themselves and about what they hope for in a partner. In searching for potential partners, users can access 'women advertising for men', or 'men advertising for women', or whatever combination is made available by the site owners. Users are then presented with brief descriptions structured via categories that may include, age, location, employment, interests and other specific attributes which are hyperlinked to longer descriptions of potential partners.

## **Researching the virtual**

The terms 'dating', 'dates', 'romance' and 'lonely heart' were entered into six common search engines and two multiple search engines. It was decided to focus on single heterosexuals who appear to constitute the largest sector of the dating market, both in print media (Jagger, 2001), and on the internet and to avoid sites which were otherwise exclusive with regard to such variables as religion. The owners of four internet dating sites originated in the UK were approached and agreed to collaborate in the research. The objectives of these sites that were displayed to users had a common theme of facilitating 'partnership' and the identification of a 'soulmate'. In this the sites represent those that cater to people who are concerned to find a long-term relationship. However, does not preclude the use of the sites studied to find or initiate other forms of relationship. A advertisement for the research was displayed on the dating site from which users could follow a link to the study Web site (Jones, 1999). Here the project was described so that users were able to provide informed consent to participation and be assured that their identities would remain confidential (Mann and Stewart, 2000). While research on newsgroups commonly analyses and provides examples of posted exchanges, email correspondence within dating sites is not public and it would be difficult to establish the consent of users to access to such material. This paper utilises the responses from an email based questionnaire that included yes/no box questions and open-ended responses. It fell into four sections: the first asked general questions about relationships, dating sites and the internet, the

following two parts explored experiences in contacting and meeting others and the final section collected profiling information.

A total of 437 completed questionnaires from users of these sites were received (men = 294, women = 143). All had visited several dating sites and many had used both free-to-users and fee based sites. They were resident in places across the UK and, when employed, about two thirds worked in occupations classified as falling into social classes I, II and III (non-manual). The analytical package 'Ethnograph' was employed to support a detailed reading, re-reading and categorisation of the resulting text (Silverman, 1996). Analysis proceeded by a systematic examination of the data in order to identify significant themes from which categories were defined (Bartlett and Payne, 1996).

### **Meetings though the internet: pure relationships or impoverished meetings?**

The use of internet dating sites as a means to meet partners operates in stark contrast to traditional ideologies of romantic love (in which individuals physically meet and 'fall in love' with each other). Giddens (1992) argues that the development of our 'late modern' era is associated with the erosion of traditional forms of close personal relationships and the increased significance of 'pure relationships'. Entered into for their 'own sake', for the intrinsic satisfactions they offer, pure relationships eschew tradition and contract, and are maintained only while they 'deliver enough satisfactions' to induce individuals to 'stay within' them (Giddens, 1992: 58). Characteristic of pure relationships is 'confluent love', a contingent love based on 'opening oneself out to the other' (ibid. 61). This form of intimacy involves the maintenance of 'clear personal boundaries' rather than an absorption into the other (Bataille, 1962). It is 'above all a matter of emotional communication, with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality' (Giddens, 1992: 130). The consequent vision of a highly discursive, disembodied late modern intimacy based on talk rather than passion, negotiation rather than commitment, and the advancement of the self rather than the development of the couple suggest that the internet is uniquely placed to facilitate such relationships.

If there is a strong affinity between Giddens's identification of pure relationships and the potentialities afforded by the internet, it is based on the idea that we are living in an age which enables us to reconstruct our self-identities and recraft our bodies by reducing the constraint of our organic existence and facilitating our development as 'information processing devices' (Haraway, 1985: 102–3). Giddens (1991) conceives of the self in the contemporary era as a reflexive project, maintained by the construction of biographical narratives and developed through an engagement in relationships and activities that can enhance that narrative. Thus, the self is an essentially cognitive phenomenon (Shilling, 1997a). The idea that self-narratives can be

written and rewritten is also a common feature of writings on the internet. As Kirby (1997: 129–30) argues, these imaginings suggest that ‘freed from the wet net of any carnal moorings, there are no apparent limits to the complex identities that . . . virtual life may assume’. Not all writers on the internet, however, are optimists concerning its consequences. Heim (1992: 76) is concerned that the internet may promote a moral indifference in people’s private relationships by putting individuals in contact with, but at a distance from, the concerns, anxieties and vulnerabilities of others. Such a view resonates with Bauman’s (1993) conception of ‘postmodern tourists’; individuals who utilise the technological possibilities available to them for increasing their experience and pleasure, yet who do so by protecting themselves from any sense of moral responsibility for the other. Goffman (1983) anticipated these concerns by referring to mediated interactions as ‘reduced versions of the primordial real thing’ (2). For Goffman it is the domain of the copresent ‘interaction order’ in which the authentic social self and moral relationships are created and maintained.

### **Entering into virtual encounters**

As we have noted internet sites provide users with a more or less open environment which they can tailor meet their needs. For those that create descriptions of themselves in the form of advertisements this extends to deciding content, length and on some sites whether to include a small photograph. Reliance on only textual descriptions provides individuals with the potential to present themselves unhindered by visual images, and mostly unencumbered by the need to negotiate those shared ‘vocabularies of bodily idiom’ that Goffman (1963, 1969) suggested is central to the ‘presentation of self’ in public. This is because text renders invisible outward signs of dress, bearing, posture, movement, facial decorations and emotional expressions that are usually so important in determining how individuals respond to us, and how we come to perceive ourselves (Goffman, 1963: 33). As one man commented in a illustrative response about the perceived benefits of the digital medium:

I value the flexibility and control it gives compared to newspaper advertisements . . . I would not put up a photograph because it cannot say much about me. Describing your life and yourself is not simple but gives a much better picture of the true person than any amount of pictures. It is also much easier to get to know someone on the Web and there is a record of everything that is written so I can look back on them. The main difference from paper dating is that I dip in and out of it whenever I want, have any number of conversation going at the same time and get to really know people. Reading what someone has written and getting into what amounts to sending letters is the best way to get close to someone quickly because

you both have time to reflect and think. Very different to chat rooms! (questionnaire, 82)

For some users, and women in particular, the internet offers a space for emotional expression that is perceived to be unavailable in elsewhere.

One of the main things I found when I started using Interdate was that I could have conversations with men that would not have happened if I met them in person. I feel like you communicate on a different level on the Web. It allows you to get into emotional things that men often don't feel comfortable with unless they have known you for a long time. (questionnaire, 359)

Intimidation, harassment and flaming (abusing someone in public environments such as newsgroups) is common in some virtual spaces (Spender, 1995) but appears to largely absent from exchanges within dating sites. Beth, who worked as a network manager, captures the way dating sites provide a space that is not conducive to harassment.

I've been flamed in a group by men who are simply out to abuse women who use the WWW. Sexism is a common experience for women in the IT industry but it is not something that I have experienced when I've used Net Dating. Some guys post what they think are macho descriptions but you can choose to ignore those. All the men I've emailed have been really interesting and when I have decided to end a correspondence I have not encountered any abuse. (questionnaire, 97)

## **Negotiating relationships**

Once a user has made contact with another member of a dating site through the internal email system a decision has to be made about whether to enter into an exchange of messages or to simply ignore the invitation. This simple opportunity provides a sense of control experienced by users that some described as 'liberating' them from what they see as the limitations or possible embarrassments of encounters in off-line. As one woman put it:

It may sound odd but it is wonderful to be liberated from the usual guff that is involved in trying to meet someone new. I feel none of the inhibitions I am used to because I can choose when and if I reply or contact a guy. (questionnaire, 247)

While internet dating sites may free individuals from many of the encumbrances associated with copresent meetings, they also remove initial contacts from those multiple visual clues which are 'given off' by copresent others

(Goffman, 1967). In this context, it is revealing that users' experiences of establishing and maintaining interaction with others approximated much more closely to Goffman's view that interaction proceeds via rituals and norms that protect the self rather than to a vision of the internet as a revolutionary social space. Paul's comments are revealing in this respect:

There's what you might call a set of unwritten rules or manners that you follow on these sites. It is not done on this site to come on with a lot of sexual content because that is not appropriate to what people expect or want from it. People who want that would be using a different bit of the WWW. You also work out with people how quickly they expect you to reply to them and the sort of depth you feel appropriate to get on with someone who starts out as a stranger. I'd say it was rather like dancing where you get two people who learn how to move together. (questionnaire, 101)

Goffman (1983) argued that the 'interaction order', the domain of face-to-face relations of copresence, constituted the arena in which people developed and maintained a morally acceptable social self, and was informed by a battery of rules designed to protect individuals. These rules were necessary, and were widely shared, because copresent interaction makes people vulnerable to physical assault and to assaults on their sense of self (Goffman, 1983: 4). Interactional 'rules' facilitate the building of 'trust' between participants and the supporting and saving of 'face' (Goffman, 1967). When they are broken, the identity and trustworthiness of the culpable party becomes 'tainted'; their behaviour is seen as evidence of 'weakness . . . moral guilt and other unenviable attributes' (Goffman, 1956: 266). Authenticity, reciprocal revelation of personal details, the building of trust, turn taking, and the dialogical establishment of intimacy may be characteristics of a 'new' form of 'pure relationship', then, but they have long been considered key to interaction rituals.

The significance and sensitivity to rituals is evident in the following comment from a John who used a wheelchair following a motorbike accident five years previously:

Once I put that in my general description but I found I got 'sympathy' mail. In my experience women find it difficult to get beyond the chair if they don't know you and you just meet casually in a pub or whatever. Now I hold off a little before I explain about the accident and that I'm in a wheelchair. The advantage of the system it allows me to decide when to reveal this aspect of my life which I don't want potential girlfriends to see as the thing that defines me. So I've got to know a girl and to some extent come to trust that once she knows about the chair we can get that over with and decide whether to keep in touch or move on. (questionnaire, 185)

Here the textual basis of interactions removes the immediacy of bodily disability which define and shape off-line conversations (Robillard, 1999). There



is therefore a process whereby people open themselves up to the other in an attempt to evaluate compatibility by, for example, adopting a playful and ironic self-description. Judith described this process as ‘flirting’:

I like to flirt and to get messages (emails) from men who I have found or have found me. I tell them a bit about me and they say a bit about themselves and that can be fun. I sound like a tease. The point is I like to be able to trust them before I reveal too many details about me. (questionnaire, 36)

As has been noted in relation to email exchanges in other internet environments such sociability can be undertaken ‘for its own sake’ where it is often underpinned by a desire to establish ‘trustworthiness’ (Parks and Floyd, 1996).

Interactions are maintained only for as long as both parties agree so should they feel uncomfortable with a particular correspondence they can simply withdraw from it. As Mary explained:

I get into quite a lot of emails from men because I don’t have to worry about cutting them off or come to that if they cut me out. Not like reality where the ego might get a bit of a battering! (questionnaire, 347)

In communications which proceed smoothly, shared ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ are often exchanged as a means of establishing more regular and serious contact. A common theme concerns the ‘pace’ of communication whereby a rhythm is established so that it is anticipated that an email will arrive, for example, every day. There is also a widely held expectation that there should be ‘turn taking’ in email exchange whereby emails should be exchanged on a one-for-one basis. Should an email not be responded to after a ‘reasonable time’ users see it as a signal that the relationship had come to end. This was accompanied by a balance between what is described as ‘coming on too strongly’ and ‘appearing uninterested’ that also underpins interaction rituals (Goffman, 1967, 1983). In email correspondences that continues, the discernible skepticism often characterising initial exchanges generally falls away the longer and apparently more self revealing the interchange becomes. The other becomes known and trusted through a mutual process of revealing the self. Penny provides a graphic illustration of how she perceives this process:

If I had to sum up what it is like getting to know people here I would say it is like a striptease! What I mean is that I start with a full clothed version of me that I put up as an advertisement – makeup and posh frock to get men interested! Then as I write emails and get to know someone I reveal more of the real me and if we both seem to like what we see of each other we might arrange a meeting. If I decide I’m no longer interested I can easily say so and that is the end of it. (questionnaire, 87)

From the posting of a self description on a dating site to the exchange of email with others, users are concerned about the possible discrepancy between 'cyberselves' and 'real selves'. Indeed the latter is often referred to as to as an important aspect of describing the self in email exchanges. In contrast to what is usually written about the nature of internet interactions, users feel obliged anchor their on-line identity in their off-line embodied self. There is a similarity here with personal home pages where people depict themselves and sometimes their family in a generally truthful manner (Chandler, 1998; Hardey, 2002a). Moreover, while individuals could always embellish or lie about their appearance, self presentation is underpinned by the knowledge that a off-line meeting would involve a manifesting the virtual self in a reassertion of the obduracy of the corporeal self (Stone, 1991; Shilling, 1993). One man encapsulated the dilemma:

It would be easy to make up some really appealing description and even stick a photograph up of some good looking bloke. I'd want think people were honest about themselves and there is no point in pretending to something that you are not. That is not to say that I would not advertise my good points! (questionnaire, 301)

In off-line meetings with strangers there is a prioritisation of bodily attraction that is replaced by an emphasis on textual adroitness in on-line meetings. As John's account suggests, the body no longer 'sizes our attention (and that of others)' (Williams, 1998: 61) but becomes something that is defined and managed through textual interaction. How the body is written and read creates a space for negotiation and disjunctures between the lived body and how it is seen by others. The domain of internet dating is, therefore, a space in which individuals seek to close the gap between the embodied and disembodied self, the public and the private individual, and anonymity and intimacy. While many commentaries on the internet highlight the possibilities it facilitates for forging new selves and new relationships unencumbered by the constraints of time, place and body (eg, Featherstone and Burrows, 1995), the users of these sites are concerned to translate virtual relationships into meetings between flesh and blood individuals.

### **From virtual interaction to copresence**

In a study of internet communities Rheingold (1993) has commented that when community members meet in the real world the relationship is, in a sense, 'backwards' because they are already familiar with much of each others lives. Studies of people who have formed off-line relationships through meeting in chat rooms or MUDs underscore the importance users attached to this process (Baker, 1998). This sense of already 'knowing the other' is an important aspect of how users negotiate the transition to a meeting. The

process may also be accompanied by one or more phone conversation as Sally explains:

In my experience there is mutual common ground in likes and dislikes and so on. It does not take many notes to see whether you get on with someone and then it naturally moves onto a meeting. John, who was a nice guy but there was no spark between us, wanted to go to the same exhibition as me so we swapped mobile numbers and fixed to meet for coffee before we went in . . . I've not felt any of the awkwardness I have felt when I've had completely blind dates. (questionnaire, 254)

The process of 'getting-to-know' the other through email contributes to a sense of mutual trust. This reduces the risks and potential embarrassment of what would otherwise be a first-acquaintance meeting. Nevertheless, there is an inevitable gap between the virtual world of the internet and the reality of copresent meetings. There is a certain 'shock' of presence involved in meeting physically an individual who was previously known only as a 'sensitive', 'funny', 'open' writer of emails. No matter how open and honest individuals have been, meeting each other in the flesh was the crucial test for previously virtual relationships. The tensions of such meetings are reflected in the comments of Helen who had met two men:

What strikes me about meeting in the flesh is the way no amount of description can prepare you for the real appearance. The two men I met did not look how I imagined. Not that they misled me, it is just that normally when you meet people you know what they look like at the same time. (questionnaire, 82)

The novelty of physical presence could sometimes be a 'pleasant surprise', but could also lead to the opposite experience as one man explained:

She was not my type. Came as a bit of a shock as I thought I'd got to know her. It was just that I instantly realised that I would not fancy her. Not that she told me tales about her looks. Suppose I wanted her to look like my ideal woman. (questionnaire, 418).

Other users expressed awareness of this risk and, after they felt they could trust the other, some exchanged photographs. Juliet explains this strategy:

I send my picture to men who I think I get on with. I expect them to do the same. This way I can at least see if they have all their hair! Meeting is also much easier because that basic 'is he my type' stuff is out of the way to some extent and you will at least recognise each other. (questionnaire, 326).

It should also be noted that appearance is not the only component of physicality involved in negotiating relationships. The apparent 'death of distance' is a theme that has been celebrated in writing about the internet (Rheingold, 1993). However, distance helps to anchor users and interactions in the space provided by internet dating. As one user commented in a response about the limitations of internet dating:

Where other people live is very important. However wonderful a woman sounds there is no point in contacting her if she lives at the other end of the country! . . . I went out for a short time with someone I met here but we lived too far apart for the relationship to go anywhere. (questionnaire, 18)

## **Conclusion**

The internet has been interpreted as leading to the emergence of a distinction between the embodied self, and disembodied, multiple cyberselves. At their most utopian, these analyses suggest that on-line identities are 'disengaged from gender, ethnicity and other problematic constructions' and 'float free of biological and sociocultural determinant' (Dery, 1993: 560–1). This focus is less revealing than it might first appear, however, because the embodied lives, identities and material circumstances of users are themselves significant in affecting patterns of access to and use of the internet. As suggested in the introduction, the environment of internet dating provides us with an example of how the real world acts as a casing for this virtual media. Changing household patterns and class biased trends in internet use, for example, have fed a demand for this mode of dating and influenced who is able to make use of it.

It would be a mistake, however, to underestimate the changes facilitated by the internet. While Giddens's conception of 'pure relationships' may ultimately constitute an unrealistic ideal, rather than a valid ideal type (Shilling, 1997b), the internet does provide a medium in which individuals engage in a communicative process of building up trust, of self-disclosure, and of exploring the other in relation to one's own reflexively constructed needs and desires. While this paper is based on the predominate form of dating site it would be imprudent to ignore the diversity of dating and other sites through which people can arrange off-line meetings. There are, for example a growing number of sites that promise to arrange relationships between people located in different countries that exploit economic deprivation in for example, Eastern Europe and Asia. Within the gay community the internet is being increasingly used to meet people and arrange social events. However, there is the common use of the internet as different starting point for off-line relationships. The general preference for text based description over photographs in the sites examined here suggests that, at least in the first stages of a

relationship, communicative appeal is less subordinated to physical attraction than in other social contexts. However, these conditions do not mean the end of interaction rituals. Widely shared norms appear to have emerged that include turn taking in the sending of emails, reciprocity in disclosing details about the self, and respecting other people's presentations of self, that mirror those characteristic of daily life (Goffman, 1983). In this respect, the workings of dating sites do not appear to support Heim's (1992) concern that the internet will empty the moral content from relationships. Just taken at the level of virtual sociability, users experience rich and diverting relationships, that are not the shallow and impoverished exchanges feared by some (Stoll, 1995).

If dating sites have not made anachronistic interaction rituals, neither have they obliterated the body. While the internet may facilitate, at least in the early stages of dating, a lightening of corporeal constraints, the desires of users to physically meet a suitable partner (and the disappointments of those who have terminated contacts with others once they have seen them) illustrates the limitations of virtual relations which 'never attain the thickness of flesh' (Ihde, 1998). The knowledge that individuals have of each other has, as we have seen, 'smoothed the way' for meetings. For women, in particular, interacting with strangers through dating sites appears to offer some protection against on-line harassment and social inhibitions about initiating contact with men fall away. For individuals who meet for the first time having communicated via dating sites, however, physically copresent interaction still has to be managed in a manner which consolidates the dyadic encounter and avoids those slips, gaffs and embarrassments which can result in 'blushing, fumbling, stuttering' and the failure of a relationship (Goffman, 1956: 264–7). However, such meetings may still be disappointing when physical copresence fails to match the expectation of one or both individuals.

The environment discussed in this paper represents one of many areas within the internet where the self may be articulated and explored but is unlikely to be transcended or reconstructed into any number of virtual selves. The casing of the off-line world in such spaces remains important because it shapes whether, how and why people turn to the internet. Internet dating sites are but one example of a growing number of virtual places that are devised to have a potential impact on users off-line lifestyles. Indeed many of the new resources that developed for the internet have been designed to address or fulfil off-line needs. The growing number of internet sites that provide health information, for example, do so by grounding information in the symptoms and experiences of real users in the real world (Hardey, 2002b). The way participants in welfare related newsgroups provide advice and support has also been shown to be anchored in their own, as opposed to fantasy experiences, to the degree that users may flame anyone they see as inauthentic (Burrows *et al.*, 2000; Burrows and Nettleton, 2000). What is known as community informatics is built around the assumption that the physical locality where people live may be enhanced by the development of a virtual space (Keeble and

Loader, 2001). Rather than visions of another 'life-world' (Benedikt, 1999) occupied by users with multiple identities (Haraway, 1985) the internet for many is just a different space where they may meet others and make use of a vast number of services and resources.

The nature of the internet and its social consequences discussed in this paper is, then, different from its common image as a realm dominated by the unreal, fantastic and imagined multiple selves (cf. Gibson, 1984; Turkle, 1995; Stone, 1996). Within the domains of MUDs and chat rooms people can remain anonymous and derive satisfactions from the disembodied interactions that take place, yet as the use of the internet has grown it has become increasingly used in ways that are grounded in pre-existing social and economic processes. The anonymity of individuals that characterises dating sites rarely seems to facilitate the construction of fantasy selves, but acts as a foundation for the building of trust and establishing real world relationships. Rather than forming a distinct cyberspace culture, the internet is opening up new opportunities to shape the extant contours and contents of social life.

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