

Dating & Intimacy in the 21st Century: The Use of Online Dating Sites in Australia

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Abstract

This article examines the growing phenomenon of online dating and intimacy in the 21st century. The exponential rise of communications technologies, which is both reflective and constitutive of an increasingly networked and globalized society, has the potential to significantly influence the nature of intimacy in everyday life. Yet, to date, there has been a minimal response by sociologists to seek, describe and understand this influence. In this article, we present some of the key findings of our research on online dating in Australia, in order to foster a debate about the sociological impacts on intimacy in the postmodern world. Based on a web audit of more than 60 online dating sites and in-depth interviews with 23 users of online dating services, we argue that recent global trends are influencing the uptake of online technologies for the purposes of forming intimate relations. Further, some of the mediating effects of these technologies – in particular, the *hypercommunication* – may have specific implications for the nature of intimacy in the global era.

Keywords: Dating; intimacy; technology

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Finding a Partner

Chantelle: *I just wanted to find someone who wanted to live the rest of their life with me! That sounds old-fashioned. I don't really care what anyone else thinks. I just wanted to meet someone...*

Using Online Dating Sites

Chantelle: *I just thought it was convenient, practical. Just a good approach. The same way as I would deal with work. You know, when it comes to issues of work or home, you know, I try to tackle things head on and I just thought it was about time... I mean, you spend all this time pushing yourself in your career... Why wouldn't you do that with your emotional life, with your romantic life?...*

Introduction

Chantelle's comments are fairly typical of the participants in our study of online dating in Australia and we believe they reflect a growing reality for many professional women and men in the 21st century. For many in the West, access to a good lifestyle, free from the economic, reproductive and social constraints of the past, does not automatically lead to success and happiness on the emotional, intimate and personal front. As a result, a growing number of people are openly expressing the desire for long-term intimate relationships, and actively seeking someone with whom to share their lives.

Looking for 'Mr or Ms Right' remains a key personal and social objective for many, although the search has become a thoroughly modern or rather postmodern, exercise. Using information and communications technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet, (with its accompanying features such as instant messaging systems; short-messaging-systems (sms) and chat-rooms), looking for love, intimacy, friendship and sex has become a highly popular activity (approx 40 million globally in 2004: Jupiter Research 2006). There has been an exponential growth in the number and nature of online dating sites globally, for example, Kornblum (2003), a journalist from the USA Today, reported that in the US alone '(o)nlinedating sites attract about 20% of the Internet population, and Jupiter Research predicts huge growth'.

As sociologists, we are interested in examining the reasons for these trends and critically understanding, if, how and why they influence the actual nature of dating and intimacy in the 21st century. Drawing upon key sociological ideas about the late postmodern society, as global, networked and mobile (for example, Castells 2001; 2000; Giddens 1999a; 1999b; 1992; 1991; Beck 1992); the place of emotion and intimacy as explored by Bauman (2003), Jamison (1998) and Giddens (1992); a view of technology/cyberspace as fundamentally complex and multi-faceted part of the social fabric of everyday life (Wajcman 2004; Baym 1998; Jones 1998; 1997; Doheny-Farina 1996; Dutton 1996; Wellman et al 1996; Bijker, Hughes & Pinch 1987; MacKenzie & Wajcman 1985)¹, this paper examines some of the complexity of dating and intimacy online in Australia in the 21st century. At its core, we maintain that online interaction (and particularly those which involve emotion and intimacy),

are part of the *real* world, not separate from it (Stanley 2001). As a result, the consequences for people who choose to go online and to be intimate are *real*, and not imaginary. It is our contention that dating and intimacy in the 21st century is changing due to profound socio-cultural shifts arising primarily from the processes of globalisation and the development of and access to new forms of ICTs (see Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2004 and Barraket & Henry-Waring 2008).

Methodology

Our study of Australian online dating – *Virtual Connections? Exploring Intimacies in Cyberspace* – started in 2004 and was based at the University of Melbourne. Its key aims were to: map the nature and scope of online dating trends in Australia; explore the effects of online ICTs on intimate connections, both off and online; and develop a robust theoretical framework and refined methodology for further research in this emerging area. The methodology included a *web audit* (a detailed review of the style and features of a web site over a predetermined period of time) of more than sixty (60) online dating sites, and in-depth interviews with twenty-three (23) users of online dating services. The web audit was carried out on commercial heterosexual dating and relationship web-sites (those with over 10,000 registered members) aimed at Australian and NZ audiences over a three (3) month period in 2004 (August-November). Participants² were sourced via a snowball sampling technique of personal contacts and via a web campaign and specifically designed study website. Our sample consisted of five (5) men and eighteen (18) women ranging in age from 25 to 62 who were resident in Australia. The majority of participants identified as heterosexual, with one person identifying as gay and three of *fluid sexuality*. Participants had to be current or past members of an online dating website based in Australia. Interviews took place via face-face, telephone, email and or via Instant Messenger (IM). The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically using an examination of rhetorical recursions through a wider interpretive perspective that acknowledged the ongoing construction and negotiation of social experience by seeking to reveal and understand the viewpoint of the actors involved.

Key Findings

In this paper, our focus is upon developing sociological understandings of the growth in and the contradictory possibilities of online dating, using an interpretive framework, which centres the experiences of the participants involved. Specifically we aim to answer the following questions:

- Why are people using online dating services?
- How are people communicating online?
- In what ways do people connect emotionally and intimately on and off-line?
- Does online dating alter the very nature of intimacy, emotion and dating?

First, we examine some of the reasons why participants in our study used online dating as a means of finding intimate relationships. We do acknowledge here that while people go online to find different types of intimacy, some for instant sexual gratification, others for intellectual intimacy, friendship and/or longer term commitment, our focus is primarily upon the latter.

Finding Intimacy/Love Online

Online dating has become a highly profitable business in its own right. A report by Jupiter Research in 2006 reveals that online dating revenues in Europe will grow 43% from €160 million in 2005 to €228 million in 2006.

We argue that global trends such as the demands of the knowledge economy, labour market mobility, the rise of transport technologies, changing household demographics alongside a presumed detraditionalisation of intimacy in western societies are influencing the uptake of online technologies for the purposes of forming intimate relations. This view is supported by existing data from the limited empirical literature, which has explicitly explored on and offline dating and romance in Canadian, UK, and US contexts (Madden & Lenhart 2006; Hardey 2002; Brym & Lenton 2001; Albright & Conran 1995; Lea & Spears 1995).

In addition, there is a range of other factors that have led to the growth of people using online dating sites. One key factor remains the seemingly innate desire for humans to form intimate relationships. Referring back to Chantelle's comments outlined at the beginning of the paper:

Chantelle: I just wanted to find someone who wanted to live the rest of their life with me! That sounds old-fashioned. I don't really care what anyone else thinks. I just wanted to meet someone... Look, I guess, maybe a soul mate, maybe that's what I'm saying, but someone who respected me. Someone who, you know had the same values... I wanted to meet someone who I feel totally comfortable with...

It is evident that, despite key global changes in society, on a personal level, many people like Chantelle who have greater individual independence than their forebears, are still interested in having a monogamous long-term intimate relationship; a relationship where notions of equality, intimacy and for some, children, are important features. Viewing these relationships as an ideal draws upon what Giddens (1992; 1999b) refers to as the 'pure relationship' – where there is active ongoing trust, an opening up of oneself to another. For Giddens, late modern society represents an opportunity for improvement but for Bauman (2003), it signifies a 'de-learning of love; a 'trained incapacity' for loving' (2003: 5). We have found instances of both these views within our study but as suggested by Jamison (1998), the reality is much more complex. Inequality, poor emotional and communicative skills with the resulting areas of tension and contradiction seem likely to remain key issues within the realm of personal relationships.

Nonetheless, the yearning question for Chantelle and others remains - how to find that special someone in an environment that appears to be one that Beck (1999) would term as 'risky', where conventional personal and public relationships operate in a constant state of flux. In a world full of risk, then, online dating acts as a useful medium/facilitator of emotion and intimacy. Indeed, as one of our participants put it:

Melody: I don't think it is as emotionally risky as putting yourself out there face to face in the hope of meeting someone.

Further as Havrilesky (2002), writes:

the anonymity of the medium, the prevalence of blogs, online photo galleries and personal Web sites, and the comfort most of us feel in corresponding entirely through e-mail have combined to make online dating a perfectly acceptable means of meeting new people. Demand creates supply. When you think for a minute about how inefficient and circuitous the traditional delivery system for meeting potential lovers is, it's not hard to see how we landed here. When your options are limited to getting set up by your friends, going out to parties or going to smoky bars in the hopes of getting drunk enough to knock over someone with a pulse, it's clear why shopping for a mate online has been embraced by mainstream America (no page, published online).

It is the ability of online dating to act as a seemingly faceless, impersonal medium on one hand, yet also offer something highly personal on the other that is part of its success. Further, the growing access to and demand for ICTs at home/work has enabled a fairly quick, cheap, and logical solution to the desire and yearning for intimacy. Chantelle goes on to state that she treated online dating as an extension of the rational go-getting ethos that she employs in her professional/work life – going online for dating purposes was therefore, logical, convenient and pro-active:

Chantelle: I just thought it was convenient, practical. Just a good approach. The same way as I would deal with work. You know, when it comes to issues of work or home, you know, I try to tackle things head on and I just thought it was about time... I mean, you spend all this time pushing yourself in your career, and you know, physically, women spend a lot of time taking care of themselves. Why wouldn't you do that with your emotional life, with your romantic life?...

This rational approach to an emotional, intimate and largely private issue was supported by the majority of our participants. Indeed, according to an Ipsos-Reid poll for *Lavalife*TM in 2002, a majority of Americans (52%) think that people have a better (44%) or at least equal (8%) chance of meeting someone they like online than at a single's bar. Four-in-ten (40%) think that a relationship initiated online has a better (32%) or equal (8%) chance of success than one initiated in a singles bar. And three-in-ten (29%) would (27%) or might (2%) recommend online dating as an alternative way of meeting other singles to their single. For many then, using online dating sites were a cheap, informal and fairly effective way of extending one's social and intimate network:

Marcus: It is generally an easy, low cost and low effort way to meet. There's not a high entry cost and no need to dress up or make a physical effort. It also acts as a bit of a screen when compared to looking for friends or partners in clubs/venues as you feel surer that the person is looking for connection rather than simply going out to dance or be with friends (rather than meeting someone new).

By providing an initial screening point, online dating sites removed some of the potentially embarrassing personal face-face features of dating and thus it has proved to be a particularly good way of dating, for shy people and for those who feel more comfortable writing rather than talking. As **Stuart** states:

Stuart: Essentially I'm a shy person regarding the pursuit of ladies, so the process works very well for me. I'm also articulate (oh and humble) and online gives me an opportunity to express myself in an informative and thought out way. 2. I like to see images of people that I'm talking to as well so online has this advantage. 3. I don't get out that much, so the incidence of interacting with femmes is increased massively through online means. 4. I really really enjoy expressing myself through the written medium and I discover tonnes about me in the process. I love talking to people about stuff and it feeds my philosophical bent

A number of our participants talked about the 'personal reciprocity' of the medium – i.e. how they learnt a lot about themselves in the process. For example, **Destiny** states:

Destiny: My girlfriend thought I was nuts, but I learned a heap about myself and relationships in a short time...sped up the learning curve and made some decisions about what / who I was looking for. Each man I met had some characteristics that attracted me and some that didn't I got to know who I was, and what I wanted, so I could take a stand about that rather than taking whoever

came my way...[it was] the most interesting personal development exercise of my life

Online dating sites then, provided the tools and space with which to reveal and find the Self. Thus, new personal and interpersonal skills were learnt (see Goffman 1959; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs 2006). For others, the fact that online dating sites are accessible from anywhere fitted in well with the longer hours they spend at work and the consumer on-demand feature of postmodern life. It also has the potential to transcend the aspects of everyday life and to be reflexivity, which can positive and re-affirming:

Marvin: I can do it at work. It's a nice distraction. Like I'm sitting there at work on a proposal, I've got my boss breathing down my neck, I've got all this shit to do, and then you get an email from someone, saying, "Hey, I think you're cute" and I think, "Well, geez, that brightens my day!" I go, "Alright, great!" And so I can do it at work. And that's the best part about it, I suppose. It's a nice distraction from everyday life. And it can... you might meet up with that person for a drink after work, and you never know...

The potentiality of online dating – not knowing who, when or where you might meet someone is a very attractive and sometimes quite addictive/compelling feature. It opens up the constant promise of finding someone, somewhere, anywhere. As Penny describes:

Penny: I just think it's a wonderful way to meet people, I really do, and a wonderful way for another person to show another side of themselves... it's just a different way of meeting people.

Nonetheless, a few of our participants expressed scepticism too about the nature of online dating:

Augustus: I think it's a great benefit. At the same time, it felt to me quite artificial at times, even though you were both there for kind of similar purposes and you both understood, to some extent, what was going on through using the same medium. I'd find quite often I was having conversations with people at the outset about how weird it was to meet people in this kind of way. And sometimes, it just didn't really get beyond that point with people.

The sense that online dating is somehow not real is bound up with notions of the cyberspace as being somehow separate, and disembodied, from 'real life'. However, the time and emotional investment that people put into online dating strongly suggests that they *do* and they *want to* feel *embodied* and want their interactions to be treated with honesty and respect, as the consequences are real and deeply personal. Although the definition of intimacy and type of relationship may vary, most of our participants wanted to establish 'bodily'; 'fleshmeet' contact (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs 2006). It does lead us to question though, what is normal in the context of dating, on or off-line?

In another sense, one of our participants queried the overall nature of all intimate relationships and in doing so, reflected some of the concerns of Bauman (2003) that relationships in modern society are becoming far too fragile, in effect that love and intimate relationships have become 'liquid':

Francine: On one hand I think it's a wonderful way of, you know, meeting people easily, quickly, you know...But then I just wondered more generally for society whether it makes everything too easy, so it can lend itself to society becoming even more impermanent, relationships even more fragile. It's just too

easy to meet people, too easy to cycle through people, so it kind of accelerates the disintegration of long-term relationships.

For Bauman (2003), relationships and love has become so 'liquid' that there is now a lack of know-how about sustaining long-term relationships. He maintains that personal relationships then are entirely 'disposable', and thus 'the facility of disengagement and termination on-demand do not reduce the risks; they only distribute them, together with the anxieties they exhale, differently' (pxiii). As Shirley points out, although online dating has been good for her on one level, she still has concerns about its long-term viability:

Shirley: I've found it generally to be a good way of meeting people and it definitely has given me good experience in dating, which I needed after 13 years of being married. I'm now at a point where I'm fairly cynical about whether I'll ever have success with it and am thinking about other ways of meeting men.

For Shirley then, online dating provided her with a set of useful skills for meeting partners, something she identified as not having before. Nevertheless, while online dating is gaining in popularity particularly among the under 35s, there remain some misgivings and stigma associated with this activity (Kornblum 2003). We found that a number of the participants in our study felt uneasy about telling people that they met their partner online, even though some had 'success' stories.

Chantelle: I'm not shy about telling people how we met, but I think though ... we are a little bit specific with regards to that. A lot of my friends know. A lot of his friends know. I'm not sure if all of John's family knows, necessarily, but for example, I have not told my parents, and I wouldn't... I was quite clear that I wasn't going to tell them, initially, because I think they would have been really shocked. I don't know how they envisage internet dating ... Like, it's curious as to who we've chosen to tell, and who we haven't. But most people do know, most of our friends know, and the others don't... People... I mean, I'm not sure why that's such an issue anyway. Why does everybody have to know how we met anyway?

Marcus: Not really- however although online dating is getting more popular I still feel that there is a stigma about it- I feel embarrassed telling friends that I met someone off line. It seems that even though many people do it they don't necessarily seek to publicise it to their friends and I think many people have lied about how they've met their partners

Melody: Despite the numbers of people who seem to be doing it, I still feel there is a social stigma against the concept of online dating, and this was one of things that held me back from trying it to begin with, and even now, I am very selective about who I tell I am doing it.

Overall, the participants in our study confirmed that there were a number of factors which led them to use online dating services. We have argued elsewhere (Barraket & Henry-Waring 2004; 2008) that changes to the wider social context which included a rising consumer culture alongside greater personal independence meant that they had less time, space and access to conventional forms of dating but at the same time they also had greater access to ICTs (see also Brym & Lenton 2001). A convergence between globalisation, ICTs and the personal, emotional and intimate have led to the growth of online dating. Finding love/intimacy online then is becoming an everyday aspect of postmodern life. Indeed, it could be argued that this raises the potential of changing how we communicate as well as how we date.

Communicating Online

A central and important feature of using online dating services is drafting one's personal profile. It is your own personal 'shop window'. All of our participants viewed the profile as highly significant and maintained that there is a real skill in doing this well (a number of websites have specific personnel to help people (mostly men) information on how to write a good profile). The notion of how people see and present themselves has origins within sociology and most noticeably with the work of Erving Goffman (1959, also refer to Mead 1927).

Goffman's ideas about the presentation of Self in everyday life has often been applied to the construction of Self online – especially his concept of impression management – how we give (usually in spoken terms) but also how we 'give-off', (usually unspoken) impressions of ourselves. One of the problems with online profiles though is the fact that, sometimes there are prescribed options to which many people do not easily or comfortably fit. As Boyd (2001), argues that online, 'one has to construct one's identities through a series of pre-selected and prescribed options, specifically age, sex and location' (Boyd 2001: 2), which can be quite problematic. Nonetheless, the setting up of a profile remains key to establishing an online dating identity (Wynn & Katz 1997; Turkle 1995; Stone 1991). In an excellent paper, Heino and Gibbs (2006), found that people in their study paid attention to small cues, such as correct spelling and grammar from profiles and ensuing messages. Overall then, Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006):

suggest that participants were cognizant of the online setting and its association with deceptive communication practices, and therefore worked to present themselves as credible. In doing so, they drew upon the rules they had developed for assessing others and turned these practices into guidelines for their own self-presentational messages (p.430).

Further, Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) also noted that there were tensions between trying to portray an enhanced Self or a true Self in order to achieve intimacy, but that this was also true of offline relationships. Our study concurs. A large number of our participants spent a great deal of time crafting and re-crafting their profiles:

Chantelle: I changed it enormously at one point. I spent a great deal of time, and I thought what I came up with was really indicative of the type of person I am. I don't know how to explain it, but I read through a lot of the profiles to get an idea of what they were about, and they were, frankly, quite pedestrian. Mine wasn't sort of "out there" but it would be obvious to anyone that was reading it that I had a brain in my head, and you know, that was important, because I wanted to be realistic about it... There was one man that I didn't really date, but we had these great phone conversations ...He told me ... to 'just strip it back, take it back to the basics' ... So I decided to do that, so ditched that one completely. Came up with a very simple one.

Responding to feedback from someone online with whom Chantelle found an intellectual connection was part of a constructive exchange, which she took on board. Clearly Chantelle was trying to be as accurate as possible about herself and her wishes for a certain type of partner, but had made it more complicated than it needed to be.

With regard to other types of textual communication, there was clearly a hive of activity between potential partners online. Many found it easier to write and express themselves emotionally and more revealingly than they would do in face-face interactions. As a result, similar to Walther's (1996) concept of 'hyperpersonal communication', we have found that

there is a type of '*hypercommunication*' occurring both in terms of the types of communication, but also the speed and intensity of the contact (Henderson & Gilding 2004; Cooper, Delmonico & Burg 2000). Harvey and Shalom (1997) have suggested that key aspects of intimacy are negotiated through language. Consistent with Giddens' construction of 'pure relationships', they observe that "lovers characteristically talk reflexively, recursively about their feelings for each other", arguing that, as an effect of reflexivity, the verbal medium is central in the process of developing and sustaining relations founded upon love and desire (Harvey & Shalom 1997: 2). This may well be the case in conventional face-face interactions, but it can also happen albeit differently in online settings. There is research which shows the informal and dis-inhibitive nature of email exchanges and Gilding (2002) for example notes that this is one feature of online/cyber relationships (see also Donath 2004; Jagger 1998).

In terms of visual forms of communication, the use of photos online has been a contentious issue, particularly in the earlier days of online dating.

Francine: it was rarer for people to put photos up, and I preferred that, because then it's just your personality, your writing, to sell yourself, which I'm comfortable with that. And whereas now, when I've looked at it last, there's much more about 80% of people have their photos up, and you get the feeling it's a bit more like a model parade, and you have to do "good photo". And so I find that really off-putting.

Patsy: I also saw a profile of an ex-boyfriend and at that point, somehow I went off the whole idea of having my photo and details on a website for anyone to see. After that, I didn't bother to use up the remainder of my membership.

Now photos are a key and popular feature, and the fact that one can restrict access to everyone viewing your photo on most sites, serves as some protection and control. However, many of our participants talked about the fact that people are judged on the basis of how they look, but also how these photos and profiles 'talk' online:

Stacey: I've responded to some people based on their photos, and perhaps haven't read enough about them, or not read the right things into what they've said, and found them in the end of the day a little bit dull and boring, or too short, or ... And also, some of the photographs are pretty ordinary. I mean, I keep looking at some of them and thinking, "Oh my God, these people just need lessons in how to present themselves well." I mean, you're a product on the shelf, literally on the shelf, most of the time, and no-one's ever going to buy you if that's how you present yourself, both your picture and your profile. I mean, they're so unimaginative that they talk about walks on the beach and romantic candlelit dinners, all of them. ...Well, I guess the disadvantage is that you can make some snap judgements that are really, really incorrect. It's very unforgiving, or it can be.

The need to keep one's profile current and make it attractive enough to encourage potential partners to get in touch, is viewed as important and some sites are now providing 'quality control' measures on this, by offering dated photo services that allow users to verify the accuracy of potential dates' photographic representations. What these visual and textual tools say about a person implicitly and explicitly is read and analysed avidly by potential partners. Reading between the lines becomes a clearly defined skill. The need to speak and/or meet directly with people online is a priority for many of our participants as initial judgements are made and used frequently by all, but many admit that they can be too harsh. Indeed, a couple of respondents said that they reviewed their filtering mechanisms to actually

open up the 'pool' of potential partners because their perception was sometimes flawed. This was often most striking with the choice and selection of partners according to the photographs and a few participants began to use these less judgements. For example, Francine concedes:

Francine: I kind of lowered...my criteria when I realised that having really good chemistry on the email didn't mean you'd be super-compatible when you met. So now, in a way, they just have to meet fairly basic criteria, sound interesting, sound like we'd have something to talk about. Fairly standard stuff. And then I'd be happy to meet them

This confirms our view that despite the potential for online dating to open up new and different partners outside existing norms and conventions, many still use online dating as a way of finding someone similar rather than different. Hence, the possibility of extending the social/intimate circle is restricted rather than encouraged³.

In terms of verbal communication, only a very small number of our participants used devices that had verbal cues such as online video/recording. The main focus was upon using email, sms and instant messaging which was backed up by phone calls. However, what is significant here is the role of language – expressed either through speech or through text – in the formation, negotiation and production of intimacy. Donath (2004) suggests, 'As communication frequency increases, messages become more informal and intimate...Email is usually more informal, with features of both written and oral language; its users may omit greetings and sometimes send messages conversationally, in a series of rapid exchanges' (p.3). A combination of written and oral language then, email provides a deeply informal and intimate way of communicating, which can be highly flirtatious. However, it can also be seen as a disingenuous medium. Many of our participants reported that there was something insincere about the medium, which created a false sense of connection and intimacy:

Marcus: It can however, as do all online dating, create a false sense of intimacy where a couple of similar interests get magnified as a really strong connection which it isn't...You can find that you connect with someone and discover one or two things in common but the heightened level of interaction and the "goal" of finding someone often means that both parties take these aspects of commonality and rush to judgment that the connection is a success. It is the kind of optimism, which drives people to use the service, but can easily be inflated in people's minds. I have spoken to people, for example, who believe that it's fate that we've got in touch given we have "so much in common" when really it was more a coincidence that we were online at the same time and had fairly common things in common (food, bars, sporting interests etc). People often go online because they are lonely and desperate for a relationship- those people will often be keen to jump at the first person that fits some basic criteria they have.

For Marcus, this was primarily due to a perceived sense of loneliness and desperation which led to poor judgement. But, we would contend that this sense of connection and intimacy is a key part of the hypercommunication that takes place in online settings.

However, because the intention of the majority of those who go to online dating sites (compared to chat rooms) is to meet face-face, the information will tend to be more accurate (see Ellison, Heino & Gibbs 2006). As one of our participants puts it:

Bruce: I prefer to establish a face-to-face meeting ASAP with someone whose profile I like. I don't pursue getting to know someone online for more than a few email exchanges to arrange a meeting. I don't see the point in investing time to

learn about someone if the first face to face meeting is the last because they have personal hygiene problems, such as bad body odour, or there is some other fundamental deal breaker, e.g. women who say they are non-smokers who then light up on the first date. I don't like having my time wasted. I'm only looking for relationships in the real world, and ongoing virtual relationships have no attraction to me.

Bruce is very clear in his desire to 'fleshmeet'. The importance of meeting offline clearly shows how online dating is used by one participant as a precursor to the embodied experience of dating. The immediacy of the meeting indicates the desire to avoid devoting any unnecessary emotional energy to unsuitable partners. It also emphasises the need/desire to establish or confirm a connection that is possibly more tangible/conventional. We will now focus upon some of the reasons why people shift to an offline meeting or relationship.

From On to Offline Dating

In order to understand why people want to meet offline, it would be useful to look at how people connect online. It appears to be the case that most of our participants established deep, close and intimate connections online, a type of 'digital chemistry'. A few talked about the addictive nature of the medium, the buzz and thrill of meeting someone that connected with you. Many viewed it as a highly intense, intimate experience. For example, Betsy says:

Betsy: I got quite addicted to talking to someone in the States when I first started... I was so blown away that you could feel connected to someone via this medium, it was quite intoxicating

Destiny: I'm always excited about meeting someone new, getting to know them, seeing if there's chemistry, it's an adrenalin rush. For a while it was addictive...like it was my favourite activity - I had to have someone new on the go - getting to know them, organising a date for the next weekend. I'd get lonely if I wasn't in the process of getting to know someone new. I'd always be excited about the possibilities.

This sense of addiction and 'hyperness' that both Betsy and Destiny refer to reflects the nature of the medium and fits in with ideas about the instantaneous consumption characteristic of the late postmodern period. As Bauman (2003) cynically states:

Like other consumer goods, partnerships is for consumption on-the-spot (it does not require additional training or prolonged preparation) and for one-off use 'without prejudice'. First and foremost, it is eminently disposable (Bauman 2003: 12).

However, for many, this digital chemistry was not enough. Most of our participants wanted to take things further by meeting potential partners face-face to confirm if a viable and tangible connection was actually present. A number of our participants stressed the importance of meeting someone they connected with almost straight away to ensure that there is a real connection. Going back to Destiny's comments:

Destiny: I find I have to meet them to gauge whether we'll have a connection, in general, I've been attracted to someone's profile, had good chats by email and phone and then it's been a bomb when we've met...

Maddy: In fact, I like to meet straight away if possible; spending weeks emailing and phoning can be a waste if we're not physically attracted which is what usually

happens. So if they don't I suggest meeting early on in our contact, often the first time, I've even met guys the same day we met online!

Both these participants then, felt the need to meet people offline as soon as possible before too much was emotionally invested in the relationship. So although the digital chemistry was often intense, instantaneous and intimate, it was not always enough or enduring. Indeed, the significance of face-face meeting cannot be overstated. It tends to make or break the continuation of the relationship. Meeting someone face-face is also a highly subjective experience. As Augustus reveals, people can have different interpretations of the same event.

Augustus: I had extremely varied experiences of just some people who I kind of immediately felt more relaxed with, and others where I just thought, this whole thing is quite stilted, and I'm not really enjoying this. Although interestingly enough, that wasn't always the feedback I got from these people who I would go away from, thinking, "God, that was tortuous", and then get a message from them saying "Hi! I had great fun the other night! Do you want to meet up again?" and I'm going, God! It's amazing how differently people can read the same situation. But I suppose the only general feeling I've had is that I did find it quite odd, and it always felt that it was, to an extent, which is a kind of manufactured situation which, personally, I felt just didn't enable me to behave as naturally as I would

These different interpretations are not exclusive to online dating, but perhaps they do point to a question mark over the viability of digital chemistry. Augustus and others in our study do refer to the somewhat artificial nature of online dating as a potential barrier or impediment. But others point out that this artificiality also occurs within conventional dating settings. It may then be the sense, that online dating is much more unfamiliar, untried and untested, that leads to a feeling of being un-natural. Either way, it is evident that a focus on the physical, the embodied, the 'flesh' in all its foibles remains for many, a central factor and a key filter in finding and maintaining intimate relationships. To some extent, this is not really surprising considering the long-held conventions of dating in the West. Nonetheless, it did come as a shock to some participants how an online connection was not followed through into an offline setting. Expectations of an online relationship appeared to be to some extent higher than others, possibly due to the fact that people have deliberately selected and engaged in an emotionally intense and often intimate period of hypercommunication, with someone that they hope will be a partner.

In our view, the shift from online to off-line dating is as much about timing, connection, luck and compatibility as it is from moving from a casual date to a longer term commitment in a conventional sense. After all, dating of any kind is not an exact science, nor could it ever be. Nonetheless, it was evident throughout our study that participants want to examine tangible cues in person, as part of the process of moving to the next stage. It may well be because it is a set of skills that many have conventionally been used to using and deciphering. Either way, the need to fleshmeet is a key indicator of whether an online relationship will continue offline.

It is worth just noting here, that there were a few concerns about dishonesty and insincerity in online dating circles. This is reflected within the online dating industry, where some websites now offer more basic background checks and one in particular, True.comTM claims it will prosecute married people and criminals if they use their site⁴. However, notions of dishonesty and deception did not figure as key concerns in our study. But worryingly, there were instances which proved unsafe for a couple of the women participants in our study. For

one of the participants there was date-rape and for Betsy, it was a case of misguided trust and belief in her online partner⁵:

Betsy: I also have had a couple of experiences of regretting meeting/ sleeping with someone one was a guy I went to [the city] to see, and I actually felt quite 'obliged' to have sex with him, as I was staying at his house...and while that was ok, it was clear we didn't have much else in common, and it felt like a grubby experience by the end... I do think the way I met him had an impact. I think I mistook, for a time, a kind of sexual liberation that was in fact, very regulatory and pornographic about women...I think at a vulnerable time one is always open to misjudgement, but I think the medium made him sound much more similar to me - education, interests, passions... but this was not the case.

These examples imply that gender inequalities with their inherent power dimensions remain part of the online (and offline) dating experience. Far from the democratic notions of the 'pure relationships' as espoused by Giddens (1992), women still face degrading situations in their search for intimacy. Further, people's vulnerabilities are exploited on and offline. The online experience of dating intensifies and, due to its informal and more intimate nature, exposes individuals' emotions more openly than conventional dating, even if it is done online. To some extent, while it is a common-belief that an online relationship is largely un-messy, easily disposed and 'saving face', there is also a view that these relationships are also potentially the opposite too as there still remains a sense of emotional investment in the act of going online. As we noted in Henry-Waring and Barraket (2004), 'we assert that, 'the online is highly connected to the offline. The consequences are real, emotions are felt, and trust is given'. This raises the question, has online dating as an activity reconfigured the notions of intimacy and emotion, and if so, how?

Changes to Nature of Intimacy and Emotion?

We contend that there are changes to the notions of intimacy and emotion, but at the same time, we believe that online dating also reinforces existing norms and values. For example, whilst the medium has changed, the goal remains the same – to find a partner/partners. Thus as Marvin puts it:

Marvin: there is still a dance to be danced; there is still a game to be played, online and offline. There's still being aloof. The guy has to contact the girl. Well, I love it if the girl's contacted me, but I always try to embody that. I try to do the right thing and contact them and do all the follow-up, and I plan the dates, and everything, and that's purely, though, because I find a lot of girls are bad at making decisions. And I don't know what, that's just probably the girls that I'm meeting. They can't seem to decide what they want to do... But the etiquette's the same. Flirting is identical. I mean, you're people at the end of the day.

Marvin simultaneously laments and celebrates the fact that women have not challenged the status quo in terms of dating. The reliance on men as the initiators remains. This is reflected in the structure of some of the key websites which reinforce the norm of the man as the hunter and the women as the hunted. The features on websites such as the 'kisses' or 'smiles', encourage highly gendered activities (Hardey 2002). For example, it is expected for men online to still buy the opportunity to date (like buying dinner) by purchasing 'stamps'/'kisses' and for women to receive them (for example, www.Match.com and www.LavaLife.com). There is resistance to the gendered structure of online dating. For example, Maddy is happy to inform us how many partners she has had within a two-year period:

Maddy: Over the past two years I've met 41 guys from LavaLife™.

Maddy's active online dating record provides some indication of the relative success of looking for potential partners, if not actually finding one that she fully connects with. We could argue that on one level, online dating does appear to shift some aspects of the gendered nature of dating, where it is possible for women to take more of the initiative. However, these shifts need to be interpreted against the backdrop of centring and understanding the real structural and gendered inequalities that remain in late postmodern society. As such, women's (and to some extent men's) position in the online dating setting, needs to be interpreted carefully.

Clearly there is potential for real change in dating, but our evidence indicates that this is not occurring, not yet anyway. Indeed, whilst it is possible for online dating to herald in a new era of global mating, we have found that due to the structure of the sites; the ways in which personal profiles are drafted; search criteria are defined and the fact that people like to meet someone close-by, leads to evidence which suggests that the same people are meeting online as they do offline (also refer to Fiore & Donath 2004; Van Acker 2001). There is thus, very little trans-cultural exchange on mainstream sites than one would expect (Lee & Wong 2003; Orbuch & Fine 2003; Nakamura 2002; Kolko, Nakamura & Rodman 2000; Sharpe 1999)⁶. As we noted in Barraket and Henry-Waring (2004), 'this suggests that online technologies are simultaneously mediating new patterns of interactivity and reinforcing existing socio-cultural norms in the formation, erosion and reformation of intimate relationships'.

Summary and Conclusions

Despite growing material success for many in the developed West, finding happiness on an emotional, intimate and personal level remains a challenge. Using all available means to search for 'Mr or Ms Right' has become a thoroughly modern or rather postmodern exercise for an ever-increasing number of people. Specifically, the use of ICTs has become one of the most popular ways of looking for love, intimacy, friendship and sex in the 21st century.

This paper has sought to sociologically examine the reasons for these trends and to critically explore if, how and why they have an influence on the actual nature of dating and intimacy in postmodern societies such as Australia. We have drawn on key sociological ideas about the characteristics of the late postmodern society, as global, networked and mobile, where intimacy is contested and ICTs are a fundamentally complex and multi-faceted part of the social fabric of everyday life. As a result, we argue that online interaction is part of the *real* world, not separate from it, and thus the consequences for people who choose to go online and to be intimate are *real*, and not imaginary.

Our focus in this paper has been upon developing sociological understandings about the growth of, and the contradictory possibilities in, online dating. Our methodological intention throughout has been to reveal the experiences of the participants involved, using their own words to attempt to answer the following questions:

- Why are people using online dating services?
- How are people communicating online?
- In what ways do people connect emotionally and intimately on and off-line?
- Does online dating alter the very nature of intimacy, emotion and dating?

Why Online Dating?

First, we examined some of the reasons why participants in our study used online dating as a means of finding intimate relationships. While these varied, a major factor remained – which was a firm desire for humans to form intimate relationships, despite the perceived and actual risks to the Self. For many, using online dating sites were an informal and reasonably effective way of developing one's social and intimate circle, even if there were still some signs of stigma. Further, we found that there was a great deal of time and emotional investment made by participants, which strongly suggests that many *do* feel *embodied* and that the consequences were real and deeply personal. This was despite the fact that a few of the participants could identify with the notion of relationships in the 21st century being rather 'liquid', as espoused by Bauman and others. Online dating has grown from a convergence between globalisation, ICTs and the personal, emotional and intimate spheres. Finding love/intimacy online has become an everyday aspect of postmodern life and in many ways, the rational approach of online dating has the potential to also change how we communicate, as well as how we date.

Communicating Online

A central and important feature of communicating online was through the drafting of one's personal profile – which was seen as your own personal 'shop window'. Many of our participants talked about the fact that people were judged on the basis of how they looked, but also how their photos and profiles 'talked' online. Not surprisingly, all of our participants viewed the profile as highly significant and maintained that there was a real skill in doing this well.

We also found that the nature of the communication between participants was revealing due to the intensity, immediacy and in some ways, the almost addictive nature of the interaction. In this regard, we have suggested that a type of '*hypercommunication*' occurs in the types of communication and also in the speed and intensity of the contact. As found in other studies, this appears to be facilitated by the informal and dis-inhibitive nature of the medium. Despite intense forms of 'digital chemistry', many of the participants still expressed the desire to 'fleshmeet', primarily to avoid devoting any unnecessary emotional energy to unsuitable partners. In this sense, this highlighted the need/desire to establish or confirm a connection that was possibly more comfortable and conventional.

From On to Offline Dating

We argued in this paper that the shift from online to off-line dating is as much about timing, connection, luck and compatibility as it is from moving from a casual date to a longer term commitment in a conventional sense. It was evident throughout our study that participants wanted to examine tangible cues in person, as part of the process of moving to the next stage. We found that the need to fleshmeet was a key indicator of whether an online relationship would continue offline. As we asserted in Henry-Waring and Barraket (2004), 'the online is highly connected to the offline. The consequences are real, emotions are felt, and trust is given'. This raises the question, has online dating as an activity reconfigured the notions of intimacy and emotion, and if so, how?

Changes to Nature of Intimacy and Emotion?

We contended here that although there are changes to the notions of intimacy and emotion, we believe at the same time that online dating also reinforces existing norms and values. For

example, whilst the medium has changed, the goal remains the same – to find a partner/partners. There remains a gendered reliance on men to be the initiators, although there are small pockets of resistance to this pattern by a few female participants who are keen to take the lead. However, these shifts need to be more carefully interpreted, as real structural and gendered inequalities remain evident in late postmodern society.

Further our evidence indicates that the potential for real change in dating and intimacy is not occurring, or not yet anyway. Indeed, whilst it is possible for online dating to herald the arrival of a new era of global mating, we have found evidence that suggests that the same type of people are meeting online as they do offline. This is due to the structure of the sites; the ways in which personal profiles are drafted; and search criteria are defined; and the preference for people to meet someone in close geographical proximity. As a result, possibilities for extending the social/intimate circle are restricted rather than being actively encouraged. As we noted in Barraket and Henry-Waring (2004), 'this suggests that online technologies are simultaneously mediating new patterns of interactivity and reinforcing existing socio-cultural norms in the formation, erosion and reformation of intimate relationships'.

In summary, this paper has provided an interpretive overview of some of the reasons why online dating and intimacy has increased in late postmodern societies such as Australia. Specifically, we regard recent global shifts outlined above as key to explaining the circumstances in which our participants find themselves. Their experiences appear to tell us that these shifts may indeed be re-shaping the ways in which we all connect and communicate, intimately and otherwise. However, the jury is still out on whether online dating alters the very nature of intimacy. Our work is still emerging – but we want to highlight the significance of this research area for sociologists. We therefore end with a call for more research into the nature of intimacy, both off and online in the 21st century, in order to fully appreciate how and why we all need to connect.

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¹ We provide a fuller review of the literature in Barraket & Henry-Waring 2004, 2008, Henry-Waring & Barraket 2004.

² Note that all participants' names have been changed.

³ This ties in with lack of cross-cultural relationships online (although separate to growth of so called multi-ethnic online dating sites, but seen as a specialty).

⁴ True.com makes it clear to married people that they are not welcome, offers criminal background checks and online compatibility tests (others are also using IQ tests), refer to: <http://www.true.com/default.htm>.

⁵ Most online dating sites provided tips for safe offline dating, such as at Match.com, refer to: <http://www.match.com/help/safetytips.aspx?lid=4>

⁶ Although clearly there has been significant growth in the development of speciality sites for separate and multi-racial groups. See guides from Kim (2005) and also refer to the Interracial website at: <http://dateinterracial.com/>