A QUALITATIVE APPROACH OF ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

Raluca Buhaș[1]

University of Oradea

Abstract. *The present paper aims to draw the attention of social researchers towards online relationships, different as pattern of construction and dynamics from offline relationships and also to outline a real image of this new social phenomenon.Using qualitative sociological approach, the study aims to be an exploratory investigation of the process of initiation, construction and dynamics of relationships developed via Internet.The thematic analysis of the interviews has revealed key elements in what regards: the socio-demographic profile of the individuals involved in this type of relationships; human mate selection patterns in the virtual environment; the dynamics of online relationships.The conclusions of the study lead us to believe that the degree of tolerance and social acceptance regarding online relationships follows an upward trend, which renders the Romanian society as being opened to the emergence of new social phenomena.*

Keywords: relationships, cyberspace, offline environment, human mate selection.

Introduction

In a dynamic society, characterized by the emergence of Internet and of new technologies in shaping social life, human interaction changes and creates new frameworks of specific expression different from traditional ones. Statistics show that in 2012 (30 June) there were 2.405.518.376 Internet users worldwide, while in Romania, in the same year the number of users reached only 9.642.383 and the percentage of penetration in the society was of 44.1% (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2013). These values placed Romania behind many European countries when it comes to Internet usage.

Computer mediated human interaction represents a normal and natural social process, seen as convenient and desirable. Cyberspace is labelled as an efficient, convenient and less expensive way to start a relationship.

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[1]**Author address:** University of Oradea, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Universității Street, no.1, 410087, Oradea, Romania. **E-mail:** ralubuhas@gmail.com

Specialized literature regarding the dynamics of online relationships confirms that cyberspace becomes more and more socially accepted as a healthy and natural way of human interaction that fails to provide a wide range of eligible partners for romantic relationships. Utz (2000) showed that 76.7% of those who declare that their friendship started online continued also offline, while 24.5% of the subjects were involved in a romantic relationship with a partner known via Internet.

The study of online relationships and of their patterns of construction and evolution is a relatively new research topic which is not sufficiently explored by Romanian sociologists. The sociology of cyberspace, still a new branch of sociology, provides wide and interesting research directions and demands in-depth studies in order to outline new social contexts for human interaction. Modern technology (including computers and the Internet with all its features) is interposed between the researcher and the new social reality, inducing new directions for analysis.

Theoretical approaches of online relationships

Computer-mediated human interaction has specificities that make it different in several ways from the offline human interaction. Among online relationships characteristics the literature mentions: low social acceptance, partners` high emotional involvement, intensity of partners` linguistic interactions (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Nadolu (2004) identifies some basic characteristics of computer-mediated social interaction:

- the power balance between online social partners is compromised, which does not characterize offline interactions.The degree of social power manifestation is extremely low, often non-existent, because individuals do not have control over the virtual interaction and their partner's behaviour
- online social partners have full control over their identity, which can be built according to the user`s desire. Online context can eliminate the presentation of perceivable identity signs such as gender, race, age or physical appearance
- the engagement in a virtual interaction is voluntary and individual. Online users developing such interaction are fully aware and responsible for their own virtual behaviour

Wildermuthand Vogl-Bauer (2007) has also outlined some features of online relationships as follows:

- family and friends manifest a low degree of acceptance and support for such a relationship
- online partners expose a high degree of emotional involvement
- online users manifest a high degree of care and caution regarding a wide range of aspects characterizing their virtual relationship
- linguistic interactions are substantial and very intense
- online relationships are often associated with extramarital contacts

The role of socio-demographic indicators in developing online relationships

Initially, accessing dating sites was biased by male gender. Men were most prone to such online activity and they were forming the network of online profiles. To balance gender representation, companies managing dating sites have allowed women for a long period of time to navigate and test online services for free (Whitty, 2009). Nowadays, the proportion of both men and women who turn to these services is relatively equal. McKenna and his collaborators showed no gender differences when it comes to patterns of expression and assessment of online relationships (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002).

In the offline environment, *age* is an inhibitor factor in developing long term couple relationships. The most vulnerable social category in this sense is the women over 40 years (Mahay & Laumann, 2004 apud Lever et al., 2008). Modern technology and the Internet meet their desire by giving them the opportunity to contact potential partners without the risk of being exposed to social prejudices and limitations. According to studies, more and more women over a certain age are using this modern way of choosing a romantic partner (Lever et al., 2008; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012).

Pew Internet and American Life Project studies revealed that the proportion of people from *urban / suburban* and *rural areas* accessing the Internet in order to develop a relationship is relatively equal.Instead, the statistics reveal that the number of people who know someone who has used the Internet to choose a romantic partner is higher for those with urban residence (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). Other research showed that the proportion of people perceiving Internet as having numerous advantages as a new way of selecting a partner is higher for those living in small cities or rural areas than for large cities inhabitants (Brym & Lenton, 2001). A possible explanation could be that in narrow geographical spaces the area of eligible relationship partners is relatively reduced, which determines people to seek other ways and methods of human mate selection.

The role of socio-cultural determinants in developing online relationships

In establishing and maintaining a relationship, physical attractiveness, *spatial and geographical proximity* and the socio-cultural similarity are considered to be the most important determinants within this process (Chipea, 2001; Iluţ, 2005). In cyberspace, these factors know different patterns of influencing relationships. Even though the distance between online partners is often not neglectible, the role of geographic and spatial proximity is diminished in computer mediated (Baker, 2008). The impediment of physical proximity is canceled by the emotional intensity created and by the open communication between partners.

Similar to spatial proximity, the role of *physical attractiveness* is diminished in the formation of virtual relationships, even if physical appearance is still an important factor in this respect. In cyberspace the attractiveness halo is replaced with that of personality, individuals being evaluated according to their cognitive and emotional

characteristics (Ben-Ze`ev, 2004). Attractiveness is rather the result of emotional-affective intimacy (Cooper, McLoughlin & Campbell, 2000). Communication and evaluation of partners` inner beauty are some of the fundamental pillars in developing a stable relationship (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). In many cases, the process of sharing photos is preceded by the formation of a high emotional attachment (McKenna, 2009; Kendall, 2002; McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002).

The way a person presents in cybersopace can determine the success in the process of choosing a virtual partner. Both dating websites and social networks enable users to create and present their own image, to construct their online profile, which will represent their identification card in cyberspace. In general, users` profile can be viewed by members of certain networks or sites. Either free or in exchange of money, users may provide information about themselves, which include socio-demographic information as gender identity, age, residence and aspects of physical appearance - facial and body features (Whitty, 2009; Fiore, 2010). Some clues, such as users` name, message of presentation, the avatar or the profile picture may suggest and foreshadow certain physical qualities (eg.: the user name of "Pretty Woman" may create the mental image of a physically attractive woman) (Fiore, 2010). It is true that many users tend to exaggerate or even lie about certain physical features. In general, men appear to be taller than they actually are, while women tend to present false information about their weight or body shape (Whitty, 2009).

The principles of *socio-cultural homogamy* are present even online; users wish to establish relationships with people similar to them in terms of socio-cultural values and attitudes (Ben-Ze`ev, 2004; Barraket & Henry-Waring, 2008). Racial, ethnic, religious and age homogamy is also valued online (Hitch, Hortaçsu & Ariely, 2010; Sweeney & Borden, 2009; Hitch, Hortaçsu & Ariely, 2006; Fiore, 2010; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). In a research conducted on a representative sample of people using online environment to initiate a relationship, Skopek, Schulz and Blossfeld (2009) observed that educational homogamy is among the most important criteria valued in this elective process.

The *dynamics of the relationship* in the offline environment is determined by the existence of strong sentimental and emotional ties between the two partners, along with a strong motivation to get to know each other (Baker, 2008; Baker & Whitty, 2008). The success of offline meetings mostly depends of honesty and openness in the online communication period (Ben-Ze`ev, 2004). In what regards the time elapsed from the initial online contact until the first offline meeting, the literature does not converge to a consensus; this period varies from a few weeks to 1-2 years (Baker, 2008; McKenna, 2009).

Research objectives and methodology

The *main research objective* is to identify and describe the patterns of construction, evolution and offline dynamics of online relationships. Thus, the research focuses

on relationships that began in cyberspace – matrimonial webpage, online network, chat rooms or virtual games.

Based on the main objective, the research has three specific objectives, as follows:

O1: shaping the socio-demographic profile of people involved in online couple relationships

O2: identifying the specific stages of development and key elements of online relationships

O3: identifying and describing the dynamics of online relationships in the offline context

The innovative specific of the research topic requires an attentive selection of methodology, techniques and methods of analysis. According to specialists (Babbie, 2010) the explorative approach of social phenomena is appropriate to relatively new topics. Therefore, the theme was analysed using the qualitative sociological research. In order to deepen the research topic and to explore its characteristics, the research instrument was the individual semi-structured interview.

The interview was elaborated in order to capture the essential aspects of the process of formation, maintenance and evolution of relationships in the online environment. Therefore, the questions included in the interview were formulated based on a thematic set, divided into six dimensions, as follows:

a) *Socio-demographic profile* of the respondents
b) *Interaction and online communication* - includes items regarding: previous online experiences, the online place where subjects have met their partner and online communication specificity
c) *Determinants of partner selection process in virtual space*. In this respect, the analysis referred to the role of physical attractiveness, the role of homogamy, spatial proximity and importance of character and personality traits.
d) *Key-factors in maintaining the online relationship*. Regarding this dimension, the research referred to communication aspects and affective-emotional aspects involved in an online relationship.
e) *The offline dynamics of online relationships*. In this regard, the research focused on issues such as: time spent online, motivational factors in order to continue the relationship offline and the correlation between the offline image vs. the online image of the partner.
f) *Social acceptance of online relationship*s. In this sense, the analysis focused on: aspects regarding the influence of other persons over the development of online relationships; social labeling of online relationships.

Based on the literature, we have identified several main directions for the analysis and elaborated 15 questions which were included in the interview guide. A semi-structured and non-directive interview guide provides a high degree of freedom in adapting and formulating new questions during the discussion, following researcher`s interest and direction of the discourse (Chelcea, 2004).

The individual interviews were conducted over two calendaristic months and the meetings were scheduled according to the availability of respondents. Each interview was recorded in about 40-45 minutes. Data obtained from interviews guided the construction of specific themes of analysis: online interaction and communication, determinants of partner selection process in virtual space, key-factors in maintaining online relationships, the dynamics of the couple relationship in the offline context, social acceptance of online relationships.

Sampling

For a clearer delineation of the research universe we have to mention that this investigation is directed towards the study of stable romantic relationships over time, characterized by a major degree of emotional-affective and cognitive involvement; following this path, the research automatically excluded from the analysis online relationships characterized by a purely sexual involvement. The very nature of the research topic draws the sampling frames: the target population is formed of people who developed online relationships. The main obstacle encountered in the selection of subjects was posed by the absence of a database including all people who were involved at one time in a romantic virtual interaction. Therefore, we applied a preferential procedure of subjects` selection, using non-probabilistic sampling technique - "the snowball" (Mărginean, 2000), which excluded a controlled selection based on the presence of certain socio-demographic characteristics. The only principle of subjects` selection was their involvement at a time in a marital or consensual relationship developed with a partner met on Internet.

The total number of subjects was of 19, which represents the theoretical saturation point, due to the fact that information obtained over this number tends to become repetitive and redundant (Strauss, 1987). It should be noted that the target population is represented only by persons with Romanian citizenship, even if some of them do not have the residence in Romania.

Results and disscusions

To extract useful information and to discuss the results, the interviews were analyzed according to the themes, following the six dimensions mentioned above.

Socio-demographic profile of respondents

Gender

According to the table below, the distribution of subjects by gender is not homogeneous. The highest share is represented by female subjects (15 persons), while only 4 respondents are males. In this regard, a possible explanation may be advanced: as opposed to men, women show a greater willingness to discuss topics related to their personal life.

Table 1. *The distribution of subjects by gender (N)*

Gender	Female	15
	Male	4

Age

In order to narrow and present in a more concise way the information regarding the age of respondents and the age of their partners, the subjects were divided into three categories: people under 30 years, people between 30 and 40 years and over 40. Information presented in Table 2 outlines the category of those under age 30 as prevalent in the group of subjects. Thus, 12 respondents, respectively 10 of the partners fall into this category. The distribution of the other two age groups is relatively equal, including 8 people in each group. Therefore, we can advance the hypothesis that youngsters are more prone to use the Internet as a mean to contact a potential romantic partner.

Citizenship

Subjects interviewed are Romanian citizens, without exception. But, the citizenship of the partner reveals interesting aspects: 13 have Romanian nationality, while 3 have dual citizenship (Romanian-American) and other 3 persons have Polish and American nationality. This distribution is a representation of the fact that the Internet facilitates contact with people from other cultures.

Residence

The higher percentage is recorded for urban areas: 17 respondents and 18 partners declare they have urban residence. Only 2 respondents and 1 partner declare their residence in rural areas.

Level of education

According to the information obtained from interviews, both respondents (14 people) and their partners (16 people) have high education level (bachelor, master degree and even post-graduate studies). The category of those with secondary education is poorly represented in the sample (5 respondents and 3 partners), while there is no person in the sample declaring a low level of education.

Table 2. *The distribution of subjects according to the main socio-demographic characteristics (N)*

		Respondent	**Respondent's partner**
Age	Under 30	12	10
	Between 30 – 40	3	5
	Over 40	4	4
Citizenship	Romanian	19	13
	Double citizenship	0	3
	Other citizenship (excluding Romanian)	0	3

Table 2. (Continue)		Respondent	Respondent's partner
Residence	Urban	17	18
	Rural	2	1
Education	Higher education	14	16
	Secondary education	5	3

Current status of relationship

In what regards the status of the relationship (namely the stage of evolution of the relationship) established with a partner met in the virtual environment, 11 respondents declared that they are engaged in marital relations, while 8 subjects have long-term cohabitation relationships. 4 of these respondents state that they want to legally settle the relationship with their partner.

Table 3. *Typology of relationships (N)*

Relationship type	Married	11
	Unmarried (cohabitation)	8

Length of relationship

The duration of the relationship is an important indicator for the stability of the couple. In this sense, the average is about 4 years (more exactly 4.03 years). It should be noted that all respondents have fixed the start of their relationship in the period when they were communicating online, not from their first face-to-face meeting.

Online interaction and communication

Location of the first online contact

The distribution of subjects according to the online location in which they have met their partners is presented in the table below. The analysis points out that dating sites are the most popular online means through which people have the opportunity to meet a potential partener, followed by social networks (Facebook and Tagged). Only 6 respondents declare they have contact their partner through other online channels - chat rooms, instant messaging services and other types of sites.

Table 4. *Location of the first online contact (N)*

Online environment	Dating website	7
	Social networks	6
	Yahoo Messenger	2
	mIRC	2
	Chat room	1
	Other website	1

Methods of online communication

Subjects were asked to identify the method mostly used by them during their communication online with their partner. The data presented below show that instant messaging services (ex. Yahoo Messenger) were used most frequently by respondents in this sense. Most subjects preferred this method of dialogue, because it is considered to be the most convenient, simple and fast way of communication. Audio-video communication (through services such as Skype) is the second most preferred contact channel. Only 3 respondents mentioned the e-mail as the most often used method in online communication.

Besides these methods of dialogue, most subjects declare that telephonic communication is a complementary method of interaction with the partner they met online.

Table 5. *Subjects` distribution by the type of online communication (N)*

Mean of communication	Instant messaging services	9
	Audio-video communication	7
	E-mail	3

Determinants of the process of partner selection in virtual space

This thematic dimension aimed at identifying the factors that Internet users tend to focus on regarding their decision to establish the first online contact the potential partner.

Physical attractiveness

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that physical attractiveness does not have a major role in the process of online human mate selection. Most respondents considered that physical appearance has a secondary role in the attraction exerted by a person in cyberspace, other aspects being more important. Only after a few online discussions, virtual partners revealed their physical image by sharing photo; in some cases, partners saw each other first only in the moment of their offline meeting. Honesty, humor, gentleness, goodness, tenderness, mental aptitudes and a high level of emotional intelligence are among the most important characteristics valued in a potential virtual partner.

> *"He had to be sensitive, intelligent and funny ..... these qualities were very important to me"* (female respondent, 26 years)

> *"Most people are very shallow and their choice is not ok, because they rely only on physical attractiveness. Yes, it's true that you are interested also to see pictures of the partner, but at least you do not have the feeling that someone rejected you on physical*

criteria. Who does not like your look, moves on foreword." (male respondent, 26 years)

"The physical aspect was irrelevant, there were more important things. Sensitivity, intelligence, sense of humor ..." (female respondent, 29 years)

"I was determined to start a relationship with the man I was talking to online and I said to myself that it does not matter if he is the one in the picture, if he's ugly, or fat, or skinny. The physical aspect can be improved ... but if you do not think properly and you don`t have a soul, there's nothing there." (female respondent, 23 years)

The analysis of the interviews revealed aspects which are sustained by the existing theories, according to which physical attractiveness has a diminished role in the initiation and development of an online relationship (Ben - Ze`ev, 2004). In the offline environment people put great emphasis on the physical appearance of the partner, being probably the factor with the greatest degree of influence on the initial attraction between partners (McKenna, 2009). However, some respondents` statements infirm the existing theoretical consensus; for them, physical attractiveness maintains its major role in the online process of partner selection. Contrary to most respondents, subjects included in this category saw photos of their potential partner prior to any online contact.

"Of course, what attracts us primarily to a person is the appearance, because it is the first thing to see" (female respondent, 23 years)

"As soon as I saw her, I have approached her. The physical image is very important to me..." (male respondent, 25 years)

The principle of socio-cultural similarity

The present analysis revealed that the socio-cultural similarity has a very important role in the process of selecting a partner in cyberspace. According to the interviews, the principle of homogamy is the most important criterion that respondents took into account in the decision of maintaining a relationship with a partner they have met on Internet. Similar views about life, attitudes and similar behaviors and not least, identical goals in life were identified by subjects as the basis of their relationship. This interpretation is consistent with other research results (Barraket & Henry - Waring, 2008).

"We are similar in the way of thinking, perceptions about life, we have the same dreams that we want to fulfill together in the future." (male respondent, 25 years)

"It helped a lot that we had many similar dreams and interests." (male respondent, 26 years)

"We discovered that we shared passions, that we understood each other perfectly in some respects ... we complemented each other." (female respondent, 41 years)

"These are the ingredients: to be on the same length and to have similar goals in life." (female respondent, 24 years)

The online environment is seen as a factor facilitating the interaction between similar individuals. By simply viewing a user's profile, people receive essential information regarding the compatibility of values. The literature confirms ou results (Whitty, 2007).

> *"So many things seemed to fit between us! The fact that two people that have met each other online and are really willing to start a relationship, already means a good compatibility. [...]is possible that partners have certain similarities in their online profile. The similarities may be known, practically in minutes, by viewing an electronic profile or after few hours of written conversation."* (female respondent, 45 years)

Spatial-geographical proximity

In terms of the geographical distance between partners, couples in the sample fall into two categories: situations where spatial distance is minimal and situations where physical distance is more accentuated. Most cases fall into the first category - spatial and geographical distance is reduced, fact that sustains the following statement, supported also by other research results (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Hardey, 2002): respondents are more likely to establish contact with people in their physical proximity, even if initially they did not plan to establish a romantic relationship with other Internet users.

It is interesting to note that respondents falling into the second category –a more pronounced geographical distance, accessed online services aiming to establish relationships with other online users. Respondents unanimously declared that they did not put great emphasis on geographical distance between them and their partner although they confirm that it was hard for them to deal with some inevitable limitations in this sense. Therefore, virtual space diminishes the role of spatial proximity (Iluţ, 2005; Baker, 2008).

> *"We concluded that we want to be together and that we don't care about the distance."* (female respondent, 22 years)

> *"I was thinking if what we have started is good or bad … because he was thousands of miles away. For the moment, he comes here, to me, because I can not go there just as easily. […] But, at some point someone will have to give up something. Usually, people are from different cities and one partner will have to give up something in order to be with the other … or they will both quit their current lives and will stay together in a neutral space. At one point there must be a compromise between partners."* (female respondent, 24 years)

> *"Distance was hard to tolerate."* (female respondent, 28 years)

The geographic distance influenced the period of online communication, until the first face-to-face meeting between virtual partners. Usually, the man was the one who traveled the distance to meet his partner in real life.

Key-factors in maintaining online relationships

The role of communication

The initiation, but in particular, the maintenance of online relationships involves a wide range of determinants, but perhaps the most important aspect in this regard is good communication between virtual partners.Summarizing the literature, there is an emphasis on the role of communication in online interactions compared to face-to-face relations (Ogolsky & Cate, 2009; McKenna, 2009; Kendall, 2002; McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002).There is consensus among respondents regarding the major role of sincere and open communication between online partners. Subjects consider that through communication, virtual partners get to know each other closely, due to a great variety of discussion topics. The maintenance and stability of an online relationship is inconceivable without an honest dialogue between partners.

> *"In that situation, it counted more how we communicated ... the honesty and transparency of the dialogue..."*(female respondent, 40 years)

> *"A long and good communication represented a sincere friendship. As someone said: it is important that you can talk to that person even when you're angry, tired or you don`t know what to say ..."* (male respondent, 26 years)

> *"Communication is very important so that you can figure out with whom you talk, especially if you do not see the person face-to-face. You discuss with him and try to understand him and to see who is at the other end. You have to see how he thinks."* (female respondent, 44 years)

The result of a good communication online is mirrored in the development of mutual trust between partners, a basic element in the maintenance and evolution of the couple in the virtual environment.

> *"Honest communication is the most important thing. Later, mutual trust is formed."* (female respondent, 27 years)

The role of affective-emotional factors

Researchers analysing computer-mediated interaction emphasize the role of emotional-affective aspects over a couple relationship. Online relationships are characterized by a higher degree of emotional involvement and virtual partners place great emphasis on the affective, moral and social support between partners (Ben-Ze`ev, 2004; Walther, 1996). Some people access the Internet only to seek support from other online users. According to the literature, data analysis revealed that most respondents noted and valued the support provided by their partner. Issues such as trust, peace, emotional security or even pecuniary benefits are associated with the affective-emotional dimension.

> *"The perfect partner for me is the one who supports me in every aspect of my life."* (female respondent, 28 years)

"He supported me morally and gave me tremendous confidence in me. He guided me and I offered him a peaceful oasis outside the fast society in which he lived. I was his diary, his silence, the person who knew nothing about him and whom he could tell anything." (female respondent, 24 years)

"Another positive thing was that he was there whenever I needed him." (female respondent, 28 years)

"He helps me a lot also regarding the financial aspect of my life. If I have a problem, he helps me ... then I see that he is there for me. I need also facts from him, not just words." (female respondent, 44 years)

The dynamics of online relationship

The transition to the offline environment

As the final step, the process of natural evolution of an online relationship assumes the development of the relationship in the offline context. The moment of the first face-to-face is mostly influenced by the geographical distance between partners. For partners living at large physical distances, the period from the first online contact to the first offline meeting is higher (between 3 and 18 months) than in the case of the other categories of couples - characterized by a smaller physical distance. Spatial proximity reduces this time interval; many respondents declared they had established the first face-to-face meeting after a few weeks of online communication. The results fall in line with other empirical research in this sense (Baker, 2008; McKenna, 2009).

Most respondents say that the first offline meeting with the virtual partner was characterized by strong emotions and feelings both positive and negative: curiosity, optimism, joy, peace and confusion, disbelief, agitation or a slightly discomfort.

"I was afraid to commit my soul to an illusion. I thought that might not be true." (female respondent, 24 years)

"Openness, trust, patience and agitation at the same time. I think there was a little fear of failure (...). I was thinking that maybe after we know each other offline, he won't be as happy as before and everything will end there." (female respondent, 27 years)

The stability of the relationship in the offline environment is reflected also by its length. We can identify in the sample cases of marital couples whose lenght of existence is 7 or even 12 years. This fact confirms that relationships initiated in online environment follow a natural dynamic in the offline context and are not just simple virtual games.

Motivational factors for the transition to the offline environment

A relationship initiated through Internet can be seen as a simple flirt, a simple game (Whitty, 2003). But users who desire to develop the relationship in the offline context are motivated by a number of factors in this sense. The motivational factor with the greatest degree of influence is identified as being the intensive, sincere and

profound communication facilitating mutual self-disclosure. Without this basis, the transition to the offline environment is nearly impossible. A good communication creates the desire to a better understanding of the partner. Also, love is included in the series of motivational factors, representing the central determinant in the decision to meet the person in real life and continue the relationship offline.

> *"The desire to know the person ... to be motivated to see that person or to be very much in love."* (female respondent, 22 years)

> *"You want to know more about that person ... you want to know what he likes and does not like to eat ... you want to know all his vices"* (female respondent, 44 years)

> *"(...) the desire of both partners to develop an everyday relationship."* (female respondent, 27 years)

Online image vs. offline image

The desire to materialize the relationship in the real life and developing the trust in the virtual partner mostly depends on how he/she presents their personal online image. Giving a false identity information diminishes to zero the chances of developing a stable relationship in offline context. Therefore, the image created and presented online to the partner must be consistent with reality.

> *"Partners are not entitled to create a false image of themselves.... things must be like in real life. Otherwise, they cannot have an honest relationship."* (female respondent, 21 years)

The analysis of the interviews revealed a correlation between the two images of partners – online and offline. None of the respondents encountered problems regarding the falsification of the real image of the partner. The impression made online about the partner has been confirmed by his real ego, both physically and emotionally.

> *"He was honest from the beginning ... so he was the same on the Internet and in real life. When we met <live> he proved to be the same agreeable person, as I expected."* (female respondent, 41 years)

> *"He was more than I thought he could be. He did not lie about anything."* (female respondent, 24 years)

> *"There were no major changes; honestly I was pleasantly surprised when I saw her, she was more than I expected, she was the person I really wanted."* (male respondent, 25 years)

Social acceptance of online relationships

Even today when Internet is considered to be indispensable to modern life, online relationships tend to be characterized by a relatively low degree of social

acceptance. In general, partner selection through Internet is seen as a risky way, because the emotional costs might outweigh the benefits.

One of the key issues referred exactly at the degree to which family and the loved ones have accepted respondents` online relationships. The analysis shows that the opinions of families and friends are divided. The polarization of views - positive and negative, is consistent with other research in this sense: if friends are those more inclined to accept such a relationship, family (especially parents) manifest greater caution in this respect and greater difficulty in accepting online relationships (Wildermuth & Vogl - Bauer, 2007). Parents are also those who have advised respondents to be cautious about such relationships, because they might be exposed to different risks: the person on the other side of the screen could show a deviant social behavior, the low frequency of online relationships could also generate social rejection or even social censure.

> *"My son was very disappointed of this relationship because he knew my experience before and he told me not to believe in it, not to think like a child, but like an adult. My daughter was more sympathetic, she told me to try, but take care. My friends too… they told me that on Internet all men are unreliable. Everyone disapproved my relationship."* (female respondent, 44 years)

But this reluctance was affirmed only in the early stage of the relationship; when the family came to know the person behind the screen, the attitude has changed in a positive way. This can be viewed as an element of confirmation of recent theories which argue that, lately, society has tended to tolerate and accept more these online relationships (McKenna, 2009).

> *"At first, they haven't got a very good opinion about him, but after they met him, they changed their minds."* (female respondent, 28 years)

The answer given by one of the subjects highlighted the involvement of the religious factor in the evolution of the relationship, through the advice offered by a priest:

> *"The priest was the only one who told me that one man in 100 could be serious on Internet. He encouraged me more."* (female respondent, 44 years)

A common element to note in the attitude of respondents`family, community and relatives is the surprise manifested towards the option to use an online service in order to initiate a romantic relationship.

> *"At first they thought it was strange, but then they got used to the idea."* (female respondent, 21 years)

> *"Everyone was delighted, but surprised that things were so serious about our relationship ... they did not expect things to develop so fast."* (female respondent, 41 years)

Conclusions

Persons accessing the Internet in order to establish contacts with potential romantic partners have certain social and psychosocial characteristics: they are centered on their professional life, do not have time for face-to-face interactions with other people, present a high degree of social anxiety (Suler, 2004; Whitty, 2008). But these characteristics are not universally valid. People tend to use this method of developing relationships also because it is a convenient, fast and efficient method of human interaction.

The short descriptive analysis of the sample revealed some socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. These characteristics are required for a deeper understanding of the profile of people involved in online relationships. Thus, most of the respondents are part of the younger generation – being aged under 30, with high educational level (they have at least a bachelor degree) and have urban residence.

Regarding determinants involved in the online selection of a partner, physical attractiveness acts as an elective criterion with a diminished influence in this respect. Personal characteristics and traits of the person behind the screen are more valued compared to their physical appearance. Spatial-geographical proximity also loses its importance in an environment that fosters emotional and cognitive proximity between partners through text messages or audio-video communication. Nevertheless, results show that people tend to establish online contacts with other users in their proximity area. Undoubtedly, the principle of social, cultural and axiological similarity has a major role in choosing an online partner, being the main vector in this respect.

Synthesizing the key factors for the development of online relationships, we can reduce them to a fundamental concept - communication. Open and honest dialogue between partners with a total disclosure of personal information constitutes the success of such relationships. Through continuous and sincere communication, mutual trust is constructed and gained, an essential ingredient in the dynamics of the relationship. Emotional- affective aspects as well as moral support for the partner are also identified by respondents as having an important role in the evolution of the relationship.

The offline dynamics of contacts established online occurs as a natural step in the evolution of the relationship. This transposition was mainly influenced by the geographical distance between partners, the length of time between the first online contact and the first face-to-face interaction (between 3 and 18 months). Regardless of the waiting period, all subjects described strong emotions and feelings related to the first offline meeting with their partner. Communication, trust and intimacy, along with the feeling of mutual love are strong motivating factors in the decision to continue the relationship offline.

Although controversial at first, these relationships were finally accepted by their families, friends and colleagues. The initial reluctance of others was generated by the lack of confidence associated with the virtual way of selecting a partner. Results

entitle us to believe that the degree of social acceptance and tolerance regarding online relationships knows an upward trend in our contemporary society.

Lately, Romanian society tends to exhibit a higher degree of acceptance regarding relationships initiated and developed in cyberspace, seen as a new social reality. The acceptance of this phenomenon is inherent while the Internet and new digital technologies are becoming more widespread and present in everyday life. The new way of online partner selection doesn't diminish or limit the importance and the role of other social contexts in this sense. Family, networks of friends and neighbors or public places are still classical frames of reference in this regard. Compared to relationships formed offline, relations mediated by computer have their own patterns of construction and evolution, which determine more and more the interest of specialists in this regard.

Research limitations

The limits of this study derive from its very explorative character. The investigation is intended to be a qualitative insight in the study of human computer-mediated interactions, without claiming to be a representative research in this regard. The socio-demographic profile of subjects in our study can not be generalized for the entire Romanian society. The present study is a starting point for further analysis and research in the field.

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