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Limits to Ludic Gaps: 
Gender & Identity in a Different Cultural Context

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ABSTRACT

“Raising Men For Fun” is an on-line dating game that reverses traditional Chinese gender relationships. We explore how on-line gender representations are assembled and used to develop intimate relationships through self-disclosure and empathy. We describe the experiences of twenty men and women as they construct and manage on-line identity(ies) and explore the boundaries of ‘male’ and ‘female’ in authentic and inauthentic gender dyads. We find the Net offers only partial liberation from traditional Chinese culture. Our respondents re-construct Chinese culture in Cyberspace to authenticate on-line gender identities. Gender deceit reveals tensions in the inter-related self and limits intimate relationships on-line.

“I met Mark, who I’m now married to, on a MUD. When I first met him I was living on the West Coast [of the United States] and he was on the East Coast…. We spent a lot of time chatting and we got closer and closer. It was really good – I could tell that he was interested in me, and at first I was reluctant to get involved but he was so nice and he said that he really loved me….After a few months I had the chance to visit the East Coast, and we met while I was there. He was different from what I’d expected, mostly in the way he looked, but we really got along well, and I decided that I really did love him. He ended up getting a transfer to near where I lived and we got married last year.” [Anonymous] (Reid, 1994, p.32)

Coupland (1996) suggests that the process of relationship development is an ideal site to observe the social construction of identity. Developing intimate personal relationship(s) requires enormous investment (Duck 1994) and self-disclosure or how people define and represent themselves to others is crucial to understand the process(es) of intimate relationship development (Bernard Adelman & Schroeder 1991; Jagger 2001). Chat rooms and on-line meeting places are the latest in a series of market mechanisms that mediate the way people make contact (Parks & Floyd 1996; Clark 1998). We explore the nature of relationships that unfold in Cyber meeting places and in doing so observe self-disclosure and identity construction important for new relationships.
INTIMATE “CLOSE” RELATIONSHIPS: SELF-DISCLOSURE AND IDENTITY

Men and women identify romantic partners as their principal “close” relationship (Berscheid, Snyder & Omoto 1989). These days people are increasingly time scarce, spend greater periods setting up their careers, are mobile and dislocated from established social and interpersonal networks. As meeting people has become more difficult ‘lonely hearts’ and dating agencies are no longer a repository of the ‘lonely’ or ‘dysfunctional’ (Coupland 1996). Historically, romantic partners were not freely ‘chosen’. Social stratification and parental choice determined partner ‘eligibility’ represented as wealth, health, family status, and social class. These days young people have been given more ‘freedom’ in the selection of life partners and other close relationships (Cunningham & Antill 1981). This ‘freedom’ observes a transfer for the responsibility of choice from parents and the formalities of social stratification to the individuals who form relationship dyads.

Compatibility models suggest that age, social class, attitudes, values and religion are used by individuals as cues to identify suitable romantic partners based on similarity (e.g. Udry 1974) but the search for the mythologized intimacy and comfort of ‘romantic love’ has seen the choice of relational partners as emotionally based (Holmes & Rempel 1989). In ‘lonely hearts’ adverts Coupland (1996) describes individuals as careful and deliberate to construct ‘idealised self-representations’ for the selective consumption of others during the early stages of a romantic relationship. However, ‘close’ or intimate relationships progress only through a process of risk taking and the sacrifice of self-interest in a series of self-disclosures (Holmes and Rempel 1989). This risk taking in self-disclosure develops intimacy, reciprocal caring and interdependency in an increasing number of life domains and levels of emotional intensity (Holmes and Rempel 1989). How people define and represent themselves and the process or level and type of self-disclosure are argued as important to intimate relationship development (Bernard, Adelman & Schroeder 1991; Jagger 2001) making close or intimate relationships a useful site to explore identity, how it is constructed, communicated and consumed.

Identity in consumer society is believed to be multiple, fluid and dynamic (e.g. Baudrillard 1988; Jameson 1984). Giddens (1991) disagrees arguing that the self is a unitary, self-regulated achievement (Turner 1992). According to Turkle (1995) in Cyberspace “you can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex” (p.184) making the Net ideal to enact multiple identities being free from the physical, cultural and social constraints imposed elsewhere. How individuals represent themselves on-line and whether the Net can sustain the emotional intimacy and interdependence of close relations has been questioned. Reid (1994) among others (e.g. Rheingold 1993) has argued that the Net is high in socio-emotional communicative content and Reid (1994) is particularly descriptive in her case study of how close relationships can develop in Cyberspace and translate off-line and into real-life. Others have argued that the absence of physical and nonverbal communication makes the Internet a shallow and impersonal medium, devoid of social cues and lacking in the subtlety of face-to-face
communication (e.g. Sproull and Kiesler 1991). What is a concern of this paper is whether ‘close relationships’ can be developed in Cyberspace and the role of identity and how it is assembled or disclosed in the relationships formed.

Elsewhere, identity seen as a symbolic project is increasingly achieved through a plurality of market place decisions rather than the rituals and traditions of the traditional social order. Studies of brand choice (e.g. Ritson and Elliott, 1996; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998), gift giving (e.g. Belk and Coon 1993; Durgee and Sego 2001) and brand communities (e.g. Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) show brands act as powerful symbols of who we are, affect social relationships, and define group boundaries. How gifts, brands and other marketing technologies are implicated in the construction and consumption of on-line identities in close relations remains to be explored.

Clark and Mills (1979) described close relationships as communal in character, where partners are each motivated to act for the needs of the other, regardless of the expected reciprocal outcome for the self. While a model of identity as divided into an inner private self (including desires, personal values, emotions, memories, and impulses) and an outer public self (based on social roles and the individual in relation to others) can be applied across Eastern and Western cultural contexts (Markus & Kitayama 1991; Wong & Ahuvia 1995) pivotal to the difference between Western and East Asian societies is the concept of “face” (mien-tzu) and reciprocal interdependence. Ho (1977) points out that in his view of Chinese society face “is never a purely individual thing. It does not make sense to speak of the face of an individual as something lodged within his [her] person; it is meaningful only when his [her] face is considered in relation to that others in the social network” (p. 882). Yang (1981) sees face as a mutually coercive power on the members of a social network and both losing face (mei yu meien-tzu) and gaining face (yu mien-tzu) implicate an individual’s family and close friendships. For Markus and Kitayama (1991) Chinese ‘face’ represents their concept of the ‘inter-related self’. Following appropriate dating protocols and meeting an appropriate partner in Chinese society is important for maintaining face and not bringing shame and embarrassment on your family and close friendship groups. How ‘face’ translates to Cyberspace and its role in constructing intimate personal relationships on-line is also of interest to this study. We examine the dynamic of on-line relationships to understand how virtual identity is assembled and consumed, the role and maintenance of multiple identities, and the nature of relationships developed and maintained on-line.

GENDER IDENTITY

Sex attributes provide basic information about how to conduct interactions with others and how to organize social reality (O’Brien 1999; Gilligan 1982; Tannen 1990). Studies of ‘Lonely Heart’ adverts show that male and female identities are easily communicated by a description of desired physical attributes. Importantly, these studies show that gender identities conform to particular socially entrenched stereotypes (e.g. Jagger 2001). Koestner and Wheeler (1988) report that some ‘lonely hearts’ marketed versions of themselves which ran counter to traditional gendered subjectivities. However, rather than supporting a view of gender interaction free from traditional gender stereotypes
and evidence of social transformation in gender relations, this blurring of gender ‘traits’ was seen as a strategy of representation used to attract a potential dating partner rather than evidence of how the relationship would be sustained in the longer-term.

Danet (1998) argues that the Net is free from conventional signals of gender, such as intonation, voice pitch, facial features, body image, nonverbal cues, dress, and demeanour and points out that on the Net there is the possibility of gender-free communication, possibly for the first time. The Net can liberate individuals from traditional gender stereotypes and scripts by giving less priority, avoiding, manipulating or transforming traditional gender signals and behaviors. While gender-free communication may seem desirable for circumstances such as business liaisons, to initiate and develop traditional ‘male’ and ‘female’ intimate friendships the presentation of gender remains important. Clark (1998) found teenage girls’ virtual representations were limited to their physical attractiveness in common with off-line gendered mating and selection strategies. However, Clark (1998) also reports that these teenagers neutralised some power aspects of a heterosexist system by adopting a “new physical personae, describing their looks in such a way as to appear more attractive to men” (p166).

Herring (1994) did not find the Net to be gender free. She has shown Cyber communication to be gendered and to replicate gender identities found off-line (e.g. Gilligan 1982; Tannen 1990). On the Net she found women were supportive and tentative in their interaction and were more likely than men to self-disclose and make attempts at tension reduction and prevention. Men, on the other hand, were adversarial and status enhancing and their postings included “put-downs, strong, often contentious assertions, lengthy and/or frequent postings, self promotion, (and) sarcasm” (Herring1994, p3-4). What is of interest is how gender is presented online and whether as Danet (1998) and Turkle (1995) suggest gender can be masked in a way that individuals can convincingly present themselves and develop relationships AS the opposite sex.

“RAISING MEN FOR FUN”: THE REVERSAL OF TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES IN CHINESE DATING

SheSay, (http://www.shesay.com), is one of several courtship Web sites in Taiwan. It promotes an on-line dating game called “Raising Men for Fun” which attempts to reverse the traditional gender relations in Chinese society. In traditional Chinese society, ideal women are commonly described by men as a “beautiful vase”. She should be feminine, decorative and dependent and waiting to be chosen by a man. In other words, men in Chinese society are entitled to actively pursue a suitable and perfect woman. In contrast, “Raising Men for Fun” allows women to pick a virtual “kept” man. Women enjoy the power of being able to ‘go after’ and court a man in on-line dating, an experience that most women never have in their real lives. Men are limited to playing a passive role and to some degree this actually reverses traditional Chinese culture. “The idea of putting women in charge – though only virtually – is unique in Chinese society,” said Charlotte Sue, the chief producer of SheSay. What has surprised staff is the large number of men, about thirty percent of registered SheSay members, who have flocked to the site wanting to be “kept”.

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In “Raising Men for Fun” women are described as the “masters” and men as “pets”. These categories not only represent the reversed gender relations of the game’s structure but also mimics common extra-marital relationships in real-life where men have a ‘kept’ mistress(es) commonly referred to as “little white dogs” (chau-lan-gao). To play “Raising Men for Fun” the woman sets three levels of criteria, or acceptable communication, for her “kept” man. Each of the three levels allows the man more freedom to talk with his “master”. The man on the other hand waits to be hunted, makes every attempt to please his female “master”, needing permission from the woman (his master) to talk to her online. Women as “masters” are also responsible for the decision to terminate, or “kill”, their male “pets”. The game is structured in such a way that male “pets” have no authority or voice in the relationship. Their only redress is to seek advice or complain about their female “masters” by posting on a “Pets Complaining Page”.

Presenting themselves as having certain images is a crucial and perhaps the only clue for individuals playing the “Raising Men for Fun” dating game to communicate who they are on the Net. Our intention is to observe the female “master” and male “pet” identities individuals assemble and communicate on-line. We might expect that the rules or structure of “Raising Men for Fun” dating game would allow women to re-define or re-order gender relations, releasing women from traditional passive and feminine gender roles of patriarchal society. Of course, on the Net the typed text could provide a mas - men are masquerading as women, and women are masquerading as men in a virtual culture (Danet 1998). We also want to know if gender identity can be hidden or manipulated on-line.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a ‘virtual ethnography’ (Hine, 2000) and uses a variety of techniques, including participant observation, social interaction, interviews with producers and users, user diaries of their thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and recordings of the SheSay website. In order to gain intimate understanding of identity/identities performance(s) and relationship development this paper reports on a six-month longitudinal study which forms the first stage of an on-going project. The data reported here was collected between 1 July 2001 to 31 December 2001 by a female Chinese researcher who also played the “Raising Men for Fun” dating game. According to the demographic data of SheSay its members are mostly between 16 and 30 years old. The company could not disclose personal information and volunteer participants were recruited by “posting” on the SheSay Virtual Community Bulletin Board and introductions via friendship networks. In total 20 participants were engaged in this study. Ten participants were working and ten participants were enrolled as full-time students at the University. An equal number of men and women participated in the study.

The methods used in this study are designed to provide long-term involvement with participants to build an in-depth understanding of social processes as they emerge and to allow the researcher to probe deep into the personal meanings and experiences of participants. To obtain the necessary data, our participants were asked to keep a daily online diary about their behaviour on the SheSay web site over the six-month period of investigation.
The same Chinese-speaking researcher conducted several three-hour face-to-face in-depth interviews and held weekly e-mail conversations with study participants. Our Chinese-speaking researcher enrolled and played several roles on the SheSay site. This allowed access to understand participants’ experiences and the ability for our Chinese-speaking researcher to share her experiences with other SheSay participants. Off-line participant-observation included attending parties and other informal social gathering in Taiwan. On-line dairies and interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. Data analysis was interpretative and iterative and used pattern coding and analysis to identify emergent themes (Huberman and Miles, 1994). In the next section we discuss the emergent themes from the interview data. We focus on the way participants discuss, describe and create their female ‘master’ and male ‘pet’ identities and the processes in which they engage to construct intimate relationships when they log on to the SheSay “Raising Men for Fun” dating game. Primarily through the interview data attention is given to issues of multiple self-identities, gender relations and how the interdependency associated with ‘face’ constructs intimacy and trust on-line relationships.

EMERGENT THEMES

Breaking the Mould of Culture?:
Authentic Heterosexual Relationships
On Line

To assemble female identities on-line our study participants draw upon traditional Chinese images where women are beautiful, feminine, engaged in the arts, and are passive or subservient to men (Lee 1984). Julie (32 yrs, an interior designer) describes herself in real life as a naïve and sensitive woman and translates these characteristics onto the Net despite the opportunity to play a ‘master’ role in the “Raising Men for Fun” dating game:

“In the beginning, I thought it is a kind of video game for raising a child on the web, which you raise virtual her [him] from 10 to 18 years old and then the result will come out what your child looks like when a colleagues of mine told me “Raising men for fun” game. I was very excited at playing this game so I identified all of my real background and references on this game. While I was devastatingly shocked, my pet replied to me “my master, please give me more words to talk.” All of my colleagues laughed at me and called me ‘stupid’ and ‘ naïve’ when I told them. After this, I acted as a silent, sensitive, and passive woman on this game, which is similar to my real personality in real life….. In the beginning, I felt he is not bad because he leads me to know how to make a friend via this channel. Recently, his strange manner bother me because I frequently receive his complaining messages from the SheSay Pet’s complaining system…..He must not only send me complaining messages but also tell me the result of his bad mood. To be honest, I told my colleagues that ‘I really treated him as my real friend’. Our relationship started with my strong defence and then gradually he became a friend. Really, I don’t know whether I should kill him or not. Is it too cruel to kill him? I have no idea because perhaps his life style is simple and boring for me to understand it. What should I do next?”

Jane (37 yrs) is an assistant at an architect agency and a happy married woman with two daughters. She is enthusiastic and confident about the female role she constructs on-line:
“At the beginning, I described myself with an ambiguous image as a beautiful ancient Chinese Kounf woman who is good at playing instruments, reading books, and writing Calligraphy, etc. When he asked me to send a photo, I sent a postcard to play a joke on him and the second time I sent my young daughter’s photo to let him imagine my appearance.”

Recently, she emailed to say:

“I got a brilliant idea through my November Kyoto trip with my two girlfriends who we have already discussed. We will play Japanese ‘Geisha’ who make up their faces with white powder to take a photo together. I wonder if he recognizes who is who. He will fall unconscious when he sees our photo, won’t he?…..”

Our study shows women are using pre-formulated gender scripts to construct feminine identities on-line despite the opportunities afforded to them to move away from feminine subjectivities by playing the ‘master’ role in the “Raising Men for Fun” dating game. It would seem that our participants need to feel confident about the gender identity that they assemble on-line and to do this they translate off-line gender ‘attributes’ into Cyber society. Moreover our female participants describe their anxieties and concerns as they contemplate how to enact the traditional masculine role of ‘master’ in their virtual relationship. Our study shows that women are unable to fully explore the possibilities of this ‘master’ role.

Male informants also found it difficult to play a reversed gender role on the “Raising Men for Fun” game. Their natural gendered tendencies to be dominant, self-promotional, pragmatic and rational are evident in how they played the game. Mark (24 yrs, a postgraduate student) said:

“It is interesting and fun for me to be raised on the net. I can’t reject it. I don’t know that I have ever heard of this kind of game before, so that it sounds fun for me. Of course, it is unacceptable for me in real life. I don’t care whether her income or status is higher than mine but I shouldn’t be sort of being raised in real life. At least I must have my own skills or abilities to live and not only be raised. To be honest, I am afraid to lose my independent right. Something she can handle, it doesn’t matter, but basically I must have some independent rights.”

Mark complains that one of his classmates posted “Please, raise me!” messages on the web site on his behalf. He worries that this reduces his masculinity further than it has already been lowered by playing a passive role on-line:

“To be honest, it’s useless, I think. I disgrace myself by being posted it. It hurt myself-respect and lost my face. Perhaps I am afraid to let my future partner know it. She might tease me “what a pity you are!” To begin with, I descended to the level of her. It must be equal. I don’t think any man who is waiting for being chosen loses his face. In contrast, I felt embarrassed when my classmate posted messages on it.”

Dave (37 yrs) is an assistant manger of a bank. He hasn’t been chosen and identifies the web site design and content of the game as the cause of his frustrations. He feels that he has lost the power and his ability to assert himself:

“This game has some intentions. I think perhaps the editor of this website might
be a woman who has been oppressed for ages so that she build up this kind of game to devastate men… It makes me uncomfortable to be called pets for playing this game. People are human beings, not animals. It hurts my feelings when I heard this kind of stuff because I lose my own right. We should respect each other for making a friend. I came here only for satisfying my curiosity at all.”

Forms of expression enable people to communicate social information and our study of on-line ‘male’ and ‘female’ participants show that individuals create and codify meaning and understanding that reinforces traditional gender scripts and stereotypes relying on ‘gender attributes’ associated with off-line Chinese society. Moreover, our participants maintained over a long period of time only those identities online that they perceived as authentic and consistent (coherent) with their real lives suggests a centered rather than a fragmented self.

Gender Play: Inauthentic Heterosexual Relationships On-Line

Gender switching on the net is attractive and many of our respondents had chosen to play their opposite ‘off-line’ gender. Sunya (27 yrs) is a teaching assistant at the university. She plays a male ‘pet’ and is proud of her on-line male charisma and success.

“Some of my male colleagues complained that they waited for a long time to be hunted. It never happened to me, even though I pretended to be a guy who needs to present myself with a special ‘male’ identity to attract a woman to choose me. Of course, I described myself as a tall, handsome, gentle, and sporty man. You know, it’s only one day until I have been chosen and then we build up a good relationship on the web……The most important thing is I become ‘a man’. It’s super, isn’t it? But it’s difficult for me to spoil a woman! Sometimes I felt why she is so difficult? I act a gentle and nice guy to comfort her several times but it’s in vain. Forget it! Forget it! Forget it! On the other hand, I feel both of us are girls and then I still continued comforting her.”

Sunya uses a pre-formulated script of off-line male characteristics to assemble and authenticate her virtual ‘male’ identity. However, she is unable to maintain this inauthentic virtual male identity finding it problematic and a cause of anxiety. She recognizes the gender contradictions she constructs when she reverts to feminine tender and caring concerns rather than get frustrated, cause tension and potential hurt or terminate the relationship, as she expects a man may do. In a subsequent diary entry Sunya explains that while pretending to be a male ‘pet’ her Net girlfriend asked to see a photo. Sunya hesitated and expressed guilt and remorse for the potential harm her gender deceit may cause:

“Basically, I have decided to let her see me. It should be better! So far she still thinks I was that handsome guy who I took a photo of with my male colleague. She only asks me who the girl is beside ‘me’. I told her the girl is my colleague. Indeed, the girl is me. Ha.ha.ah….I won’t be a man, if I were killed by my master in the future. Right! Never be a man! I feel I deceive someone. As you know, I have a strong morality in my mind. Deceiving her emotions!! Yup, She treats me very well because I comforted her bad mood when she broke up with a Japanese guy who already had a wife in Japan at the beginning of our talk. So I feel it will hurt her again when she jumps deeply
into my trap. It will drive her crazy when she knows I am female.”

Belle (30 yrs) who works at an advertising company and has a long-term boyfriend in real life but was curious about gender crossing. She e-mailed to share some of her concerns and distress when her gender deceit was potentially revealed:

“I was so shocked and scared in case my master might recognize me – I am a woman – because my boyfriend substituted for me and posted something on for the first time. My master was so mad and questioned how many people in my company joined our chat….It’s so terrible, isn’t it? What’s wrong with that? My personality was all copied from my boyfriend’s personality. That’s the reason I thought my boyfriend could replace me when I am busy or tired. What should I do? Recently, I am afraid that she will know that I am a woman. Not because it will be terminate our online relationship, but because it will hurt her feelings and emotions. I will feel guilty. What I am gonna do…Keep deceiving her….”

Other informants also describe intense anxieties for deceiving their online partner(s). Gender switching for all our informants was abandoned or became unviable. Lucas (29 yrs), is member of staff at the University. He explains:

“I pretended to be a high school girl once but I killed my pet because he didn’t come to talk with me frequently enough. I don’t want to be a woman anymore because I need to change my writing intonations. It’s not fun for me. Finally, it will be disgusting when we have a chance to meet together. I think he will vomit blood when he sees me saying, ‘My God! You are a man.’ In real life, I would like to be a woman because if you are a man you will who must be put under pressure and responsibility from your family and society. For example, I need to continue the family line and glorify my family’s good reputation. I can’t breathe when hearing these words.”

What is interesting is that participants in the dating game presume their online partner is gender authentic, despite the fact that they have engaged in gender switching themselves. Mark (24 yrs, a postgraduate student) assumes that ‘masters’ on the Raising Men for Fun game would be female and describes his imagined reaction if this was not the case:

“I think it’s only a game so that it doesn’t mean anything for me. And I have pretended to be a ‘woman’ to choose myself so that I have already played and enjoyed this game before….. There is no limitation in the virtual world for me. Just play!! Whatever! But not with a man, it deceives my emotions. At least it must be female and it doesn’t matter whether other references such demographic data are fake or not. With a man, disgusting!! Just making friends on the Net.”

While we may consider these negative emotions and worries to be evidence that ‘trust’ between two relationship partners is needed to develop an intimate relationship, we argue that what our participants are expressing are anxieties in the inter-related self. The anxiety and remorse for the consequences of gender deceit is not directed towards themselves but is focused on others, most often their online partner. Our data also shows that our participants imagine this shame will be felt by their families and friends in the real world if their gender deceit is found out. As a consequence our study
shows that ‘gender play’ tends to be limited to new and fairly superficial relationships. This is because participants cannot sustain inauthentic gender role either because they are unable to maintain the scripts and expressions of the opposite gender beyond fairly concrete physical and cultural images traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity, and/or because the anxieties of the inter-related self become overly problematic and this leads our participants to terminate their inauthentic on-line relationship.

Close Relationships: Intimacy, Disclosure and Empathy

Our data show that the “Raising Men for Fun” dating game allows heterosexual virtual couples intimacy and inter-dependency characteristic of close relationships. In Cyber-society intimacy is developed through self-disclosure and empathy. Both are forms of risk-taking and are symbols of reassurance and trust.

Self-disclosure in on-line relationships involves sharing personal stories and secrets. Sunya tells us about early intimacy in an inauthentic relationship on-line. She describes how by sharing intimate stories she feels closer and more affectionate towards her on-line partner. She says:

“It upset her to be a mistress of one Japanese guy. She only wanted to look for a guy to chat with her or develop another love story which can help her forget her last unhappy love. To my surprise, I don’t think I sincerely wanted to make friends on the Net until my master told me her secret. After that, I thought it would hurt her when she told me her private secret because we don’t know each other in real life. My master says that she is 165cm and her weight is 47 kg and good looking. She describes what she wears black mini-skirt with high heels. All her colleagues think she looks so sexy. I think she should be pretty and a lot of men pursue her in real life. I trust her so much because she is willing to share her private secret with me. I don’t know perhaps I give her a hint that we can be a couple in the future because we discuss about Japanese soap opera in Taiwan which old woman falls in love with a younger guy. I told her I was a younger guy”.

Developing close relationships was also achieved by showing empathy and an understanding of each other. This was mostly enacted through the giving of virtual gifts. Tina (24 yrs, a postgraduate student) plays two female roles. She describes how happy she would be if her partner(s) could show that they understand her and “can read her mind”. She told us how virtual gifts sent as presents are important to progress a close relationship:

“My sign is Leo …… considering or evaluating gifts. It is rather strange because your partner doesn’t know what you really want, but I expect to get what I really want. It will make me happy when he sends me the gift, which is accurate, what I want now. I will feel, ‘how do you know me?’ ..............I might send e-card to inform him when I will be busy in moving or going out in a few days. Recently, I sent both of them a virtual cat because I think a cat stands for independency. But one of them was no reaction and the other only said “thanks”. I thought they didn’t really know the meaning of a cat.”

On the SheSay site virtual gifts include e-cards, flowers, chocolates, and more personal items such as bags, clothes and leisure items. Our study suggests these gifts are hierarchically and reveal
progressive levels of intimacy and understanding. Sunya explains in her diary:

19/07/01: After a couple of weeks raising, he finally starts to be aggressive for understanding his ‘Master’, me, since I am active and send him several e-cards.
24/09/01: Hey, I got a bouquet of flowers from him, which I sincerely cultivated for ages.
02/11/01: He sent me a virtual plane ticket. He seems jealous that I usually travel somewhere. I told him I am going to Tokyo next Monday. I must send him a virtual travel, even though he can’t go.

However, gift giving does not always achieve the desired outcome. Lucas (29 yrs), is a member of staff at the University. He reflects on his previous failed relationships playing this game. Post-hoc he is rational and dismissive of his previous online interactions continually referring to it as “only a game”. He says:

“She gave me a hat and then a bag. I gave her a bouquet of roses and a basket of fruit. I know some language of flowers but it doesn’t really mean anything because it is made up by people. It doesn’t mean anything for me to give people a virtual gift.”

Virtual gift giving is a skill. Competence in sending virtual gifts gives the symbolic capital necessary to show that individuals in relationship dyads can read each others minds and satisfy their wishes. This competence adds authenticity and intimacy to the on-line relationship.

Our data also suggests that developing intimate relationships on-line is however limited and that once a threshold level of intimacy is reached the relationship moves back to the ‘real world’. Generally, our informants exchanged phone numbers and then agreed to a meeting, often for lunch. But transferring the relationship off-line is a big step. Tina explains that there must be a level of mutual understanding or intimacy reached before she can consider going off-line:

“I haven’t decided to meet him or not. Perhaps, we will meet next week if he keeps sincerely touching my heart”

Dave also has concerns about whether there is enough trust and understanding to move off-line. After two months of on-line dating, Dave was asked by his ‘master’ to meet her for lunch. Dave is unsure and anxious about his decision. He e-mailed for advice:

“I am having trouble because my master is likely to meet me in real life. Strange! How charming I am! Not only do I pretend to be a woman when I am a real man, but all of my net friends want to meet me face-to-face. I am wondering whether I am charming or whether they want to have one nightstand. Quickly, give me advice! I prefer not to meet. She might not make contact with me any more if I am not her style after meeting. But she might kill me if I insist not to meet her. Of course, I am confident of myself, I must be swarmed all over by women and men. Dave”

Dave (his on-line pseudonym: Wind) and his master (her on-line pseudonym: Sudden) felt more secure in moving their on-line relationship off-line. Here is an exert from on-line communication:

Sudden: After all, the Internet is virtual. I want to talk with you face to face.
Wind: Hi, it’s too quick to understand you but you have already given me
your mobile number. To my surprise, I am not used to do like this. Indeed, I am interested in your deep understanding of my life. Can you talk more about yourself?

Sudden: My mobile is 0918193803. I am absolutely your intimate friend whatever you want you can talk with me.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study has shown that people can develop ‘close’ relationships or intimacy on-line. Our informants experienced intense positive and negative emotions and concerns in their relationships as “master” and/or “pet” and we suggest other studies have been premature in their dismissal of social experiences on the Net as mediated, ‘not real’, vicarious, lacking in trust and emotional authenticity, and predominantly motivated and maintained for purely ‘fun’ (Clark 1998; Hine 2000). However, while the Net is shown to be in someway liberating, by allowing our participants to express emotions, establish relationships in a non-traditional way and engage in ‘gender play’, our findings also show that this ‘ludic gap’ is only momentarily enjoyed. Our study shows that neither women nor men could sustain the reversed gender role of “master” or “pet”. Gender play in inauthentic heterosexual relationships was also quickly abandoned showing that the manipulation of gender identity cannot be sustained over time on the Net and that our participants revert back to the comforts of their off-line gender and personalities. We have argued that knowledge of gender deceit on-line results in anxieties for the inter-related self that were unsustainable. Together these findings confirm that culture is inescapable and that the Internet affords only very limited ‘ludic gaps’ to explore alternative gender relations and identities before there is a ‘catastrophic reversion’ to traditional gender roles, that is, there is a complete and sharp reversal to an original position with no evidence of mutation or change. Our study supports others who have questioned whether “technological transformations may be grasped, not as flights from reality, but as the means for creating new bodily and social realities, unimpeded by modern categories and constraints” (Lyon 1999, p. 82). Our evidence shows “cyberspace as a repository for a collective memory – it is popular culture, it is narrative created by its inhabitants that remind us who we are, it is life as it is lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts” Fernback (1997, p.37). Culture is a unifying force and our study questions whether the fragmented, multiple and de-centered identity associated with postmodern views of consumers can be extended to collective cultures, and perhaps on-line environments more generally.

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