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INTERNET DATING AS A PROJECT: THE COMMODIFICATION AND RATIONALISATION OF ONLINE DATING

ABSTRACT

Based on qualitative empirical data from two studies on Internet dating in Slovenia, this paper discusses the social contexts of the Internet dating of heterosexual men and women and homosexual men. Special attention is given to different aspects of the commodification and rationalisation of dating in the process of forming potential (romantic) partnerships. First, we discuss our respondents' reasons for using the Internet to get in touch with potential (romantic) partners. Second, we focus on the demands and strategies of targeted marketing in personal profile writing and, finally, on the process of selecting potential partners. Our study shows that the primary understanding of Internet dating among people who engage in it is its economic nature. Together with targeted marketing and the predetermined criteria for choosing interesting others, Internet dating can thus be understood as a market that encourages rationalisation and commodification in the process of forming intimate relationships.

KEY WORDS: *Internet dating, rationalisation, commodification, partnership, heterosexuality, homosexuality*

Spoznavanje po spletu kot projekt: Komodifikacija in racionalizacija spoznavanja po spletu

IZVLEČEK

Članek, ki se ukvarja z družbenimi konteksti spoznavanja heteroseksualnih moških in žensk ter homoseksualnih moških po spletu, temelji na empirični osnovi dveh raziskav o spoznavanju po spletu v Sloveniji. Posebno pozornost dajemo različnim vidikom komodifikacije in racionalizacije zmenkov v procesu oblikovanja potencialnih (romantičnih) partnerskih razmerij. Najprej se ukvarjamo z razlogi naših respondentov za uporabo interneta pri vzpostavljanju potencialnih (romantičnih) partnerskih razmerij. Nato se osredotočamo na zahteve in strategije »ciljno zasnovanega trženja« v oblikovanju posameznikovih spletnih profilov, na koncu pa se dotaknemo še procesa izbora potencialnih partnerjev. Študija

je pokazala, da uporabniki spletnih strani, namenjenih spoznavanju, te najpogosteje interpretirajo skozi ekonomske vidike. Skupaj s ciljno zasnovanim trženjem samega sebe in vnaprej določenimi vidiki, med katerimi lahko izbiramo potencialne partnerje, spoznavanje po spletu lahko razumemo kot tržišče, ki spodbuja racionalizacijo in komodifikacijo procesa oblikovanja intimnih partnerskih razmerij.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: spoznavanje po spletu, racionalizacija, komodifikacija, partnerstvo, heteroseksualnost, homoseksualnost

1 Introduction

In the late eighties and early nineties of the 20th century personal computers gradually became inexpensive and computer-mediated social interactions started to blossom (Merkle and Richardson 2000). Today the penetration of the Internet into nearly every aspect of our everyday life has become self-evident. Just like we can read books online, buy a house or a dog, watch movies, communicate, play games and make money online, we can also engage in Internet dating and possibly find a romantic or sexual partner online.

Internet dating, which is 'a method of courting used by individuals who meet on the Internet and continue online correspondence in hopes of forming a supportive romantic relationship' (Lawson and Leck 2006: 189), is blooming. In the USA in 2003 about 40 million new users joined Internet dating sites (Fiore et al. 2008). The largest American Internet dating site match.com reported having 7 million users in USA and additional 2 million worldwide in 2006 (Arvidsson 2006). Online dating has also become increasingly popular in Slovenia (population: 2m) in the last decade; in September 2010 there were 50,000 members registered with 'Ona-on.com', the oldest and most popular dating site in Slovenia. By the end of February 2011 the number of registered members had nearly doubled.

This paper provides an analysis of narratives from straight and gay Internet daters in Slovenia.¹ Their stories are framed in the context of the consumer society in which dating becomes a commoditized and rationalised activity. First, we discuss the development of Internet dating, which can be seen as a new marital market, mirroring traditional partnership and marital markets, as well as a market with its specificities, which makes it distinctively different from traditional ways of meeting partners. In the second part of the paper, the results from the qualitative research study on Internet dating in Slovenia are presented. Through the narratives of Internet daters, we show how the Internet as a market encourages rationalisation and commodification in the process of building intimate relationships. Internet dating is thus not seen only as a symptom, but also as a consequence of broader changes in the field of intimacy and sexuality.

1. The study on heterosexual Internet daters was conducted by (Tjaša Žakelj) as part of her PhD study "Internet dating as a new marital and partnership market in Slovenia - a qualitative study on heterosexual internet daters (2008-2011)", Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. The study on gay Internet daters was conducted by (Doris Kocon) as part of her BA research project "The culture of Internet dating among gay men in Slovenia (2009)", Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.

2 Internet as a new marital market

Studies on Internet dating cover a wide variety of topics, ranging from studies into dynamics of computer-mediated communication (Hardey 2002), profile writing strategies and strategies of maximisation of individual's opportunities to find the significant other (Illouz 2007; Illouz and Finkelman 2009), importance of visual material in the Internet dating profiles (Smail 2004; Hitsch et al. 2006; Fiore et al. 2008; Whitty 2008), question of rationalisation of choice (Bauman 2003; Hollander 2004; Illouz 2007; Illouz and Finkelman 2009; Salecl 2011), on-line intimacy potential (Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Žakelj 2011) transition from on-line to off-line contacts (McKenna et al. 2002; Hardey 2004; Whitty 2008) the role of gender in online identity creation and re-creation (Bargh et al. 2002; Couch and Liamputtong 2008; McKenna et al. 2002; Yurchisin et al. 2005), gender in web-based personals (Paap and Raybeck 2005), the understanding of Internet infidelity (Whitty 2008), to studies focusing on the role of gender on computer-mediated communication (Herring 2000; van Zoonen 2002; Wang 2012).

Regardless of the focus of the studies listed above, they are all based on the understanding that the computer-mediated communication is the key element, which differentiates Internet dating from the 'classic' (off-line) face-to-face dating. The first studies on computer-mediated communication focused primarily on the impersonal features of such communication. However, the 1990s brought new empirical findings, which showed that online communication could sometimes be even more personal than offline communication. It can be characterized by a high level of self-disclosure of those who engage in it (Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Walther in Henderson and Gilding 2004). For these reasons, the Internet has become an important partnership and marital market, a new social context for meeting potential intimate or sexual partners.

The increasing popularity and importance of the Internet for dating has several social backgrounds. Following Giddens (1993), these include changes in intimate relationships and the private sphere, the transformation of intimacy, the phenomena of pure relationships and plastic sexuality. It has also been affected by changes in the labour sphere, such as prolonged working hours, and by the processes of individualization and the demands of the reflexive project of the self.

Internet dating – unlike the 'old technological mediators' in dating, such as newspapers, audio and video ads – has broadened the marital and partnership markets, especially for those who are generally outside of their social networks in real life due to spatial, social, cultural and other reasons. In such a way the normative pressures stemming from one's own social networks become less important and enable people to explore new areas of sexuality and intimacy with a greater extent of anonymity and privacy (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2008), avoiding social stigma. While the use of technological mediators in dating, such as newspaper ads, used to be ascribed to the 'desperate ones', those who were lonely and asocial and failed to meet partners in their everyday life, it has now be-

come a mainstream practice (Gibbs et al. 2006)². It has contributed to the establishment of the new reality of the inter-personal relationships (Merkle and Richardson 2000). As Kuhar et al. (2010) ascertain in their research on Internet dating in Slovenia, the two most often mentioned reasons among Internet daters for their online dating are easy access to potential partners and anonymity.

As the Internet is a specific medium of communication (i.e. computer-mediated communication), this also affects the process of searching for, contacting and communicating with potential intimate partners in an online and (possibly) offline settings (e.g. Merkle and Richardson 2000; Turkle 1995; Walther 1996). It therefore creates a new social context in which intimate partnerships are perceived, created and sustained. It also creates new meanings of partnership itself and its various aspects, such as intimacy, sexuality, trust, fidelity and so on. In such a way Internet dating is one of the constitutive elements of the late-modern transformations of intimacy and sexuality (Giddens 1993).

Despite the fact that Internet dating has become a mainstream activity, it has not necessarily superseded non-virtual dating. Rather, it exists parallel to offline (traditional) marital and partnership markets or even functions as a *supporting* marital and partnership market for possible later offline dating (Hogan et al. 2011). Nevertheless – as we will show – it cannot be understood solely as yet another tool for meeting potential partners or simply just as the first phase of a later offline face-to-face communication. Instead, Internet dating is a *specific* marital and partnership market, which is in many ways distinctively different from the traditional face-to-face ways of meeting potential partners. It creates specific conditions for meeting and communicating with other people (for example: limited visual contacts), it influences the selection process (for example: search options) and, consequently, it influences the course of the online and (potential) offline communication. In other words, Internet dating creates new contexts, which importantly shape our understanding of intimacy, sexuality and intimate relationships.

3 The commodification and rationalisation of dating

The interpretation of Internet dating as based on the ideology of consumer culture (i.e. the process of exchange and negotiation in forming intimate relationships) and the marketing of the individual originates in the idea that Internet dating is a successor to personal ads in newspapers (Ellison et al. 2006; Hardey 2002). Newspaper ads already indicated the principles of the marketing of the self and the buying of others (Coupland 1996; Jagger 1998, 2001).

The process of the commodification and rationalisation of dating is caused by the very characteristics of computer-mediated communication. It excludes face-to-face interaction and thus inevitably shapes communication differently from initial face-to-face communication in traditional dating, which is primarily defined by non-verbal rather than verbal

2. Despite frequent use of ID sites we still can not talk about ID as a totally stigma free partner search type. The intent to find a partner undermines thesis that »love happens« (Hollander 2004; Illouz 2007) and is thus an option of those who haven't been successful in face-to-face meetings (yet).

aspects (Walther, 1996). Furthermore, Internet dating offers an abundance of potential partners, which consequently requires the adoption of at least some principles of (rational) selection (Illouz 2007). The latter is supported also by the technical characteristics of online personal profiles, which feature 'search options' and allow choosing potential partners on the basis of predetermined attributes, such as age, colour of hair and eyes, body type, place of residence, education, etc. Heino et al. (2010) interpret such dating as 'relationshopping', in which potential partners are objectified and the selection is based on shopping strategies.

On the other hand, the process of the commodification and rationalisation of dating cannot be attributed only to the above-mentioned factors, but also to broader changes in the intimate sphere and to the process of the transformation of intimacy, the changes of sexual cultures and morals and the phenomenon of reflexive individualism (Bauman 1998, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1999, 2002; Giddens 1991; Schmidt 1995). Illouz (2007: 79) claims that Internet dating is 'literally organized within the structure of the market.' Similarly, Bauman (2003) believes that we increasingly interpret each other as objects. We 'consume' both goods and each other in the same way in order to manage our insecurities and immediately fulfil our needs. The latter is (painfully) clearly illustrated by a statement of a respondent from an Australian research study on Internet dating who stated: 'To me its [sic!] a bit like shopping at [local supermarket] ... you just look what's on offer and go for it! ... If I like I ask them if they want to meet! If they say yes, we meet then we fuck. Simple.' (Couch and Liamputtong, 2008: 273)

According to Bauman (2003: 65), 'shopping for partners on the Internet' is like 'browsing through the pages of a mail-order catalogue with a 'no obligation to buy' promise and a 'return to the shop if dissatisfied' guarantee on the front page.' It means that the free selection of appropriate others and complete individual responsibility for the success or failure of one's private life contributes to the rationalisation (and commodification) of choosing potential partners. The selected potential partners should be as close as possible to the predetermined (rational?) criteria of the selection in order to minimize the possibilities for failure in private life. In this way, as Smail (2004) points out, marketing oneself and buying others is not obvious only in personal online profiles, but also in the expectations and predetermined search criteria of those searching for romantic partners online. Searching for love is transformed into an economic transaction where a person is a product (and his/her online profile is a marketing tool), which competes with others on a free market. This is not to say that such elements are not present in offline dating as "impression management" (Goffman 1959) is an element of every interaction. However no other technology 'has radicalized in such an extreme way the notion of the self as a 'chooser' and the idea that the romantic encounter should be the result of the best possible choice' as the Internet (Illouz 2007: 79).

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The article is based on two separate qualitative studies that were carried out in 2008 and 2009, the first on a sample of heterosexual Internet daters and the second on a sample of gay Internet daters. This chapter explains the research topics, the process of data collection, the sample characteristics and the data analysis procedure in both projects.

For the purpose of the research in both studies, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 34 heterosexual men and 32 heterosexual women and with 27 gay men – in total 93 interviews. All respondents self-identified as having experiences in searching for a partner on the Internet. The aim of the studies was to look into the sociological aspects of Internet dating and to analyze its characteristics, focusing primarily on the process of filtering, which we may define as a two-way process: the interpretation of the Internet profiles of potential partners and the creation of oneself (i.e. one's own profile) in the virtual space.

4.2 Data collection

All participants were recruited in three steps: first, e-mail invitation was sent to those individuals who had participated in the first Slovene online quantitative survey on Internet dating carried out in 2006 by Švab and Kuhar (2007) and agreed to participate in a follow-up qualitative study. Secondly, the snowball sampling method was applied. We asked each of the participants in the interviews if they could provide us with further contacts with Internet daters. Finally, an invitation to take part in the study was posted on Slovenian Internet dating sites. Recruitment was accommodated to the response rate (Taylor and Bogdan 1998: 92), by which the age and gender diversity of the sample was obtained. We stopped interviewing once we reached the saturation point. The gathered material enabled a wide and detailed insight into the research topic.³

In the heterosexual group, all interviews were face-to-face, except one interview that was carried out through Skype due to the respondent's current place of residence outside Slovenia. In the gay group, two interviews were carried out online as the respondents were not ready to reveal their identity. All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants and were later transcribed, except for the two interviews with the gay men

3. In the interviews we focused on the following aspects of internet dating: reasons for using Internet dating sites, the advantages and disadvantages of online dating (in comparison to face-to-face dating), the process of creation of the online dating profiles, what is the key data in such profiles and what other important information is revealed in online communication, the development and the dynamics of online relationships, the establishment of intimacy in online communication, the characteristics of moving from the on-line to off-line face-to-face contacts, the incongruence between the expected (created) image of an individual and the real image of the dater as revealed in a face-to-face meeting, the strategies of ending of an online-only communication and the ending of communication after a face-to-face meeting, the features of moving into a romantic relationship, the importance of physical intimacy and sexuality in the context of Internet dating and the formation of off-line communities of individuals who first met online.

online, which were conducted through online typing. In order to preserve the respondents' anonymity, the quotes from the interviews are equipped with fictitious names, followed by the real age of the interviewees. Colloquial language has been standardized, but the meaning and its different nuances have been preserved.

The average length of interviewing was one hour. The meeting point and the time of the interview were suggested by the respondents themselves. Most of them wanted to meet in public places, such as quiet coffee bars.

4.3 Sample characteristics

The average age of our respondents was 34.3 years for the heterosexual sample (35.4 for male and 33.1 for female) and 26.7 for gay respondents. In both groups, the youngest participant was 19 years old. Among heterosexuals, the oldest participant was 72 years old, while in the gay group the oldest respondent was 41 years old.

Our respondents have been involved in Internet dating from one month to eleven years. Approximately one half of the respondents can be characterized as those who gained their experiences in Internet dating through 'coincidental' or 'secondary' online contacts (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2008: 153), which means that their primary intention of using the Internet was not to find an intimate partner, but rather to make friends or to socialize. Five gay respondents reported using Internet dating websites (at the present time or in the past) only for sexual purposes. In the course of the study, 42 heterosexual and 6 gay participants were in a steady partnership.

4.4 Data analysis

In both studies, qualitative analysis was based on the following two research questions analyzed in this paper: What are the reasons for using the Internet as a mediator in finding potential partners and how is the process of filtering constructed: on the basis of which information does one make a selection and how does one create his/her own Internet dating profile?

Qualitative analysis was conducted in three steps: the organization of data and the identification of topics were followed by the descriptive phase, during which the categorization and classification (i.e. groups of categories) of selected empirical data were performed. This was followed by the final, analytical and interpretative step.

For the purposes of this paper, the research questions are addressed through the application of the above-described processes of rationalisation and commodification. The data presented in the remaining of this paper are combined from both studies in order to present various aspects of Internet dating and to analyse the similarities and differences in the heterosexual and gay samples. We did not focus on gender differences, but rather on differences (and similarities), based on sexual orientation.

5 Results

5.1 Reasons for engaging in Internet dating

The widespread availability of the Internet and, consequently, Internet dating has contributed to partial destigmatization of such types of goal oriented, intentional and controllable dating practices. Internet dating has become a mainstream marital market (Baker 2005; Gibbs et al. 2006; Kuhar et al. 2010), complementing the traditional ways of dating. The majority of heterosexual respondents explained their reasons for Internet dating in 'economic' terms, such as greater time efficiency in the search for potential partners or easier (i.e. more effective) access to more potential partners (overcoming spatial limitations in traditional dating).

Technically, one can 'do' more women in the same day compared to when one goes out. And it is even cheaper! On top of that, I am also lazy and I don't feel like hanging out [in pubs] with 18-year-olds anymore. (Edi, heterosexual, 36)

One of the advantages [of Internet dating] is the possibility of meeting a person you wouldn't be able to meet otherwise. Furthermore, you can meet more persons in shorter time. Even from the economical point of view, this is a more satisfactory option. (Bojan, heterosexual, 34)

I remember it very clearly when I have started it, it was a breaking point in my life, when I decided to quit 10-year-long relationship with my ex-partner. I have heard about Internet dating before and some gay friends mentioned it to me. I have started using it right away, because I was afraid of staying single. I wondered if I was already too old – I was 32 then – that I would never manage to meet a man and create a lasting partnership and family. I signed in because of this fear. At the time I wasn't going out much and it seemed to me there is no other opportunity to meet new persons. (Nena, heterosexual, 36)

I decided [to look for a partner online] because it is more time effective and it demands less personal engagement. /.../ And I am also in the life period when I do not feel like going out anymore (Coopi, gay, 37)

While among gay respondents the 'economic' rationalisation of Internet dating was not absent, their major reasons for Internet dating were somewhat different when compared to heterosexual respondents. Several studies, particularly in Slovenia, have shown that Internet dating for gay men has become the primary way to meet other gay men (cf. Švab and Kuhar 2005). Usually this is explained by the absence of other 'dating sites' (such as gay bars, gay discos, etc.), especially in rural areas, and by the heterosexualization of the public space in general, but there seems to be another reason for that. The social stigma attached to the 'homosexual identity' and homophobia in particular creates a fear of entering such stigmatized places (gay bars, etc.) when they exist at all. The anonymity offered by the virtual space is therefore also one of the reasons why Internet dating among gay men flourishes. For some of our gay respondents, Internet dating was also a way of 'socialization': the Internet provided the only channel they had to be in contact with other gay men, to discuss issues such as coming out and similar.

According to the rigidity of the system of [gay] dating in Slovenia, I would say we almost have no alternatives. (Miha, gay, 29)

Outside [in bars etc.] it is harder to look for a homosexual than heterosexual. Even though I find Internet dating obnoxious, I finally realized I have no other alternative, especially because there is no gay bar close to where I live (Jure, gay, 32)

I decided to look for a partner online not because I was shy and would not be capable of inviting someone for a drink, having a talk and meeting people this way. I would prefer to do that, but in Slovenia there are no such bars. You can't simply go to a straight bar, approach a guy you suspect is gay, invite him for a drink, talk to him and then in ten minutes end up in hospital because it turns out he is in fact a homophobe. (David, gay, 19)

The interviews with gay men showed that despite the widespread availability of Internet dating the old images of such dating as being 'second best' and something stigmatized still exist. It seems that here the stigma is not linked only to not being able to meet a partner in everyday life, but also to the stigmatized images of homosexuality; one is 'forced' to seek partners online (or through ads) because of one's sexual orientation. It is therefore not one's social skills, which demand such dating techniques but rather one's sexuality, which is perceived as stigmatized and does not allow for "ordinary dating" in a heteronormative society.

Among the disadvantages of Internet dating the respondents outlined primarily the problems specific for the virtual space, such as the absence of face-to-face communication and fake information provided in Internet profiles (to be discussed below). They also pointed to the 'economic' disadvantages; for some Internet daters the experience of Internet dating was not as effective as originally expected. They talked about 'a lot of work for little effect':

Now, when I had paid 30 euros, I expected a revolution. I thought I would go out for a coffee with three women each day. I soon realized that you have to work like crazy, but it's all futile. (Leon, heterosexual, 34)

5.2 The filtering process: creating profiles and choosing others

One enters the virtual partnership market by creating a profile (a self-presentation page) on Internet dating sites. In creating a profile and especially in its consequent adjustments according to the response of the target group we can clearly perceive the functioning of the Internet dating as a sort of a market. One has to address potential partners in a way to attract (or repel) their attention. The virtual self has to 'sell' its own profile in order to be 'bought' (i.e. clicked) as only then the process of dating can start. On the other hand, the profile serves also as a selection tool. One has to outline those characteristics, which will attract 'the right kind of potential partners'.

My profile is a trick. It is meant to be a bait. There is a catch in it – and those who understood it were interesting for me. Those who could laugh about it ... well, it functioned as an 'entrance filter'. (Tadej, heterosexual, 41)

In comparison to other profiles mine was quite long, because I wanted to reduce the clicks in a way that I stressed what is totally unacceptable for me. For example religious believes, different life practices like vegan life, extreme sports or some things that I am not interested in. I stressed that in the beginning. Some people found the length of my profile disturbing, but some were pleased saying: finally someone who took her time and described her well. (Jana, heterosexual, 42)

In those few lines I tried to express key things about me, and I didn't want to base that on my physical characteristics. I tried to describe myself clearly and in a way to avoid those who were looking only for adventures. (Jože, gay, 33)

If products on the market are generally advertised in such a way to attract as many buyers as possible, the profiles on the Internet combine the number of potential daters with the right kind of daters. Unlike general marketing, Internet profiles represent targeted marketing, which – in our research – does not differ considerably between the two researched groups.

Targeted marketing is realized by two different strategies: the first strategy includes expressing and describing oneself with the aim of the simultaneous exclusion of those Internet daters who are not desired by the owner of the Internet profile. The second strategy – just the opposite – focuses on explicitly describing the 'types' of people the owner of the profile is not interested in. Furthermore, the targeted marketing process of Internet dating includes posting one's profile on different Internet dating sites in order to maximize the effect of the profile and to reach as many potential partners as possible. In this sense, Internet dating is like a catalogue shopping: Internet daters focus on those characteristics they like and avoid those, which they dislike (Heino et al. 2010). The creation of a profile is a 'complex folding together of self and desired other' (Smail 2004: 97).

/.../ I pointed out particularly those characteristics that make me different from others and might mean I am above average because of them. I did not want to have a profile which others would comment as "oh, she suck!". I wanted a special profile so I pointed out characteristics and activities that could attract. (Nika, heterosexual, 25)

It was very simple [to write the online profile]. No horoscopes, no yoga, no hocus-pocus possibilities, but a scientific one with a bit more literature and that. And I also searched in this direction. (Dejan, heterosexual, 39)

When I returned back [to the Internet dating sites] I have created a new profile, which helped me to release frustrations over the whole situation. Instead of self-praise, which is a part of almost all profiles, I sarcastically described my weaknesses and imperfections. Surprisingly it was very successful. Well, perhaps the fact I have used a photo of my back after a year-long intensive fitness practice helped. (Simon, gay, 29)

Despite the fact that providing selected (and selectively chosen) information on one's profile contributes to the decrease in uncertainty, typical for Internet dating, it seems that Internet daters have also developed some kind of decoding techniques which enable them to figure out what kind of a person stands behind the profile.

I believe that in 80% of cases I am able to decode what type of person is 'hidden' behind the profile. (Jože, gay, 33)

It is quite easy to 'read' these profiles. You can quickly figure out what you can expect from a person. Such 'reading' might be a bit harder in profiles like mine, where there is not much information about myself. For me this is the charm - to go to a blind date. I am more attracted by those who are discreet than by those who write a novel [about themselves] in their profiles.' (Emil, gay, 23)

On the basis of our research we can say that Internet profiles are often understood among Internet daters as 'just an advertisement'. One might get some basic information about the person, which is needed for the selection process, but entrance into offline communication is crucial in order to see who the real person is (as opposed to the virtual image of that person) that one has selected.

'Profiles are precise and clear enough in the sense of excluding those who are not potential partners, but they do not offer enough information to select among the potential ones.' (Olga, heterosexual, 37)

You have to talk, you have to type to see what she thinks, what are her wishes, her expectations, experiences... (Andrej, heterosexual, 35)

At first I believed it is enough if someone fulfils certain criteria in the presentation, but I later realized that a face-to-face meeting is obligatory. Only then you can see if you are attracted to the not only intellectually but also physically. At the beginning visual aspect is important, other things get into the forefront later. (Črt, gay, 22)

While generally the respondents agree that meeting a person offline provides them with the 'real profile' of the potential partner, one first has to attract attention online. The online market functions as a competition among hundreds of profiles, each of them competing for the daters' attention. Which profiles are successful/effective? Our respondents claim that they like those profiles, which are exact, telling and revealing quite some information about the person behind the profile. Such profiles are noticed as they stand out from average profiles. This is especially true of male heterosexual profiles as there are more male Internet daters online.

I knew there were much more men up there. And women are the ones who choose. /.../ Women were bombarded by e-mails, invitations and with »go« and »no go« options, with messages and all. So I have checked men's profiles just for fun and I realized men's profiles are much more elaborated and much more neatly written. Women just do not need to do it. (Brane, heterosexual, 25)

I put an effort into creating a profile which would be something special, something unique, something that stands out, something that is quite individual in order to make it noticeable as a special, non-stereotypically written text. (Janez, heterosexual, 58)

I didn't adapt [any information about myself], but I tried to present facts about myself in a way to create a nice image [of myself]. One might say that I have decorated the facts about myself. (Črt, gay, 22)

Despite the fact that profiles should be unique, they should also be, as reported by Paap and Raybeck (2005), in line with the social norms which exist on the Internet dating market. Here we are faced with an interesting paradox of Internet dating: one has to find a balance between uniqueness and social norms, rules and expectations. In other words: the profiles – while tending to be unique – tend to strategically outline the activities which are understood to be socially desirable and expected. This is why one might get an impression, when reading the profiles, that ‘everyone’ does sports, reads good books, enjoys wine with friends, loves to travel, and is caring with a good sense of humor. As one respondent said when discussing fake information in the profiles: ‘One might go for a walk once in a while, but writes in his profile that he likes mountaineering a lot.’ (Ian, gay, 28). While the above is true for both, heterosexual and homosexual respondents, it is worth noting that men of both sexual orientations put a lot of emphasis on the picture placed in the profile. It seems that physical appearance as read from the dating profile photo boosts interest to get to know a potential partner better.

The picture [is of key importance]. This is the way of the world. If somebody finds you attractive, but you don't find him attractive, then this cannot work. [...] The appearance is everything. This is especially true of gay men. Unfortunately, this is how it is. [...] It [the importance of the information] follows the structure of the profile. First there is a picture, then physical characteristics, and then the textual self-presentation, if it exists at all. I always return back to the picture. (Emil, gay, 23)

Of course the photo is important. If profile has no photo, it has good chances that no one will read it. It doesn't matter if people say physical appearance is not important. People nevertheless choose whom to talk to on the basis of appearance. (Matija, gay, 41)

I haven't even looked at the personal profiles without photos. /.../ If you find a good-looking woman on the photo, then you'll do your best to find other things [in her profile] that seem interesting. (Alen, heterosexual 31)

Generally, research on Internet dating outlines the picture in dating profiles as the key element in the process of filtering the profiles (cf. Davis et al. 2006, Fiore et al. 2008; Kuhar et al. 2010; Walther 1996), despite the fact that the picture cannot be treated as being separate from the text in the profile. The picture is always understood in the context of the textual self-presentation (Fiore et al. 2008), which can influence how the image on the picture is finally perceived. According to Kuhar et al. (2010), this is especially true of women, who put more emphasis on textual presentation than men. It means that in heterosexual women the physical image can be subordinated to an attraction on the basis of computer-mediated communication:

Then, I think, if I met him in the Citypark [shopping mall] or anywhere else, he would not attract me. This was an advantage, because on the basis of online communication you get to know a person better. You are not attracted by his looks. (Nina, heterosexual, 30)

In the heterosexual sample another piece of information turned out to be very important: the person's marital status. Married heterosexual Internet daters are the least wanted according to a clear hierarchy of Internet daters. They are followed by those who have kids and divorced daters. The most wanted are unmarried and childless daters. Having children seems to be perceived as a relevant obstacle for a possible creation of partnership.

I had two different profiles on two web pages – different in terms of telling the truth about my children. /.../ In one I didn't state that I have children, because I realized this was a problem. I noticed that when someone tried to get closer to me and I told him I have two children, at that moment the thing ended very fast (Daša, heterosexual, 40).

I am sorry. If I see she has one [a child] I have to say I quit immediately. I imagine it in a way to start a new thing and to have kids of my own. Even if I meet her face to face, I have to say [her having children] turns me off a lot. I get a sort of a protection click. (Alen, heterosexual, 31)

I am now coming to the age, when I'll be lucky to get anyone [even a woman with a child]. It is getting harder to get anyone normal. (Žiga, heterosexual, 26)

5.3 The rational choice?

What is at work while browsing through Internet profiles is a rational choice, which tries to fulfill the emotional needs of the person who is making the choice. This is most obvious in the very structure of Internet dating profiles. The 'search option', which enables users to list only those profiles, which fulfill the (minimum?) required features (for example, gender, age range, presence of a picture, distance in place of residence, type of relationship etc.), boosts the rational selection.

'In a profile you have to list whether you look for a friendship, sex date, relationship or chat. If there is someone who looks for a sex date, he is out [from my selection] immediately. The second thing is the picture. If a guy has a picture of his naked body, if he shows muscles or genitalia, he is out. The third milestone is the name of the profile. If one writes 'hot guy', 'big cock', 'macho man', I immediately cancel him. [...] Only if he fulfills all [my] conditions, I start reading his message which he has sent me.' (Urban, gay, 25)

If you ask me directly about men, they often expressed they need a friend in terms of a fuck buddy, not a friendship as such. I think those who searched for mere sexual relationships without responsibilities often stressed the importance of physical look, body dimensions and everything. I usually avoided such profiles. (Karla, heterosexual, 23)

Here we are confronted with yet another paradox of Internet dating: Internet daters have generally more information on the potential partners they contact online compared to random contacts established offline in a bar or other venues. In offline communication, the physical image is more or less the only initial information one has when meeting a

new person – but this is the very information that is missing in computer-mediated communication. That is why most of the respondents reported that – while profile information and online chatting are important selection factors – meeting offline is defined as a ‘test of truth’ (Hardey, 2004), a ‘reality check’, and a crucial point on the basis of which it is decided whether the persons will move on to building relationship or not.

The deciding point is meeting offline. Internet profiles have very scarce information and they are not very helpful. (Simon, gay, 19)

But when I saw that man, I remained speechless. I do not know, I just missed the keyboard and the computer monitor in front of me. That was it. It was a hard experience. We had nothing to talk about. (Anja, heterosexual, 31)

The amount of information Internet daters obtain from Internet profiles might create a false image (and impression) of the person on the other side of the computer. Furthermore, the limited information one has due to the lack of physical contact might result in filling in the blanks in the information with idealized or optimistic images of potential partners (Walther et al. 2001). On the other hand, the absence of face-to-face communication enables Internet daters to pre-think in which way to present themselves or, in Goffman’s (1959) terms, computer-mediated communication enables high impression management. This is also why respondents so often report being disappointed when meeting persons offline. Unavailable information is filled in with positive imagination (Ben Ze’ev 2004), and imaginative constructions usually turn out to be untrue and therefore incongruent with expectations.

‘Virtual dating causes a lot of disappointments because of high expectations. [...] When you meet someone online your mind creates an illusion that you have actually met that person in real, that the person is cool and the right one for you. When you meet him offline, it turns out to be a disaster. I know this because it has happened a few times that people didn’t like each other’s profiles, but then they met offline and became partners. I personally believe that virtual dating has no advantages. Actually, it has disadvantages.’ (Urban, gay, 25)

Above all, I think I’ve lost expectations. In the past I had them. If I met someone on chat and it was a blind date ... Oh, there were expectations. I almost dreamt about getting Pamela Anderson. But in the end disappointment followed. In time, I got down to earth and cancelled expectations in my head. In the sense: hoping for the best, expecting the worst. (Bojan, heterosexual, 34)

Off course after three, four unsuccessful contacts you start to think about it very straightforwardly and you are not so naive anymore. But still, when you go to first face-to-face meeting, you wish the person would match the image you built, and on the other hand there is a fear not to experience again as so you already often did. (Niko, heterosexual, 41)

6 Conclusion

Similarly as other studies (Bauman 2003; Hollander 2004; Illouz 2007; Illouz and Finkelman 2009; Salecl 2011) our interviews have shown Internet dating can be framed in the context of rational choice. However, the context of these choices seems to be somewhat different for heterosexual and homosexual Internet daters. Among heterosexuals, the rational choice is still primarily shaped by the traditional understanding of gender roles (Žakelj 2014). A typical example of this is the expectation that one starts a family with someone who has no children. Nontraditional forms of families seem to be less desired or even unwanted among our heterosexual respondents. It means that traditional ideas still bear some importance, although – at least at the level of values – reflexive partnership is what our respondents desire and look for. No such ideas were found in our gay sample, but that is primarily due to the fact that the gay context differs considerably from the straight one, starting with the lack of equal legal recognition of same-sex partnerships in Slovenia.

The global extent of Internet dating shows that the 'new' way of looking for (romantic) partners has reached a status of normalization. However, based on our interviews, many respondents still have some kind of 'bad feelings' about it. Some respondents, particularly gay respondents, use it as they have no alternatives available. Others reported not being very open about dating online: they do not necessarily talk about it with friends or colleagues. Furthermore, some of those who have managed to get into a successful partnership through meeting online, tend to hide the information about where they met their partner. Our research does not allow for any generalizations, but these 'reservations' about Internet dating show how postmodern changes in intimacy are still imbued with some traditional ideas and (social) expectations.

As expected, our study showed that for the heterosexuals and homosexuals in our sample, the primary understanding (and interpretation) of Internet dating is that of economic nature. The advantages (and disadvantages) of Internet dating were mostly listed in economic terms: the ability to reach a higher number of those who are looking for partnership, the estimation of time consumption for Internet dating, the time flexibility of the activities and – as outlined by several of our heterosexual male respondents – spending less money (on women) are some of the most obvious dimensions of the economic understanding of Internet dating. Together with targeted marketing and the predetermined criteria of choosing interesting others, Internet dating can thus be understood as a market that encourages rationalisation and commodification in the initial stages (i.e. selection process) of building up an intimate relationship.

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