

Virtually There: Creating Physicality in Dating Chat Rooms

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1. Introduction¹

Some researchers have shown that computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be a liberating medium of communication because gender, race, ethnicity, and other social traits lose their limiting and discriminatory dimension in a medium where bodies are absent (Clark, 1998; Correll, 1995; Hall, 1996; Sutton, 1999). When observing conversations in chats, however, one soon realizes that CMC is not a body-free environment (Sundén, 2002). On the contrary, there seems to be a special interest in embodying the interactions that take place in cyberspace. The bodies that result in this process are discursive creations, but this does not mean that they are virtual entities devoid of any relationship with the people and the bodies behind the screen. In fact, as I am going to show, participants in chats use a variety of linguistic and graphic strategies to create a physical presence in the room that blurs the lines between virtual and real spaces.

In this paper, I report on the construction of physicality in dating chat rooms. The data for this study come from conversations taking place in five chat rooms hosted by America Online (AOL): “Thirties Love”, “Gay 30s”, “Lesbian 30s”, “Catholic Singles” and “Ethnic Latin”. This selection reflects the overall criteria used in AOL for the organization of dating chat rooms at the time of the gathering of the data, namely, gender, sexual orientation, age, religious affiliation, and ethnicity. During April 2002, I downloaded conversations during half an hour in each of these rooms in five random days around the same time each day. My analysis of the data rests upon the discourse analytic idea that social and psychological phenomena are partly constituted in and through discourse, whether written or spoken. I therefore examine what people *do* in and with their talk in Internet chats, focusing on how the creation of physicality is unfolded in conversation. My interest lies not in how people’s conversations in chats *reveal* aspects of their bodies, but in how bodies are constituted and arise through language in Internet chat interactions. In particular, I will show how a variety of linguistic and graphic strategies result in three

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OnlineHost: SHerna8348 has entered the room.
 Dely417: IM OUT LADIESSSSSSSS MUAHHHHHHHHHHHHH
 GOOD NIGHT TO YOU BEAUTIFUL LADIESSSS :
 MUAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
 OnlineHost: Dely417 has left the room.
 Biglesmom1: back
 Xboigyr1x2227: NOPERSSSS XB NOT DONE GETTIN HERS
 DRMMMYAngel: Nite Dely
 OnlineHost: WScott00 has entered the room.
 Biglesmom1: :-D
 Rudy2227: muahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh dely

3. Material Bodies

The most obvious way of creating a physical presence in the chat room is by making direct reference to the physical bodies of the people behind the screen. We need to bear in mind, however, that these references may not have any resemblance whatsoever with the “real” offline bodies of the participants. A participant called “Blueeyescs” may really have hazel eyes, but she may think that blue eyes are more attractive. In the end, what matters for the interaction in the room is not whether there is an exact match between real and virtual bodies, but that participants are trying to link their online personae with their material bodies.

The most frequent and ritualized means to create a bodily presence in dating chat rooms is the a/s/l schema, as we see in Examples 3 and 4. As is used in Internet chats, the a/s/l schema is intended to provide personal information about oneself to facilitate the search of a potential date, although as mentioned before, the information provided may not correspond to the reality. Crucially, age and gender are conceptualized as emerging from physical characteristics, and thus the a/s/l schema foregrounds the materiality of offline bodies. As illustrated below, participants also include other types of information in their introductions:

- (3) “Gay 30s”
 T123321: Hello everyone 29/m Cleveland, OH
‘hello everyone 29 male Cleveland, Ohio’
- (4) “Thirties Love”
 A Wagon 2 Envy:26 / M / NYC / RICAN & ITALIAN / GREEN EYES
‘26, male, New York City, Puerto Rican & Italian, green eyes’

There are also descriptions of the body interspersed in the conversations, as in Examples 5, 6, and 7.

- (5) “Ethnic Latin”
 Godswisdomneeded: im just a regular green eyed guy
- (6) “Catholic Singles”
 ECCE X: though, my body is in the shape of a 28 yer old

- (7) “Gay 30s”
SnowBall177123: well i am not bad for a white boy

Finally, the offline bodies of the participants also surface as a result of the multi-tasking that characterizes CMC. While people are chatting, they may also be tapping on the table, moving their legs, feeling sick, eating, watching TV, listening to the radio, or taking care of children. References to these parallel feelings, actions, and activities are relatively frequent, especially when they interfere with the interactants’ ability to be fully engaged in the conversations, as shown in Examples 8 and 9:

- (8) “Catholic Singles”
Herb950196: <<GETTING SOME ICED TEA
- (9) “Ethnic Latin”
RiCaN CuTeY: I HAVE HEART BURN

4. Discursive Bodies

An essential part of human interaction goes beyond the communication of referential meanings. Speakers and listeners alike are aware of other meanings conveyed in linguistic messages such as the irony, friendliness, or seriousness of what is said. This information is often encoded in facial expressions, gestures, or voice in face-to-face situations, but these features are absent in text-based chat rooms. Participants, therefore, have developed a series of graphic strategies to bestow a voice and a face to the messages they type on their computers. Apart from fulfilling a communicative function, attempts to provide a visual and aural dimension to the written messages emphasize the physical dimension of these interactions. Unlike the a/s/l schema or descriptions of actions (which, as we saw before, foreground the offline body), para-linguistic features as they are expressed through graphic strategies blur the line between offline and online bodies. A participant, for instance, may add a smiling emoticon to her message, but her face may be completely serious. On the one hand, the smile is exclusively related to the utterance that appears on the screen, and consequently, it helps create the impression of a virtual body. On the other hand, the emoticon is experienced and interpreted as springing from the biological body of the person who is typing the message. The bodies that surface in the interactions are purely discursive creations that are nevertheless related to the material bodies of participants in the chat rooms. In the remainder of this section, I am going to describe several strategies commonly used in the chats to reproduce in writing common gestures, and visual and aural cues of face-to-face interactions.

4.1. Visual cues

The most common means of incorporating visual cues to the interactions are emoticons such as the ones we can see in the following examples (to see the emoticons, readers should tilt their head towards the left):

- (10) “Ethnic Latin”
RiCaN CuTeY: IM AN O:-)
 ‘I’m an angel’
- (11) “Lesbian 30s”
Da1nonlyteas: agift do I know you under another sn?
 ‘agift, do I know you under another screen name?’

Agift2uFmE: no Da1 i don't think so..
 'no, Da1, I don't think so'
 Da1nonlyteas: ok agift you do now :-)
 'ok, agift, you do now, smile'

(12) "Thirties Love"

BGHEARTEDCOWBOY: hello sin c);-)
 'hello sin³, "winking man with a hat"'

The participants could have very well described in words what they are expressing with the emoticons and, for instance, write "smile" instead of drawing a face ":-)" in Example 11. Participants' frequent use of emoticons seems to suggest, however, that the visual aspects of communication are very important, both to signal the key of an utterance or to add some visual reference about the person who is writing the message, as in Example 12, where the emoticon conjures images of a gentleman addressing a lady in a flirtatious manner.

Besides facial expressions, participants in chat rooms have also developed strategies that substitute common gestures, movements, or actions that are often present in face-to-face interactions. Such is the case of hugs, which are often present in greetings, and which are represented in these chat rooms by means of parentheses around a participant's screen name. The inclusion of the screen name between parentheses represents the inclusion of a person between another person's arms, and this adds a material dimension to the message on the screen. The two participants, however, cannot really touch each other, and thus the physicality expressed through the parentheses, although related to the people behind the screen, is also closely related to the virtual personae created by the screen names. Other gestures or movements do not have a special graphic symbol but in many chats they tend to be enclosed between angle brackets "<>".

(13) "Catholic Singles"

SULTRY MAE WEST: (((((((((((((((Tee))))))))))))))

(14) "Lesbian 30s"

Tx Devil Woman26: <curls up for a lil nappy> too damn hot to do anything else

4.2. Aural cues

Aural cues are also important in face-to-face interactions because they carry important information about utterances and their intended key. Participants in the AOL dating chat rooms often exploit the written language for expressive purposes and reproduce paralinguistic features such as the volume of the voice, the length of a sound, laughter, and other sounds. Some of the conventions used for reproducing voice features, such as onomatopoeic words (Example 15), capital letters to express a higher volume, or repetition of letters to express a longer sound (Example 16) are found in other written media (e.g., movie scripts, comic books, magazines, or personal notes), while other conventions, such as "lol" (*'laughing out loud'*), illustrated in Example 17, are mostly found in CMC:

³ "Sin" is the screen name of a participant in the chat room who described herself as a woman.

(15) “Catholic Singles”

Ashely ketchum: they are picking on me sniff sniff

(16) “Ethnic Latin”

RiCaN CuTeY: GIRL PLEASE MY DAUGHTER OUT THERE YELLN IT'S
UNBEWEAVBLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

‘Girl, please, my daughter out there yelling, it’s unbelievable’

(17) “Lesbian 30s”

SpecialK1975: HAHAHABA, I KNOW YOU LOVE ME FOR MY HUMOR

Luv2D2M: yes oh yess yesss special LOL blushing

As mentioned before, although these aural cues are interpreted as emerging from the writer of the message and, consequently, from his or her material body, they remain part of the written conversation that appears on the screen and that takes place among the online personae created by the screen names. The presence of such cues, therefore, helps in the creation of bodies that are purely discursive entities yet are linked both to the material and the virtual bodies of the participants.

5. Virtual Bodies

As we have seen, material bodies constantly surface in the conversations through the a/s/I schema, as descriptions, or as comments about what participants are doing or experiencing while they are chatting. I have also explained that emoticons and other graphic symbols are important elements in communicating the key of an utterance, and are also essential in the creation of discursive bodies that establish some connection between material and virtual bodies. In what follows, I am going to present two strategies (screen names and alter personae) used by participants in chat rooms to create a physical presence that is purely virtual and whose existence foregrounds the online body.

5.1. Screen Names

Screen names protect the anonymity of the participants, but they also serve other communicative functions. While some screen names are just a string of letters or numbers whose meaning is only obvious to the holder of the screen name, other participants are very creative and use screen names to construct a personal image for themselves. Screen names create physicality in two ways. First, they fulfill a function similar to dress, make-up, or voice pitch in face-to-face encounters because of their effect in making first impressions. Just like people make choices about what to wear in order to create a certain image for themselves, chat participants choose certain screen names to create a certain type of body and appearance. Screen names may reveal aspects of the participants’ bodies, whether their age, their appearance, their gender, or any other characteristics they want to reveal about themselves. Here are some examples of screen names that highlight physical aspects of identity⁴:

Sex: ELHOMBRE157 (*the man*), MsGaPeach35 (*Ms. Georgia peach 35*), RobNY769 (*Rob New York 769*), MALE4SALE30 (*male for sale 30*), LVNVCowboy, Diamondboy02.

⁴ These categories are not mutually exclusive, and some of the screen names that appear in the list can refer to more than one physical dimension.

Race or ethnicity: sexynegritamami (*sexy black woman*), mulato244, YoungBrotha210, Sex C Boriqua (*sexy Puerto Rican woman*), Cray z Chicana (*crazy Chicana*)⁵.

Physical appearance: rubia peligrosa6 (*dangerous blonde 6*), TRUEblonde821, blueeyescs, Hazelbrowneyes69, SoftNSweetLips (*soft and sweet lips*).

Attractiveness or sexiness: Preciosa1nyc (*pretty I New York city*), Latinasensual (*sensual Latin woman*), softfemGa (*soft femme Georgia*), KollegeStud, PrettynPinkThong, SULTRY MAE WEST, HOTAZHEAT88 (*hot ass heat 88*), Karabella (*'beautiful face'*).

The second way in which screen names embody the participants is by giving them a physical space on the computer screen. In Example 18, the message of Godpoet88 is describing the person typing on the computer, but instead of using a personal pronoun ("I am as single as can be"), the grammatical subject and the verb are absent and instead there is an arrow pointing at the screen name. The screen name occupies a place on the computer screen where the virtual body of the participant is metaphorically standing.

(18) "Catholic Singles"

Godpoet88: <<< single as can be

For this conceptual shift to work, participants must accept the unstated premise that the computer screen is a physical space that virtual bodies can inhabit. This premise is reinforced by the metaphor of the chat as a room. People are not only conversing, but they are also occupying a piece of the virtual space that has a number of physical features such as an inside and an outside separated by doors, or a here and a there, as illustrated in Examples 19 and 20:

(19) "Lesbian 30s"

HOTAZHEAT88: LWR IF U CANT BE CIVIL THE EXIT IS THAT
WAYQQQQQQQQQ
'lwr, if you can't be civil, the exit is that way'

...

Xboigyrlx2227: SHOW HIM THE DOOR HOTAZZZZ
'show him the door, HOTAZHEAT88'

(20) "Lesbian 30s"

Zuukie: rob the strait room is >>>>>>>>

In these two examples, participants in the "Lesbian 30s" room are reacting negatively to the presence of a participant that they have identified as a man. Although there is nothing explicitly stated about participation of men in the "Lesbian 30s" room, it is generally considered that only people who identify with the profile of the room should participate (in this case, lesbian women). Crucially, instead of asking the male participant to stop participating or to log off, HOTAZHEAT88, Xboigyrlx2227, and Zuukie ask the male participants to leave the metaphorical room where they are interacting by making reference to the door of the room or using arrows that point away from the screen name.

⁵ These last two screen names do not indicate any physical feature per se, but they undoubtedly evoke certain racial stereotypes like the color of the skin or hair.

5.2. *Alter Personae*

In some occasions, the screen names seem to take on an independent and virtual existence and create characters that become the alter egos of the participants. These alter personae engage in imaginary situations where they meet, flirt, see, or touch each other, as illustrated in the example below:

(21) “Ethnic Latin”

Sexynegritamami:	thank you kool and bx,, muahzzzzzzz
BXhombre:	a kiss from sexy....must be my lucky day
BXhombre:	i knew this cologne was gonna work

As the last example shows, the virtual world where the alter personae exist is brought up by referring to situations that have no sense in real-life terms. It is not possible for the person logged on as Sexynegritamami to smell the cologne worn by the person logged on as BXhombre, nor is BXhombre claiming that he has actually sprayed himself with cologne. Therefore, it is Sexynegritamami and Bxhombre, and not the people behind the screen, who are kissing or smelling. The conversation, however, does not bring the virtual world to the foreground in an absolute way. The use of the first and second personal pronouns (*I* and *you*) is ambiguous and can refer both to the offline participants and to the alter personae created by the screen name, and thus the pronouns potentially link the conversation to the real people who are participating in the chat despite being interacting through their alter egos.

In other instances, however, the shift from the real to the virtual world is much clearer, as shown in the following example:

(22) “Lesbian 30s”

A kitty kat 4 you:	HELLO ROOM 28 FEMALE HERE IN GA
ILUVITWENUDOIT:	hey kitty
HARLEMGYRL550:	meowwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww
HALOPARR:	here kitty kitty
HARLEMGYRL550:	<~~~setting down a bowl of milk....
HARLEMGYRL550:	here kitty kitty kitty
A kitty kat 4 u:	PURRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR

The participant “A kitty kat 4 you” greets the room with the typical a/s/l schema, thus downplaying the alter persona and bringing to the front the real person. However, other participants do not respond to the real person, but to the alter persona evoked by the screen name, a cat. When “A kitty kat 4 you” sends her second message (“purrrr”), she shows that she is acknowledging this conceptual shift and is playing along. This conversation illustrates a very frequent way of foregrounding the alter personae, namely, describing actions that in this context can only happen in the imaginary world of the chat room. In this case, the action is expressed with the present participle and an arrow indicating who is performing the action (“<~~~setting down a bowl of milk....”). The arrow pointing at the screen name directs our attention to the speaker/writer, but it has very different conceptual implications than if the participant had written “*I* am setting down a bowl of milk”, where, as mentioned before, the referent of the pronoun remains ambiguous. This arrow is pointing at a space on the screen where the alter persona, through its screen name, is metaphorically standing, thus highlighting the existence of the virtual world.

In the previous examples, the impossibility of performing the described actions in any literal sense underscores the theatrical nature of the conversation, thus contributing to the separation between the chat room world and the real world. Grammatically, however, there is ambiguity, since the subject of the progressive tense is missing. Who is setting the bowl? Am I (the real person) describing an imaginary action, or is she (the alter persona) performing it? This ambiguity is absent in those cases when the participant uses the third person of the singular to refer to himself or herself, as in Example 23. Here, the alter persona Clmmartins appears as an entirely different being from the participant behind it by writing the third person of the verb “to give” (“gives”) instead of “I give” or “giving”:

(23) “Catholic Singles”

MaggieM731: OK OK I WANT TO BECOME ENAGED TO, DO I GET A
CYBER RING
Raceroxgundam: <--GETTING THE CYBER RING POLISHED
Raceroxgundam: lol
Clmmartins: gives ring to maggie...
MaggieM731: MAYBE I CAN HAVE 4 OR 5 HUSBANDS TOO
MaggieM731: I LOVE AOL
MaggieM731: THEY CAN ALL SEND ME THEIR PAYCHECKS
Scarlit777: LOL ME TOO MAGGIE

The use of a third person pronoun for self-reference is not exclusive to CMC, but it has become a standard part of the CMC language (Crystal, 2001). Regardless of the origin, most participants have probably no difficulty in adopting this linguistic practice because it is also a feature of spoken English, as when adults talk to children (e.g. “Mommy is tired now”).

The examples above illustrate how participants use language to bring their real life personae or their alter egos to the foreground. The boundary between the real and the virtual world is not always clear, however, and this ambivalence is also expressed linguistically, as in the example below, where Godpoet88 uses both the possessive “my” (first person) and the verb “has” (third person) in the same utterance:

(24) “Catholic Singles”

Darla8881: LOL POEY, SWEETY YOU WOULDN’T LOOK AT ME ONCE
MUCH LESS TWICE
Godpoet88: yes I would because I have Carrie
<<< has you on my puter
‘I have you on my computer’

6. Conclusion

Even though chat rooms seem at first sight body-free spaces where the absence of visual and aural cues restricts the possibility of materiality, participants use any means available in the chat to create bodies or parts thereof. The creation of physicality in dating chat rooms is not a simple transference of the attributes of “real” bodies, nor a discursive construct that exists independently of the people who are participating in the chat. On the contrary, there is a constant shift between the virtual and the real worlds, and this shift is achieved by using a variety of linguistic and graphic strategies such as the alternation of first and third person pronouns for self-reference, the manipulation of the written code to reproduce visual and aural cues, or the ritualized description of the self through the a/s/I

schema. The evidence provided here shows that, as Wilson and Peterson (2002) argue, we need to move beyond the dichotomy virtual vs. real if we hope to understand better the world of computer-mediated communication.

The linguistic practices observed in dating chats, as in any other social practice, are a product of a particular intersection of technical, contextual, and social features. These practices produce specific forms of bodies whose meaningfulness can only be understood in the context where they arise. Only by examining the local can we understand the specific shape of physicality that exists in dating chats. In cyberspace, where bodies are apparently absent, identities and relationships have to be created in the interactions, for the purpose of the interactions, and with the joint collaboration of all participants. At the same time, however, the interactions that take place in dating chats are not completely isolated from the social practices and ideologies that exist elsewhere. The chat room, as a space where people meet online, is certainly virtual, but that does not mean that it is completely separated from real life. As we have seen, many of the discursive strategies that participants use to construct their bodies are similar to those used in other virtual and non-virtual environments. The results of the analysis can, therefore, illuminate our general understanding of the discursive dimension of materiality and how physicality is constructed beyond the specific setting under study.

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