Gender and Identity Play on the Net – Raising Men for Fun?

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Abstract

“Rising Men for Fun”, a game of making friends on the web, reverses traditional Chinese gender relationships where women are ‘masters’ and men are ‘pets’. We explore on-line gendered identity representations and find them to reflect and reinforce cultural expectations and entrenched hierarchies. However the prevalence of gender switching and the creation and maintenance of several on-line identities is shown to free men and women to experience profound emotions and roles unavailable as experiences in ‘real’ life off-line. We describe the experiences of ten Chinese men and women as they explore the boundaries of ‘male’ and ‘female’, ‘on-line’ and ‘off-line’, ‘morality’ and ‘deceit’, ‘playing fun ’ and ‘real life’. We find that virtual identity play is not just a game and may emerge as a powerful force of cultural change.

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“Millions of Americans on networks are logging on…they’re making friends and falling in love without the constraints and the protections that apply, as they say, IRL [in real life].” (O’Brien, 1999)

The process of making a friend or attracting a mate has been categorised in terms of marketing and/or consumer behaviour and studied by a number of researchers (Bernard and Adelman, 1990; Bernard et al., 1991; Kotler and Levy, 1969) in which emotion, rather than rationality and an economic calculus, has emerged as the dominant mode (Belk, 1991). However, all previous studies have been located in US culture, but what happens in Asia?

Chinese Dating: Real Life vs. the Net

Traditionally, men in Chinese society were entitled to find the perfect woman by all available means including gift-giving, courting, writing love letters, dating arrangement, etc. Matchmaking (Tsang-ching) was an important dating ritual in the past for Chinese young adults, especially for men to choose a suitable women (Stockman, 2000). Even in modern Taiwanese society, some Taiwanese young adults still rely on a matchmaker to help them find an appropriate man or woman. In general, matchmakers realize how important equality of family standing is for a married couple. The matchmaker uses photographs of a man and a woman of suitable education, occupation, income, and family background. If both parties are interested in each other, the matchmaker will arrange the dating ritual in the house of the female, or more recently in a luxury restaurant. In such a dating ritual, if the man likes the woman he will reveal this at the end of the “tea-offering” process by putting a red envelope with money into the empty cup, or directly by telling the matchmaker afterwards. That is, men have all the power in the matchmaking process.
Conversely, a man will refer to a women who actively courts him as a ‘flower-like nut’ (Wah-tse) and, if he is not charmed by her physical beauty, he will talk to his friends about this ‘male like’ behaviour in a woman. This in Chinese culture is “upside-down courtship” (Doa-juay).

Women’s active pursuit of men has not been socially acceptable and most often conferred a negative and damaging image on those women involved. A Chinese woman was expected to be passive in dating and to wait for the man to court her, or bear the risk of loosing “face” if active pursuit of a man was discovered by her family or friends. The well known Chinese saying “a woman who goes after men should find it as easy as going through a paper window screen, while a man going after women should find it to be as hard as climbing across a mountain”, shows women as passive recipients of romantic male gestures and reluctant to show their emotions and attraction to a man. This makes traditional courtship a complex and sometimes ambiguous activity for men. Men believe that if women were able to show their emotions and attractions openly, courtship for men would be easier to understand and negotiate.

The situation is very different now. One online survey conducted in Taiwan by Living Psychology Magazine (2001) found that around forty-one percent of Taiwanese girls confessed to be active in seeking their male targets. Moreover, one women’s Web site in Taiwan SheSay (http://www.shesay.com) has promoted an online dating game called “Raising Men for Fun” which attempts to reverse the traditional relationship between men and women in Chinese society. This game allows women to pick a virtual “kept” man. Both men and women can play, although their gender roles are different. The woman is empowered to set the criteria, or levels, of acceptable behaviours for her “kept” man. The man, on the other hand, waits to be hunted, makes every attempt to please his female “master” and needs permission from the woman to talk to her. “The idea of putting women in charge – though only virtually – is unique in Chinese society” said Charlotte Sue, the chief producer of SheSay. Extraordinarily, women become masters on the SheSay web site. They enjoy the power of being able to ‘go after’ and court a man, an experience that most women never have in their real lives. What has surprised SheSay’s staff
is that a large number of men, about thirty percent of the registered SheSay members, have flocked to the site wanting to be “kept”. “Maybe men want to enjoy the feeling of being loved and courted” said Ms. Sue. Basically, if this situation can really be applied or is translated into real life off-line, women in Chinese society may transform traditional patriarchal Chinese culture.

**Women’s Empowerment on the Net**

In traditional Chinese culture men were entitled to the supposed masculine traits and characteristics of authority, power, aggression, competition, and domination which have been valued over feminine traits and characteristics such as tenderness, gentleness, and obedience. It has been suggested that the coming of the Internet age may empower women in such traditional patriarchal societies and allow them to redefine and re-order gender relations (Castells, 1997). However, Wiley (1995) pointed out that the Net is still “male territory” based on two claims: women as a proportion of all users are still in the minority; and there is a cultural dominance of masculinity in on-line spaces. As Kacen (2000) emphasised, “gender is constructed by culture and language and then the emerging transformation, enhancement, and dilution of the culture that is occurring will continue to retextualize the meanings of gender.” In other words, gender identity and interaction in cyberspace will likely reflect a series of signs or a mixing of the old and the new, which may just happen in an emergent fashion. Traditional gender relations may carry over onto Internet behaviour, as found in Trinidad by Miller and Slater (2000).

On the other hand, on the Net women have an increased opportunity to mask their gender identity. Moreover, Jaffe et al (1995) found pseudonym use to result in greater expression of social interdependence among men. As these authors speculated, “what we consider to be a ‘feminine’ pattern of exhibiting social interdependence might actually be an essentially human style unconstrained by the expectation of male power assertion.” It appears that women in cyberspace are able to have their say while eliminating gender biases.
Although Wakeford (1997) proposed that women remain constrained in real life, more recently in the UK there is growing evidence that women and girls are developing confidence in cyberspace. Malina and Nutt (2000) suggested that “the Net provides potential ‘voices’ for women whose ideas have often been silenced, or at least restricted and may provide the opportunity for multiplicity of women to be ‘heard’. In addition, the Net has the potential to empower women to, “negotiate the global and make it a local space and conversely, to inform and change global cultures” as the Net provides an environment for women to challenge the masculine power base (Harcourt, 1999).

To some degree, making friends in cyberspace, or cyber-matching, challenges the traditional masculine power base because women are significantly more likely to be active than men and to have formed a personal relationship on-line (Parks and Floyd, 1996). Of course, it may simply be that a greater proportion of women are looking for friends in Cyberspace. In an analysis of teens dating on the Net, Clark (1998, p.166) found that “teen girls adopt new physical personae, describing their looks in such a way as to appear more attractive to the males.” He suggested that “this not only fulfils the function of avoiding potential pain and rejection but also neutralizes some of the power aspects of the heterosexist system in which beautiful girls are given more attention and more social opportunities.” Moreover, girls could be empowered to control and handle their lovers on the Net and they could even date four men at the same time (Clark, 1998).
In other words, boys in cyberspace lose some of their power in one of the most important tools of the evaluation of desirability. In contrast, girls feel empowered through control of self-presentation and their ability of evaluation selection which extends to a decision on whether to terminate a relationship with their ‘pet’ partners on the Net or not.

Under the encouragement of the SheSay website, the online ‘Raising a Man’ dating game affords women in particular the opportunity to claim power within heterosexual relationships via actively writing love letters, sending e-cards, giving virtual or real gifts. Conversely, men in this
game lose their power to choose their women and are limited to playing a passive role. To some
degree, this game actually reverses traditional Chinese culture. In fact, even in cyberspace, it
would be the first time in Chinese society for women to be empowered to handle their own
private love lives. This contemporary consumer behaviour must be related to Chinese traditional
and emergent dating and dating services which are used to illustrate and provide a wider cultural
context for the findings of the study.

Identity/Identities and the Construction of Self on the Net

As Danet (1998) pointed out, without conventional signals of gender, such as intonation, voice
pitch, facial features, body image, nonverbal cues, dress, and demeanour, in the virtual world of
the net we see gender-free communication for the first time. According to Turkle (1995 p. 184),
“you can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can
be the opposite sex.” In cyberspace, individuals can change themselves as easily as they change
their clothes. Even though there are many social and cultural constraints on individuals’
behaviour in Chinese society, for women particularly, the Net is potentially very liberating. No
wonder a well-known New Yorker cartoon comes to the key point: “On the Internet no one
knows you’re a dog.”

Developing an image of ourselves as male or female and convictions about what membership in
that group implies, we develop a gender identity and through a variety of dating patterns, this
identity, or self-presentation, becomes a key factor for both men and women to appeal to one
particular Mr. or Ms. Right (Woll and Young, 1989) in real life, or on the Net. One of the most
popular ‘love match’ TV programs in Taiwan called “About Romance” features an identity
section in which participants could describe their height, weight, education, occupation, etc. to
attract attention. According to an analysis of the TV show (Chaing, 2000), most females in this
program tend to identify themselves as tender, easy going, and always with a sweet smile, while
most males describe themselves as aggressive, honest, ambitious, responsible, and so on. It appears that participants find it necessary to refer to such identity factors even though they are face to face on the TV dating program.

Relatively, making friends on the Net is much more mysterious and complex. Presenting themselves as having certain images is becoming a crucial, or the only, clue for participants dating on the net. Of course, on the Net men or women could play opposite gender roles if they would like. Women might be curious about what it would be like to be a Man, while men could experience the feelings of being courted and loved and understand the “female experience” (O’Brien, 1999) in a virtual dating world. In fact, as found by Danet (1998) the typed text could provide a mask in Cyberspace --- men are masquerading as women, and women are masquerading as men in a virtual culture.

Gender characteristics are a primary means by which we sort and define self and others, and these gendered representations reflect cultural expectations and entrenched hierarchies. “Sex attributes” provide basic information about how to conduct interactions with others and how to organize social reality (O’Brien, 1999). We argue that when people enter cyberspace they bring with them pre-formulated cultural scripts, which they may use to map this new territory. Turkle (1995) suggested that it “is affecting our ideas about mind, body, self, and machine” (p.10). It appears that some people in the SheSay dating game are playing double or multiple lives, sometimes with different gender identities or the opposite sex. These virtual behaviours are challenging our ideas about social relations and the existing forms of interpersonal communication.
Research Questions

To ground and elaborate each of these points empirically in a Chinese virtual community, we examined the SheSay website’s ‘Raising Men for Fun’, an online dating game, to compare the patterns of on-line and off-line Chinese dating interaction, internet usage, and related consumer behaviours. Specifically, we explore:

1. To what extent are women empowered through identity formation and identity play?
2. How and to what extent do Chinese culture and gender relations in Chinese society influence relating behaviours on the net?

Research Methodology

Although laboratory experiments (Sproull and Kiesler, 1986) have been conducted mostly in task-oriented research on computer-mediated communication, their findings cannot be generalized to the whole of electronic communication (Baym, 1995). Kollock and Smith (1994) found that monitoring the behaviour of others becomes easier, while sanctioning undesirable behaviour becomes more difficult in the developing social organization of the Usernet in cyberspace. They called for extended ethnographic explorations charting the emergence of norms and expectations concerning acceptable use and appropriate behaviour on-line. Marvin (1995) argued that lurking or observing is not a suitable method for researching CMC and argued that using the ethnographic tool of participant-observation might lead to a deeper understanding of Internet behaviour. Following these calls, this research utilises ‘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 over an extended time period of time, events and activities. 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 respondents, while also
appreciating the cultural influences as they are revealed at the social and personal level.

According to the demographic data of SheSay, its members are mostly between 16 and 30 years old and spans both university or college-level students as well as working men and women. Five working men and women, and ten university girls and boys, were the participants in this study, which forms part of a larger research project. Because “Raising Men for Fun” is considered by the web site producers to be personal and private for individuals, it is almost impossible for the company to provide any detailed personal data. 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 three-month period of investigation. To gain in-depth experiential insight a Chinese-speaking researcher participated in the ‘Raising a Man for Fun’ dating game. In addition to virtual ethnography, the same researcher conducted several face to face interviews and held e-mail conversations with study respondents on a regular weekly basis. On-line diaries 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 (Reason, 1981; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Huberman and Miles, 1994). In the next section, we discuss the emergent themes from the interview data. We focus on the way respondents discuss, describe and create self-identity and the social interaction that occurs when men and women log-on to the SheSay “Raising Men for Fun” game. Primarily through the interview data attention is given to issues of multiple self-identities and the translation of traditional Chinese culture and gender relations onto the Net. The analysis also indicates movements and change in Chinese culture brought about, at least in part, by the Net.
Emergent Themes

Identity Play

The issues of identity and multi-identity were obvious. Most informants were proud of their on-line identity, or more usually, multi-identity performances, and enjoyed playing and developing their identity with their on-line partners. In other words, gender switching on the net is attractive and acceptable between and/or among genders, and sits alongside more traditional heterosexual friendships.

Sunya (27 yrs) a teaching assistant at the university, plays four different roles on the “Raising Men for Fun” game. She is proud of her identity performances, especially her online self-charisma, and believes that she maintains good social relationships with both her female and male 'pet' partners. :

“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. My colleagues are such poor guys!! I tried to help them and went to the “Roaming Pet Community” of this game to post “emergency information such as please raise me! Raise me!”

Sunya emphasized,

“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. Indeed, in my mind I hate her because she didn’t open her mind to forget about her last lover.”
On-line and off-line identities and emotions do not appear discrete, as Sunya points out,

“Two girls on this game I am playing are quite similar to my daily life. But the third one is totally different from these two. She is arrogant, indeed the guy who plays with me is arrogant as well. For example, he told me ‘you must show me your ability if you want to be my master.’ Hey, what an arrogant guy he is! I replied to him, ‘who wants to be my pet must show me his ability as well.’ So he asks me questions in English on purpose. Of course, I replied to him in English. You know I passed it. Today, he posted, ‘he is leaving for Singapore meeting.’ I will reply that I will be going to Tokyo for a conference. Aha, I love challenging. Keep observing our challenging stories!!”

While Sunya pretends to be a man, ‘his’ net girlfriend wanted ‘him’ to send a photo a month ago. Sunya hesitated and thought:

“Basically, I 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. In real life, all of my friends trust me because I am always a good girl and woman. I prefer to give my friends [on-line] a totally different me, to reverse my old image. Basically, I really want to be a bad woman. Although I am really conservative, I don’t want anyone to recognize it. So, if I have enough time, I will challenge the guy who claims to be a “sleaze” on the Net. It’s really challenging, isn’t it?”
Lucas (29 yrs) a member of staff at the university plays a male and a female role. Although he points out that he has had a bad experience when deceiving others on the BBS in the past, he still tries to be a woman on this game.

“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 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.”

Lucas mentions that the man who he plays on this game is similar to him in real life. One of his interesting stories is:

“To my surprise, I was chosen after only one day’s registration and then my master asked me to send my photo for her. I asked her to log on to my Home Page, which I think it is okay because I just posted some of my photos taken from behind. Nobody knows who he is. Unfortunately, I forgot that I have posted one of my front side photos on it. I was shocked when she emailed me saying ‘who is that handsome guy’, even though I was happy to hear that she said, ‘Can you introduce that guy to me?’ Indeed, I still lied to her ‘that guy is my younger brother. He is too young for you.’ Recently, she knows it’s me. Ha.ha.ha…”

Jane (37 yrs) an assistant at an architect agency and a happy married woman with two daughters, plays a female role with a male net friend, even though her husband knows she ‘keeps a man’ on this game:

“I can show my husband or discuss the game with him, there is no secret in my screen life between us. I used to chat with my net male friends on the ICQ. So, my husband is used to my
behaviour ”.

Jane is enthusiastic about showing her game identity:

“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?….”

Belle (30 yrs) who works at an advertising company has a fixed boyfriend in real life. She just wants to enjoy a gender crossing experience, but had an unexpected shock last month. She e-mailed to share her concern and distress:

“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….=”
In the ‘Raising Men for Fun’ game, women sometimes portray themselves as men to enjoy the ‘male experience’, while men create female characters with the intent of understanding the degree of the female power they would get between ‘her’ and her partner. However, when reporting gender switching on-line respondents were concerned over the impact of “deceiving” potential friends, showing respondents expected their on-line partners to see their portrayed gender identity on-line as authentic. Moreover, both men and women use ‘game’ and ‘play’ metaphors in a manner that suggests that the Net shields ‘real’ emotions. Our analysis shows that this is not the case. Respondents feel and are exploring intense and often profound emotions and concerns that they would often find difficult to experience or discuss with others in real life.

**Chinese culture and gender relations influence dating behaviours on the net**

From the interview data, one female interviewee pointed out that “I agree and don’t care about women who go after men in Chinese society, but it’s absolutely not me in real life.” Conversely, on-line there is little, if any, concern about women actively courting men. However, our analysis shows the importance of pre-formulated off-line gender scripts to the form and dynamic of on-line interaction. Sunya said:

“It’s impossible for me to court a man in real life because there is a heavy morality in my mind. I don’t understand the reason I just feel something is bad. For example, women shouldn’t be careless or shouldn’t carelessly get divorced and have an affair with a married guy. It is beyond my morality to go after men. Basically, I do not do it in real life. But it is good for other girls to go after men. Brave!! I feel it is normal for other girls to court a man whom she loves…….I feel that it’s no problem to court men on the net because we don’t need to meet them. And there is no morality on the net. Not only for me. Basically, there is very very low morality on the net. For example, a one-night stand will happen. I never and dare not think of this. I am a pure girl. Hey! How come? I still can’t be a bad woman.”
Jane said

“I feel it is normal now but I can’t do it. That’s because I belong to the older principles. Indeed, I will encourage my daughters to court the guy who she feels right for her. For me, I can’t jump out or open my mind to go after a man. Our educational principles told us that women must carry ourselves with dignity and reserve and must be virtuous, otherwise, we will be blamed to be ‘nuts’. Except me, I accept that my daughters and my colleagues do it.”

Julie (32 yrs) an interior designer, said,

“I can’t do it, asking me to court a man because my sign is Cancer which is more passive and protective unless I recognize my partner. One thing is to lose face in front of my colleagues; the other is to be afraid to be hurt. I will feel sad if I were rejected by a man who says ‘I don’t like you.’”

Dave (38 yrs) an assistant manager of a bank company, said:

“It’s appropriate for men to court women in real life. Conversely, I can’t accept that the opposite way because I feel the girl would be ‘flower-like nuts’ [male-like behaviour in a woman]. If she courts you today, she might court another guy tomorrow as well. From my point of view, a female must act with dignity and should have shy and embarrassing personalities in her mind…To be overwhelmed by ‘unexpected favor’ [special attention], if I were courted by a woman in real life. Of course, I would need to check her appearance at first. However, I will feel sorry if she is a ‘dinosaur’ who all of my male friends called an ugly woman when they meet her. In contrast, it should be okay because it doesn’t matter who courts whom on the net. But I still think a game should be opened called ‘raising women for fun’, it might be so-called equal between men and women.”
Mark (24yrs) 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 perhaps I have never heard 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. Some things she can handle, it doesn’t matter but basically I must have some independent rights. I just want one wish for a woman to court me in real life. But I will care about her age (she must be within five years younger or older than me), appearance (not ugly), education (above college) and easy going, etc. Conversely, 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. I don’t care about age, appearance or something. It’s just a game.”

While there is clear evidence of gender switching, our data shows that the presumed heterosexual dyadic interaction on the Net is organized and shaped on traditional gender role in Chinese culture, and that traditional gender relations are upheld by both men and women even when they explore their opposite gender role.

Conclusions

There is some debate as to the existence and nature of ‘virtual community’ (e.g. Baym, 1998). Rheingold (1993) defined virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net, [when] enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships” (p. 5). Turkle (1995) has also pointed to a kind of shared understanding that enables the possibility of on-line community, while Weise described her online social life and explained the emotion-laden sense of belonging: “coming to the community with a cry of pain, feeling alone and bereft, and these women I did not know sat
down beside me and offered comfort, told their own stories” (p. xi). In our study we found that our respondents experience intense positive and negative emotions and concerns in their social interactions as ‘master’ and/or ‘pet’ on the ‘Raising Men for Fun’ game. Our data suggest that these are much more than ‘play’, or a mediated, partially real or imagined emotion that we might expect from ‘identity play’. Men and women share their love stories, daily life experiences, and even their personal secrets, as well as give advice to each other. While our respondents show the Net to be in someway liberating enabling people to express and explore emotions, parts of their character and an opposite gender role they would not otherwise be able to examine, this ‘liberation’ is partial when we consider the expressed tensions, or emotional disturbance, felt by respondent’s gender deception. These on-line ‘master’ and ‘pet’ dating experiences are profound, authentic, and extending in time beyond on-line interaction to affect respondents off-line. Our findings suggest some 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). Our findings indicate an on-line/off-line fluidity and support Baym (1998) who suggested “on-line groups are often woven into the fabric of off-line life” (p.63). People explore and develop forms of expression that enable them to communicate social information, to create and codify meanings and understanding.
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