

Love and the web

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The purpose of this study was to examine and explain how the landscape of personal relationships is changing through new means of technologies such as the Internet. Nowadays, increasing numbers of individuals are getting to know each other, and falling in love, thanks to this form of communication. In order to understand and analyse this phenomenon from a sociological perspective, I have carried out exploratory research on the situation in Italy. We conducted a series of interviews and constructed the histories of the lives of Italians who, by navigating, fell in love with their correspondents and got involved in affairs with, more or less, happy endings. We were thus able to discover that, behind this virtual world, there are real feelings, emotions, hopes and dreams. Often, on the computer, anonymity and the barrier of the screen allow people to be more spontaneous, sincere, true and genuine with each other than they might be in real life. True love affairs according to Francesco Alberoni's definition are born. However, meeting in person, which must happen sooner or later, can result in losing what might have been gained up to that point. As in every challenge, many end up as losers and few as winners.

Introduction

According to the latest available data, an increasing number of people of every age group – men and women, from every social class all over the world – are getting to know each other, exchanging information and secrets, striking up friendships, falling in love and forming relationships thanks to the Web. As a result, researchers and writers alike have focused their attention on this new phenomenon; for example, in qualitative research on young Americans (aged between 15 and 17) who got to know each other and chat online, it has been noted that they have a greater degree of intimacy and faith in each other with respect to real life.¹

In Great Britain, research carried out on 2000 navigators whose average age was 27 showed that one quarter of them had started a romantic relationship on

the net. Six out of ten met the individual they corresponded with in person and one out of ten had sexual relations. These percentages were greater for residents of London.²

However, if many online conversations turn into bonds of love, it can also be said that most of them are not long lasting. It is hard to say if these failures are more or less frequent than in the case of those started with partners not online. (Despite the alarmist claims of many scholars on the failure of relationships started on the Internet, our previous research on adolescents has shown that traditional couples in that age group also do not last very long. More than half form couples that do not last longer than three months).³

We know that in Australia, out of 600 couples who got together on the Web, 70% broke up after only a few months (according to research carried out by Scheryl Hayhoe, at the Australian University of Whyalla, which has an Internet site where couples created on the web can talk about their experience).

According to a study done in Italy, the percentage of failure rose to 80% when the two individuals met in person, because of the sense of uneasiness caused by meeting someone perceived as a stranger (according to research carried out by Daniele De Barbera, psychotherapist at the University of Palermo).

However, this phenomenon in Italy is too recent to make it possible to make any definite statements on the duration and quality of relationships that have survived the impact of the first meeting in person.

While, in Italy, only 30% of Internet users are women (see Ref. 4, which specifies that this percentage increases by about two points per year), the percentage in the USA is 46% (see Ref. 4, in which according to the research carried out by A. C. Nielsen, the telematic situation in America consists of 92 million Internet users). This is why, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, manuals have come out on how to find the ideal person without having to face awkward meetings,⁵⁻¹¹ which are frequent on the Internet according to the results of English researchers mentioned above. According to this research, 74% of the women stated that they had bad experiences with people on the Web, and that they had had to face various types of perversion.

Many warnings in the texts on the market are directed to a specific audience of the divorced,^{12,13} and the elderly.¹⁴ The titles of books are particularly riveting¹⁵: *Amore.com*, *Love at First Byte: Surviving Cyberspace*,¹⁶ *Cyberflirt: How to Attract Anyone Anywhere on the World Wide Web*,¹⁷ *Seduction On-line*. Other bestsellers contain testimonials of people who have found love thanks to the Internet. And novels,¹⁸⁻²¹ and films on this subject (*Viol@*; *You've got m@il*; *Bossa Nova*), and articles on love multiply.

In order to find out what the Internet had to offer whoever might be in search of love, we used the most frequently visited research engines, and simply clicked

on the key words AMORE and LOVE. As can easily be imagined, we found considerable material.

On Yahoo.it: 54 sites and 18 notices with the word AMORE; on Yahoo.com: 52 categories with 3754 sites with LOVE (the category LOVE and SEX); on Altavista.it: 99 480 pages under the word AMORE; on Altavista.com: the word AMORE – present in sites in languages that were not Italian – had 165 845 pages; on Altavista.com: LOVE had 9 717 800 pages.

Since there was no term to indicate love between two people either in Italian or in English, or ‘romantic love’. Searching under the words Love and Amore also took us to sites where there were other types of love, like love for a famous star, for one’s team, or for nature and animals (for example, the third site that came up on Altavista.com, in the list under Love, was dedicated to love for pets).

Our data were exclusively concerned with the realm of romantic love, and when we clicked on Amore and Love, we arrived at sites that offered simple friendship, dates, erotic encounters and full-fledged agencies that could help us look for our soulmate.²² As for services, the web offered every kind. First and foremost was the sex shop, but other sites offered letters with romantic texts that could be translated into every language (www.utenti.tripod.it/JAMES_BOND; www.tremila.com; moreover, CNN has set up a site where the expression ‘I love you’ is translated into every language), postcards (www.valentine.com), virtual kisses (www.baci.it), delivery of all kinds of gifts like books on love, etc. There were a wealth of psychologists and councillors who offered advice (www.psiconline.it; www.lovepsychics.com), and card readers and astrologers who made predictions about relationships (www.lovetest.com). Lovers could also write messages and love poems to the one they loved, or tell their life story (for our studies we used life stories found on www.digilander.iol.it; www.poseidon.crs.unibo.it; www.paulapaula.com www.dols.net; www.utenti.tripod.it; www.digilife.io.it). An increasingly widespread trend involved engagements and virtual marriages with or without the agreement of the partner, with proper certification, or the possibility of taking care of a virtual child to be fed with daily e-mails. And if things did not work out, divorce could be easily arranged (www.matrimonioonline.com). This is the multi-coloured world that revolves around the word LOVE.

Exploratory research on navigators in love

In passing from the analysis of supply to that of demand on the web, our team carried out a project observing participants in October 2000. Among other things, it led to the suggestion of that as a topic for discussion in various chat rooms. We

collected a series of accounts and 12 life stories of 24–47 years old men and women who fell in love with their correspondent and got involved in an affair with a more or less happy ending.

Then again, in the same period, we carried out exploratory research on a non-representative sample of 50 individuals who fell in love online. Interviewees were given a written questionnaire of 36 questions (of which nine were open questions) and a battery of 17 and 19 items from different scales developed by Francesco Alberoni and Robert Sternberg. For data processing, it was sufficient to use the typical instruments of descriptive analysis. In the following paragraphs there is more precise information on our sample, and the main results are commented upon in qualitative and quantitative terms.

Who falls in love online?

The sample consisted of 22 men and 28 women between the ages of 16 and 34 years of age, living in different parts of Italy, in small towns and big cities. More than half (54%) are still students; while the majority of the others work (32%). Almost all had at least a high school education. They represent various social levels and backgrounds and, in the case of those who work, have highly varied jobs among them. At the time they were interviewed, a little less than half were single (40%); the others (38%) were engaged, living together, married, separated or divorced. There were no widows or widowers, which may have been due to the young age of the sample.

It is interesting to note that people who look on the web for someone to have a relationship with almost never live alone (10%), but rather, more than half (63%) still live with their families.

All those we interviewed had real friends, more than half (60%) had many, while only 8% thought they had few friends; most even had a trusted friend to confide in. All of them fell in love on the Internet (this was the primary condition we used to make the selections for our sample) even if, at the time they were looking for a virtual contact, a quarter already had a relationship going in the real world.

What led them to make contact online?

Some began out of sheer curiosity, for entertainment, because they are admittedly shy, or ‘for fun’, as one young man stated: ‘I’d made a bet with a friend that I would be able to get a girlfriend that I’d known only in a chat room’. However, apart from these cases, many of those interviewed said that they ‘wanted to get away from the usual routine, in a boring day in a small town’, ‘were tired of the same old crowd’, ‘didn’t know any interesting people’, ‘were lonely’, ‘were

homesick', 'sadness', 'were not getting along with their girlfriend or boyfriend' or had just been left by him or her, or were 'unsatisfied with their marriage'. They got on the web because they 'simply wanted to meet new people', or 'were fascinated by the ease with which they could make new contacts, almost as if they could be in two places at the same time', or 'felt the need to talk to someone new who could share their experiences with them', or 'wanted a real, more engrossing relationship' or 'wanted to try something new'. Some approached the web with far more determination, because they wanted 'to find a soulmate with all my heart', or to do 'what a friend did when she found her husband online', or because they 'didn't have a girlfriend, and one of my friends had had good luck.'

When looking for a relationship, they are making the rules for getting to know someone and letting the other person get to know them. For example, as one young person stated: 'To begin a new relationship starting with what I want the other person to appreciate in me', or the opposite, to 'get to know people from something other than their physical appearance', 'to get to know a person on the inside first and then on the outside'. Again, juxtaposing oneself against the real world to then be able to proceed with 'the search for a sensitive soul a thousand miles away from the vulgarity, arrogance and ostentation that unfortunately you come up against more and more often ...'. Finally, one interviewee showed how entering the web could be experienced as a courageous act of self-assertion if done to 'discover if my optimism about my fellow human beings is worth having ...'. As these excerpts show, motivation for using the web can be classified into two major categories: push factors inspired mainly by the search for escapism, and pull factors that explain why someone might be attracted by a certain destination. In fact, in order to justify the decision to look for a person to correspond with on the Internet, people have motives linked both to the real world in a negative way as well as to the virtual world in a positive one. It is curious to note that more than one interviewee used the expression 'true stories' to indicate what he or she was looking for in the virtual world as opposed to what was actually experienced.

What impressed them about the virtual partner?

It appears that the fact that the place where the relationship starts is virtual, contributes to what makes interlocutors fall in love. One interviewee explained that he fell in love with his virtual partner because she was a person who did not 'ask me the usual questions'. The condition of 'not being in the real world' can only feed the fire of falling in love which, by nature, is an explosive event that upsets daily life and falls outside its sphere.^{23,24}

The 'mystery' surrounding the partner on the web is what users are fascinated

by. One of the life histories we collected concerns Maria, a 30-year old woman who fell in love with a man she had started a copious correspondence with after her fiancé left her because she had begun to lose interest in their relationship. She had a great deal in common with her correspondent, and fell in love with him ‘precisely because of that aura of mystery that surrounded him and the spell it had on me’. Maria explained that it was because the other ‘had managed to excite me, to attract my attention, to make me dependent on him. Love born on the Internet can be the same as love between people in flesh and blood.’ After a while, after her new partner kept on insisting, she agreed to give him her telephone number. On her birthday, she received a bouquet of her favourite flowers, and then she knew she was really in love. She suggested they go out together that night, and, before seeing him in person, felt the need to declare her love to him. Then, as she waited for him at home, she felt a sense of anxiety and remorse for being too hasty in revealing her feelings without ever having seen him. Instead of him, flowers, a ring and a note to open her e-mail arrived at the door. The e-mail had an address where she was to go to meet him. Maria rushed to the place and found her ex-boyfriend there. She agreed to marry him, but made it clear that the man she married had to be the one she had met on the Internet, not his same old self. When they got married, they hung out a banner with ‘What is life without a little mystery?’ written on it.

On the web, everything begins as mystery, starting with the identity of the interlocutor who has no face or name. Often, the first thing that attracts users to a stranger is the nickname he or she has in order to get into the chat room – because it might evoke experiences, memories or feelings.

Other elements that contribute to falling in love with someone on the web are the ‘passion’, ‘sensitivity’, ‘tenderness’, ‘romance’, ‘artistic creativity’ or ‘imagination’ that come out of the conversation. Many appreciated his or her ‘ability to move me’, the fact that he or she ‘talked about his/her passion’, ‘the warmth he/she managed to transmit even through the computer’, the fact that ‘he/she had nothing to do with the humdrum life of our daily existence’, ‘the stories he/she made up: knights, fairies, witches, princesses’.

Giovanna was engaged when she became attracted by a young man and decided to correspond with him because, as she herself says, ‘his name sounded nice: it made me think of a hero in [a famous film] and it also “excited” me that his e-mail had a background with [a certain image] and a soundtrack with songs with really nice lyrics. [...] It’s so nice when someone dedicates such a romantic song to you. But my boyfriend is a real grouch, – he never says anything romantic ...’ And so Giovanna embarked on a long attempt to seduce the other, ‘using all the tricks’, even if it was difficult to see the reactions of her virtual lover on the Internet. In the meantime, she became colder and colder with her real boyfriend, lost interest in going out with him, and finally left him. She then made a date with her

correspondent, and went to the place agreed upon. She saw him from a distance, did not like what she saw, and so did not introduce herself, because, as she explained: 'the one I wrote to was someone else'. She went back to her real boyfriend. To return to the subject of what is attractive in the partner on the Internet, for some, it is simply a 'feeling' or 'charm', while for others, 'a sense of humour' is important, or they found the other person 'fun', or managed to laugh 'at his remarks' or received 'jokes'. One person confessed that 'it was a time when I needed to laugh'. Others enthusiastically told about how they were able to 'cry together'. In the partner, people like characteristics that are peculiar to a friend but not necessarily to a lover, like 'the thought of being able to solve the problems of the other person', or, on the contrary, finding in him or her 'protection' or 'good advice'.

Love is sometimes born when the other person has 'steadiness', 'patience', 'constancy', 'determination'. Or qualities like the following are appreciated: 'ability to calm me down any time', 'he/she cheers me up', 'his/her virtual pampering', 'shyness', 'a hint of sadness that awakens my paternal instinct', 'sincerity' and 'transparency'. Other relationships are born from 'interests in common' and 'the same tastes'; others, instead, from the feeling of having 'similar personalities but complementary inclinations and hobbies' or 'opposite interests'. Finally, since users cannot see what the other person looks like, attention is directed toward the spiritual or mental side of the other person, and the source of love is his or her 'intelligence', 'culture', 'ideas', 'deep discussions which are full of feeling', 'his/her elegant Italian', 'the words he/she uses'. 'It was the only thing I had of her', a young man told us, '... her ideas. I had nothing – neither her voice, nor her face, nor her perfume. Only her ideas and my image of her.'

How did they fall in love?

Two thirds of our sample fell in love with the other person before meeting him or her in person. In the case of four men and four women, it was a case of love 'at first sight'; the others fell in love little by little. Once they fell in love, more than half told their best friends (especially the women), but some even told colleagues and other friends. Almost all the correspondents in love met the person face to face. Whoever did not do so because of distance. Only three couples gave in before putting themselves to the test. In one case, we do not know why, since our interviewee simply said that 'the other person never showed up'. As for the other two, in the case of the first, the other person backed out because he/she was 'afraid of ruining our friendship'; in the case of the second, 'because he/she realised it was a virtual love affair'.

How was the real meeting arranged?

Things usually started in chat rooms. As we saw in the preceding section, it is sometimes possible to visit sites that encourage meeting partners according to different norms and the fact that they meet certain needs. But this was not the case with our young people. In these chat rooms, apart from the words typed in, it was also possible to send kisses, cards, images, sound messages (if their equipment had speakers and a microphone) and photographs. When the interlocutors got to know each other better, they could pass on to more discreet forms of conversation: private conversations, ICQ (homophone for 'I seek you') when a limited group of correspondents was formed so that they could see when they were online and, finally, e-mail.

The sequence of events for the majority of the correspondents in the process of gradually getting to know each other was the following.

- (1) Begin by getting to know the other person's thoughts, ideas and feelings by reading his/her words.
- (2) Then, through a photograph, see his or her image.
- (3) Hear his or her voice on the telephone or mobile phone, rarely on the computer.
- (4) Finally come into physical contact by meeting him or her in person.

The second and third phases can be interchanged, or the second might not even occur. Many, in fact, do not send photos. In our sample, only little more than half did.

How did the meeting come about?

For about half of the interviewees, the meeting took place within a month or two, but there were also many who waited a few months, and cases of putting the date off were rarer. On the whole, the minimum time between the first contact online and the meeting was 7 days, the maximum, a year.

The decision to turn virtual correspondence into real acquaintance was mutual, or it was the man who encouraged it. Few women were the first to have the idea – only six of the women in our sample did so. The choice of the place to meet was made together, or by the man or woman, and depended on highly disparate factors; it appears that just about anywhere met with their approval. Sometimes, convenience was the top priority, so stations and easily accessible places in the city centre, such as the cathedral or the main square, or the parking lot close to the home of either party were chosen. At other times, they preferred to make a date at concerts, at sports events, at the city park, in a pizzeria, at a bar, at the university, at the library or some such place. However, if convenient, the meeting

was also arranged in a resort area. A preliminary analysis seems to indicate that neither symbolic connections, nor the seductive nature of the place were important criteria. On the contrary, this may also be a matter of safety: crowded places with high visibility were chosen. This hypothesis was confirmed by the questions that followed, which concerned when the meeting was to take place: by putting together the percentages of morning and afternoon appointments, it almost seems as though daytime was preferable to an evening or night date, which is symbolically more seductive and transgressive. Nevertheless, practical concerns may have been the main cause here, given the young age of the interviewees.

The time of meeting was not important. At most meetings, the virtual partner was alone, but in some cases preferred to show up with friends, especially if their history started with conversations or games in which the others were involved.

Before the meeting, what was the wait like?

Feelings before the meeting can be grouped into two different, opposite categories. There are feelings associated with pleasure: 'emotion' and 'joy', and others with uneasiness, such as 'restlessness' and 'fear'. While the first were felt more intensely by men, the second were stronger in women.

Before the meeting, the physical aspect of the person about to be met did not seem to be fundamental or even very important.

Anna had always felt the physical appearance of her partner was very important. However, even though she was engaged to a handsome young man, she started a correspondence that became increasingly frequent with a stranger. When at last she felt bound to him by her love, she had a nightmare in which he appeared 'as a monster without legs and very long arms' who tried to embrace her as she tried to escape. When she woke up, she decided to meet him and describes the moment in which she was about to do it: 'The appointment was at 5:00, and I didn't know whether to go or not: since I could finally see him, I was afraid. He seemed like a stranger: what was supposed to say? How was I supposed to greet him? How was I supposed to behave? Only then did I realize that we were strangers; of course, we had written to each other, and I had dreamed about him a lot, but he was a stranger.' Lost in these thoughts, she went to the meeting, looked at her virtual partner from a distance, did not like what she saw, and went away.

If you had to evaluate that meeting, how would you define it?

The majority defined the event first of all as exciting. Above all, the men had no

doubts about this. They also experienced it more romantically than did the women. Some thought of it in a playful way, bringing up the tone they used in their conversations online. For some women it was embarrassing, cold or normal, but this was not the case for the men.

What were your impressions during the meeting?

Impressions that were formed during the first meeting with the person with whom our interviewees thought they were in love could be very different and even opposite. Things could go as planned, or there could be surprises, in which case, they could be good or bad surprises.

For some, everything went as planned and, as they themselves relate, the partner in flesh and blood ‘confirmed my impressions’, ‘I found the same person I confided in earlier in the chat room’, ‘he/she was the same as on the screen, but with physical substance’, ‘a person I had never seen, but that I felt I had met before’, ‘it seemed like we had always known each other’, or had known each other ‘for a long time’.

At times, it was difficult to juxtapose the image formed through the virtual relationship with the one encountered in reality, and there is a vacillation between a sense of uneasiness and a state of well-being. ‘The impressions and feelings are contrasting. I felt like I was with an old friend, but the way she looked was strange.’ There was even a reference to fiction in one young woman’s sensations: ‘I felt like I was in a film: those old black and white ones where he comes back from the war and she is there waiting for him.’ The meeting can go differently from what was expected: it can turn into something amicable. ‘It was a surprise. I had imagined a romantic meeting and was a bit ill at ease. Instead, I found him to be affable, sociable and nice – like an old friend.’ In other cases, the fear and anxiety was so great that the meeting was experienced as a liberating moment in which the only thing felt was ‘pleasure and an immediate release of the built-up tension’. The person felt a sense of release because ‘the distance and age difference made me afraid of disappointing her but instead everything went fine’. Others described a sudden change of heart: ‘I was really excited but, after a few hours, I felt like I had always known her’, ‘I was excited, curious and at the same time I immediately felt comfortable, calm.’ Many insisted on the pleasurable sensations they felt and on the nice surprise they had when they saw what their partner looked like: ‘in person, I liked him/her even more!’, ‘I found her even more beautiful than what I had seen in photos!’, ‘in person she was sweeter than she was behind the monitor’, ‘she seemed beautiful, simple, genuine, calm, with her head on her shoulders, the right girl!’, ‘brilliant, cute, sensitive’, ‘just the girl I was looking for!’, ‘he/she gave me a sense of security and happiness’, ‘he/she made a wonderful impression on me and we got along well together’, ‘I liked him/her right

away'. Thus, some meetings worked out well, leading the interested parties to experience 'a good feeling, joy, serenity', and instilled in their relationship as a couple 'happiness, security and an almost religious inner silence', or, on the contrary, 'an enormous desire to talk, and so we talked all night'. One young man described his meeting like this: 'It was her. I saw her. I brushed her arm and I went into ecstasy.' One young woman simply thought: 'He is the man of my dreams!'; another said that 'love burst out after our meeting,' and it was more moving 'than the words written on a screen without a voice'.

Unfortunately, not all meetings worked out this way. Gigi had met many of the women he had corresponded with online in person, but it was always 'something of a trauma' for him. In fact, it took hours and hours of conversation before he could associate their faces with his recollections of their written phrases. For others there was 'embarrassment' or, as another young man said, 'conversation was easy, but she was too aggressive.' Others were disappointed by the person they had just met, and they said: 'he/she did not match the person I expected to meet', 'he seemed very shy and embarrassed', 'he seemed a bit cold: we didn't communicate as freely as we usually did'. Or they were disappointed in their own reaction: 'I was inhibited, afraid and amazed by the openness of the other person.'

It also happened that the feelings and projects of the two did not match up, and that only one of them took the virtual relationship seriously while the other considered it a diversion or a game. The misunderstanding was then cleared up at the meeting, as happened with Carlo, who said:

I was really attracted to her. It seemed as though I had before me the only person in the world who really understood me. I talked to her as if I were talking to myself, and she responded with the same trust. We had reached a degree of intimacy that I thought could happen only after many years in a solid couple. Or at least so I thought. After six months of being online constantly, we decided to meet in the city where she lives. I thought about moving there and getting a job ... I was really pretty far gone... You can easily imagine what happened when I found myself with a person who was completely different from the one I had lived with for six months. It wasn't so much what she looked like, which was pretty different from the photographs she had sent me, anyway. The way she was – it was completely different from her online personality. The final blow came when she said: 'What did you expect?' At that point, I really felt stupid, humiliated, taken for a ride. Crushed, I went back to Milan, and I was also angry with myself because it hurt... I was ashamed of letting myself go in that way. I know it might seem stupid, but it was an enormous disappointment. In any event, after that misadventure, I didn't log in for a long time.

(From an interview carried out in May of 1997 by Giovanna Capelli, in the course of work on a thesis at the IULM University, on interpersonal relationships started on the Internet)

Finally, there is a case of a young man who said he mainly felt 'disappointment:

she wasn't like what I expected. She had sent me a photo of someone else, and I felt like I'd been deceived, or taken for a ride.'

Was there a follow-up?

More than half of the couples started a relationship. In referring to the man she met online, one woman stated that she had 'divorced her husband for him', even specifying that she was 'tired' of the former and had done it because she had been 'discovered'. On the contrary, when talking about her meeting, another woman explained: 'I was in love with an idea, but when I had to face reality, the fire went out.'

At the time our research was carried out, almost half of the interviewees had left their partners. The average duration of the relationships, including those still going on, was about 2–3 months, but eight couples out of 50 had been together for more than a year. On the whole, the variations from one case to another were high, and went from a minimum of one day to a maximum of 3 years for a relationship that is still going on today.

Would they do it again?

As might be expected, those who are still together said they would. However, it is interesting to note that those who left each other did not answer the question. Only five said they would not like to go through this experience again.

When they compared their stories with traditional love affairs, what were the main differences?

For some, there were few differences because 'afterwards you go on with traditional dates anyway'. The overwhelming majority, instead, insisted upon the positive sides of a romantic approach on the Internet for various reasons. The most common concerned the way people normally get to know each other: from the moment of the initial contact made on the web, 'getting over shyness', 'no embarrassment or inhibitions'; to the possibility of moving on according to the times chosen with more freedom with respect to real relationships: 'to have done it in steps' or, on the contrary, more hastily: 'the process of falling in love and winning him/her over was very fast'. The different dimension on which the online relationship is based is also important: 'the relationship is not based on physical attraction. You have to trust in the feelings you have when you read the words', 'the beautiful thing is that you get to know a person inside first and then outside'.

Our interviewees appreciated the fact that they ‘could decide to go out with a person without knowing what he/she looks like’. Thus, paradoxically, what might be cited as a negative element in getting to know a partner on the web was always seen as an advantage. Not seeing what a person looks like does not make a relationship incomplete. Instead, it sheds light on the important sides of what is usually left in the shadows. For this reason, our interviewees thought not having ‘the prevalence of the physical appearance’ was an advantage of the web, and not a limit, because, as one of them explained, ‘I could get to know someone without being distracted by what he/she looked like’. Another uses the term ‘be conditioned by’, and – always for this reason – a third interviewee says: ‘It was easier to fall in love.’

The Internet is appreciated because it allows for ‘greater sincerity’. On the Internet, ‘you can get to know each other better because you talk more’, ‘we always said what we thought’. It was possible to ‘get to know each other without inhibitions’, ‘you don’t have any limits, you can talk about whatever you want’, ‘you can discover sides of a person that only come out after you’ve known him or her for a long time’. And all this causes ‘happiness communicating’. Moreover, the lack of a physical relationship not only makes it possible to get to know each other better, but ‘it is even more intriguing’, and makes room for ‘the expectation and sublimation of feeling beyond the physical’, leading to ‘a more abstract, but nonetheless intense passion’. It creates ‘mystery’, ‘the unknown’, ‘the excitement of something you’ve never experienced before’, ‘it lets you dream’. It is ‘more fun because you can discover the other person gradually’. People feel ‘the fascination of novelty’.

If these are the positive sides of love on the web, there are also negative aspects, above all, ‘less certainties’. A relationship can spring up which is, according to others, ‘not as serious because it is easier to leave each other because you do not have to face the situation in person’, or ‘not as easy because you are going into it blind’, or a situation where ‘uncertainty’ prevails, where it is ‘impossible to be sure that the other person is really sincere’, where you have to have a blind faith in what you are told, and you risk meeting the wrong kind of people or being taken for a ride’. And, confronted with these unknowns, ‘the worse thing is that you get your expectations up’, and tend to ‘idealize the partner more’. All this is ‘risky because it is easy to idealize the different sides of someone’s personality’, but ‘reality is different’, and when, sooner or later, it must be faced, unpleasant surprises can be the result, as we have seen.

Very few of our interviewees listed negative experiences on the Internet. Some of these depended on their own ‘difficulty in overcoming diffidence’ or ‘fear of not hearing from him again’; others were more practical, such as the inconvenience due to the ‘distance and age difference’, or the lack of traditional means of courtship, which made it ‘more difficult to win her over because there

were fewer possibilities of exploiting the physical factor'. Only in one case was the web described as 'more difficult to create an intimate relationship'. For the most part, we saw that the contrary was the case.

What does it mean to be in love?

We used Francesco Alberoni's 'Scale of Being in Love', which has already been used in empirical research. Interviewees were asked to evaluate how they agree with a series of definitions of falling in love, according to a scale of 1 (totally disagree) to 9 (totally agree). From the results, it is clear that, first of all, falling or being in love online means that there is a desire to stay with the other person and to think of him or her. Faithfulness toward the loved one, mutual help and the desire to build a future together are also strong elements. The partner is loved more than anyone else, and when the person filling out the questionnaire thought of the partner, his or her heart began to beat faster.

There are no great differences between the feelings of men and women. Men experience the passion more intensely than women do: their hearts beat faster; they think of their loved one; they consider her the most beautiful woman in the world. Women, instead, feel somewhat more faithful to their loved one, and associate love with helping each other and planning for the future. However, these are not significant differences. In order better to take into account whether the world of the Internet is composed of individuals with a different idea of love than others, we compared the present results with those of earlier research on a group of the same age who were engaged in real-life love stories.

We observed that the first group experienced love more intensely, even though it was online. The only predictable exception was the statement that being in love meant considering the other person the most beautiful or handsome person in the world, obviously less important for online relationships. Otherwise, the idea of love was the same or even stronger than what was expressed in the earlier sample.

These data suggest that, contrary to what we might think, whoever looks for a partner on the web and indicates the lack of physical presence as a positive factor, does not mean love as something Platonic, but rather experiences it with a passion equal to that of real love; that is, falling in love as a faster beating of the heart and the desire to kiss and hug, and with the loved one as a unique human being, whom they loved more than any other and thought of continually, who helped them in the present and who they hoped to live together with in the future, perhaps because they felt their distance so strongly.

What is a romantic relationship on the web like?

In order to define the characteristics of a relationship started on the Internet, we

used the Triangular Love Scale devised by the American psychologist Robert Sternberg. This scale consists of three elements comprising love: passion, intimacy and commitment. For each of these items, the interviewee was asked to express to what extent he or she agreed or disagreed on a scale of 1 (complete disagreement) to 9 (complete agreement). We can tentatively state that all three components of a romantic relationship were present, and with a high degree of intensity. The average minimum score was, in fact, 6.9 out of 9 for passion for the women. For the rest, scores were higher. Men especially put great passion and commitment in their online love stories.

As in the previous section concerning the meaning of love, for the romantic relationship, too, we compared the present results with those of earlier research.

As can be noted, as far as intimacy and commitment are concerned, men and women alike showed a higher degree for relationships started online. Only passion was slightly lower. Intimacy and commitment are greater in love relationships born on the Internet, while passion is only slightly lower. The divergence is so slight that a comparison between more balanced samples could upset results. We found that ongoing relationships with partners met on the Internet were not only intense but also complete and balanced, since passion, intimacy and commitment were present in equal measures.

Can true love be born on the Web?

Finally, reflecting on the data we have analysed so far, we asked the following question: is it possible to fall in love on the web? Among the cases we observed, are there some that can be considered true love? To answer this question, we used Francesco Alberoni's theory. The author suggests that 'any kind of love, from the very first moments to the formation of the couple',²⁴ is based on four fundamental mechanisms: *the pleasure principle*, *loss*, *indication* and *the nascent state*; Alberoni adds that even if the first three mechanisms might also appear as simple, passing infatuation, real falling in love is dominated by the typical and unmistakable experience of the *nascent state*.

(1) The pleasure principle

In the first place, since we bond with whoever satisfies our needs and desires, we tend to establish closer relationships and, with time, to strengthen them with the people who bring us pleasure. But can virtual stories between two people who are far away and who cannot see or touch each other be considered erotic encounters pleasurable enough to create an enduring tie? We think the answer is yes.

Even if the relationship before the meeting was incomplete, the available elements are blown out of proportion and over-evaluated. 'The fundamental difference' between whoever has an online relationship and whoever has one in person, explained one young man, 'is that digitally speaking, there is nothing to go on, and you cling to every detail, loving it more deeply than you would in the real world.'

Many explained how great a pleasure it was to receive a reply to their messages, 'to find sweet, beautiful, tender words' and to read and re-read them countless times, as happened once upon a time with conventional letter-writing. 'We wrote three, four and five times a day, and each time I liked it even better.' As Pietro said: 'there is something magic in the web that draws one person to another' or, as a journalist who entered a chat room to write an article and became attracted to it said²⁵: 'Chat rooms are a disease', to the extent that 83% of the women interviewed in an English research project (the surveys carried out by the site Newwomanonline) said they were desperate if they did not have any new mail when they checked their e-mail.

Even the presence of a flesh and blood man, if the couple are not truly in love, cannot compete with the force of a virtual relationship. Lara tells of how, after meeting a young man online, she went out with her boyfriend, but for the whole afternoon, she 'did nothing but look at her watch to see if it was time to go home to see if he (her virtual partner) had answered'. When her boyfriend noticed her anxiety, they argued, and so she could go home, turn on the computer and, as she herself said, 'when I saw that it was downloading messages, I was so happy ...'

For others, writing a message and getting replies is such a pleasure that it leads to a sort of habit as in the film *Viola*, where the protagonist ends up forgetting the world that surrounds her, loses her job and is no longer satisfied with real relationships. This sort of obsession does not only happen in films, as a 28-year old recognised expert states: 'not finding her online, I felt pain that went from my mouth down to my stomach, as if someone had punched me in the stomach... In 20 minutes I was overtaken by a sense of anxiety... I knew I felt things for her that I had never felt for anyone in my "real" relationships. At that moment, I realized that, if I wasn't in love, at least I was pretty infatuated.'

(2) *Loss*

If, in real life, we realize that a person is indispensable when we risk losing him or her, and only in that moment do we realise his or her worth, the Internet partner – without a name or a face – is constantly perceived as someone we could lose at any minute, as someone who could abandon us or decide not to be available

on the web any longer, without leaving any possibility of calling or contacting him or her. But this is not all: if we continue to meet online, we can lose him or her at some later stage when it will be more difficult to get over it, such as when he or she hears our voice, or receives our photo or when we see each other in person. Each of these mandatory – or almost – steps is experienced with a sense of loss. And, even after successfully overcoming these phases, in the case of two lovers who are far away, there is always the fear that the meetings will not take place again, or that the other person will get tired of it, or decide not to come, or that the trip will not work. ‘I lived each time as if it were the last time we would ever see each other. So, more intensely than a normal relationship’, explained one interviewee. Another man remembers above all ‘the fear of losing her, because she was only a name, but that name was my ideal woman’. From these elements, we can deduce that if the experience of loss not only serves to reveal an already existing love, as often happens, it also contributes to binding us all the more to the object of our love. In the case of the Internet, where people feel an enormous sense of loss with respect to real love, the romantic link can certainly be strengthened through the continuous sense of loss the person experiences.

(3) *Indication*

We usually think people are beautiful and desirable if others tell us they are worthy of our admiration, thus we easily fall in love with people who are sought after. For example, infatuation with divas, so typical of adolescence, plays on this mechanism. Love originating on the Internet is not like this and, as far as this mechanism is concerned, is located at the other end of the spectrum. In fact, the solitude and intimacy with which a relationship is born and develops on the Internet does not appear to leave any room for worrying about the social desirability of the partner.

(4) *The nascent state*

When the objects of our love are no longer as absolute as we would like, but become oppressive and frustrating, we try to compromise and adjust until we reach that certain point in which it no longer works, and everything seems false and empty. Our energies then look for new outlets until the world suddenly looks rosy and we feel as though we are changed: we enter into a ‘Nascent state’.

When falling in love, the passage from the old world with its values and the

new world comes about thanks to the person we fall in love with – he or she becomes our way in. If the two people who enter the Nascent state recognize each other, then they fall in love with each other, and they are ready to shape their life together.

According to Alberoni, true love cannot come about unless there is this ‘Nascent State’ and the other three states are subordinate to it. Otherwise, as is the case of love on the web, where the sense of loss is particularly strong, we are faced with what the author defines as competitive infatuation, in which the subjects want the one they love only as long as they perceive him or her as a fleeting thing but, once the obstacle of the screen is removed, they cease to be interested. Looking back over the statements of our interviewees, we found descriptions of some of their feelings, and they led us to believe that some of them had entered this newborn state. Sometimes in life, in the desire for change, the loss – which can also be unexpected – of interest in one’s own past and old loves and the sense of rebirth can be very strong. Paola, who saw the possibility of having access to a new world in her virtual partner, explained: ‘I wanted to change my life, and he, who had been married, represented a great turning point for me.’

Someone who is truly in love feels free from ties with the past, but he or she also feels as if pulled by a greater force of destiny. This sensation comes through in the answer of a 33 year old homosexual who fell in love with a correspondent with whom he has been together with for six months. When asked about the difference between a relationship born on the Internet and a real one, he said: ‘For me it was only a case of falling in love – I would have met Victoria sooner or later in real life ...’ Yet the young woman in question lived hundreds of kilometres away! We know that people who are in love relive the past together, re-evaluate it and try to plan their future together. This is what some virtual couples do: ‘we talked very easily about our pasts and what we expected from the future.’ Sandro talked about how he had spent months on the telephone with a girl he had met on the web, and how he fell in love with her so deeply that he was willing to put his future at stake to make a life together with her. But she did not really exist. He had fallen in love with a ghost, or in any event, as Sandro continued: ‘so I am still in love with a ghost’. The anonymity and distance of a virtual relationship would seem to enable us to get around the problem of commitment. Instead, as we have seen from Sternberg’s scale, it is present, and when circumstances in life make it impossible to build a future together, many people turn to a virtual bond. For example, this is the case with a 40 year old navigator who is married with three children. In July 1999, he contacted an American woman on the web, they liked each other immediately, and exchanged photos. A few days later, they found the courage to say they loved each other, and in October, they were married virtually.

Conclusions

In this exploratory investigation, we were able to find real feelings, emotions, hopes and dreams within the virtual world of the web. Although many enter chat rooms on the web for fun or out of curiosity, the motives that drive them to get to know other people through this means are more profound and complex. There is solitude, disappointment, or boredom with everyday life, but these are not the only reasons. There is also the desire to search for something new and better with respect to what one already has. On the one hand, there is an aspiration to meet more interesting people, find true friendship or love, which was long dreamed of but lost or never found; on the other hand, the desire to find oneself, to show the most intimate, true part, which is hidden in everyday life. Relationships with others are always fast and superficial, and often never go beyond the simple appreciation of the outer appearance. No one has the time or the desire to really listen to other people. Paradoxically, people are more visible behind the screen, and the computer can claim victory over a world where everything is appearance: we find ourselves before someone without a face but who attracts us solely through the depth of his or her thoughts, the sweetness of his or her words, and the spontaneity of the feelings he or she knows how to convey to us.

The American sexologist Harley states that people fall in love on the web because, on the Internet, they encounter their own needs for honesty, sincerity, dialogue and affection. They are powerful instincts and when men and women find a partner that can satisfy them, they fall in love. We have seen how our interviewees attributed importance to the ability of their partner to make them laugh or cry, to their imagination, or to their sense of romance. These are all elements that have unfortunately disappeared from everyday conversation, and this accentuates the functional aspects of communication more. These data, which surprised us when we were doing the research, were confirmed only in part by an online survey carried out by Match.com. Out of a sample of 4500 people, it happened that for one third, the most attractive characteristics in a potential partner were a sense of humour, for 26% the face, for 24% intelligence, for 14% the physique and for 1% money. Just as paradoxically, the virtual environment and the anonymity of those who visited it allowed for more spontaneous, sincere, true and real communication than was possible in the real world.

A means, such as the computer, associated as it is with the idea of efficiency, speed and coldness, has become the privileged vehicle for a warm relationship in which time passes slowly enough to be able to work out complex, profound sentiments, and in which, in the intimacy of his or her own home, the individual can find space for relationships with others more than s/he can in traditional meeting places. Remember that 60% of the young people who go out at night want to meet new people, but only 5% succeed (Top girl, Duedipicche in tour). Harley

again explains that a love story on the web has many advantages: the main one is that lovers can enjoy each other's total attention. Even an evening together in front of the fireplace has more distractions than an evening spent talking on the Web. A face-to-face meeting implies many distractions that detract from the pure flow of emotions.

However, just as the computer makes introspection and intimacy easier, at the same time it also makes projection toward the outside possible. The video is truly a window through which the world enters, and in this way the world seems smaller than what we see outside. The dangers of disassociation between the personality online and the self in the real world have become a focal point in online discussions. On The Well (the acronym of the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, virtual community based in San Francisco), people have been talking about such things for years – especially MUD, games played in virtual communities in which people take pleasure in impersonating a different identity than their real-life one. They also talk about how much energy it takes. Moreover, it should be noted that, at a certain point, if a person wants to express him or herself, it is necessary to be seen by the other players. In addition, the web speeds up the sensation of knowing the other person: after a short time, people have the sensation that they have always been friends. And it is strange how, even though this form of communication is slower because it takes more time to write than it does to speak, it seems to affect the feelings faster. Something similar happens in chat rooms. The sense of communion between anonymous people who share the same video can give satisfaction for a certain amount of time, which is usually brief. Then, the desire to become visible and transform the virtual relationship into a real one becomes stronger. Thus, once the test of affinities or complements has been overcome on the level of thought, ideas, tastes and sentiments, the couple feels the need to bind themselves together completely by involving other senses. And they go on to the later phases more or less rapidly: exchange of photos, listening to their voices on the telephone and the final meeting with the person. For these phases, they establish the times and the rituals as they see fit. They confront them when they 'feel ready'; aware that, if the trial fails, they will lose everything they have gained up to that point. And, as in every challenge, there are many losers and few winners.

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