INTERNET DATING AND RESPECTABLE WOMEN:
GENDER EXPECTATIONS IN AN UNTRADITIONAL
PARTNERSHIP AND MARRIAGE MARKET – THE
CASE OF SLOVENIA

Online upoznavanje i ugled žene: Rodna očekivanja na
netradicionalnom tržištu partnerstva i braka – slučaj Slovenije

ABSTRACT Some theoreticians support notions of the Internet as a media that makes the social differences of those who use it irrelevant or at least less important. The Internet is also often regarded as a medium that improves the free expression of thoughts and wishes of marginalised groups that cannot express themselves in face-to-face relationships due to several normative obstacles. The article deals with the question of gendered normativity related to expressions of femininity in the case of building of intimate romantic partnership within Internet dating. It is based on data gathered by qualitative research. 66 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 34 men and 32 women with Internet dating experiences were conducted in Slovenia in order to get insight into several sociological aspects of internet dating, among which question of gendered expectations related to partnership and family building will be discussed in article. Results show traditional expectations of gender roles are more pervasive as could be expected. Traditional normative understandings of gender were identified especially in the field of expectations related to women and womanhood and were revealed in men’s hierarchical positioning of women regarding their status, in women’s endeavours to present themselves as respectable and in men’s disapproval of women’s sexualities.

KEY WORDS Internet dating, gender, traditional expectations, women’s respectability

APSTRAKT Pozitivistički pristup upotrebe interneta podržava ideju interneta kao medija koji čini socijalne razlike među korisnicima irelevantnim ili barem manje važnim i isto se tako često prezentira kao medij koji omogućava slobodno izražavanje misli i želja marginalizovanih grupa koje ne mogu da se izraze licem u lice zbog različitih normativnih prepreka. Tekst se bavi pitanjem rodne normativnosti u vezi sa izrazima ženstvenosti u primeru izgradnje intimnog romantičnog odnosa u okviru internet upoznavanja. Tekst je zasnovan na podacima prikupljenim kvalitativnim

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istraživanjima: 66 dubinskih polustrukturisanih intervjuja sa 34 muškarca i 32 žene sa iskustvima internet upoznavanja. Sprovedeno je u Sloveniji da bi se dobio uvid u nekoliko socioloških aspekata internet upoznavanja među kojima će se u članku raspravljati o pitanju rodnih očekivanja vezanih za partnerstvo i izgradnju porodice. Rezultati pokazuju da je tradicionalno očekivanje uloga roda učestalije nego što je očekivano. Tradicionalna normativna shvatanja roda identifikovana su u vidu očekivanja u vezi žena i ženskosti, u muškom hijerarhijskom pozicioniranju žena u vidu njihovog statusa, u ženskim nastojanjima da se predstave kao ugledne i takođe u muškom neodobravanju seksualnosti žena.

KLJUČNE REČI online upoznavanje, rod, tradicionalna očekivanja, ugled žena

1. Introduction

In world terms, the Internet dating market will soon have a 20-year tradition. In Slovenia, this partnership and marriage market is still growing in popularity and, consequently, slowly the stigma2 of those who use it with the aim to get in touch with a potential romantic partner3 is being reduced, especially among younger individuals, who use internet frequently (Žakelj, 2012). The number of sites created for the building of an intimate relationship in Slovenia has been expanding very rapidly in the last five years. Websites offering searches for an intimate partner vary according to the main type of relationship they are created for. The main type of relationship (affairs, romantic relationships, sexual relationships, friendships etc.) targeted can usually already be recognised by the name of the site. In the case of Slovenia, the biggest number of Internet daters is gathered on Ona-on.com, a site with the longest tradition of offering Internet dating. Ona-on.com was established in 2001 and has approximately 50,000 active users. Other Slovenian sites for Internet dating have a substantially smaller number of users although, as mentioned, the diversity of the offer is constantly growing (Žakelj, 2012).

Several theoretical approaches understand the Internet and its opportunities for building romantic partnerships in terms of its openness and lessening of social normativity. Prospects of making social differences irrelevant or invisible online (Herring, 2000), the concept of absence of “gating features” (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004), the idea of downplaying social norms (Eisenchlas, 2012), the concept of the lessening of traditional gender4 differences (Paap and Raybeck, 2005),

2 Stigmatisation of internet daters originates in two beliefs – first supports idea of internet dating as a strategy used by individuals who are not successful in face-to-face dating and second derives from intentionality of search which demolishes assumptions of romantic idea by which love simply happens (Hollander, 2004; Illouz, 2007).

3 The concept of romantic relationships as preferred intimate relationships is common to many researchers of modern intimate relationships built on the basis of on- and off-line dating (Merkle and Richardson, 2000; Gross and Simmons, 2002; Ben-Ze’ev, 2004; Gross, 2005; Illouz, 2007; Illouz and Finkelman, 2009). The term romantic is not understood in this article in line with Gidden’s idea, explained in his work Transformation of Intimacy (2000).

4 Category of gender refers to the socially and culturally constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that in a specific society are considered as appropriate for men and women. Categories of sex refer to biological differences.
flexible identity formation theories (Turkle, 1995; Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna et al., 2002) and theories of online identity re-creation (Yurchisin et al., 2005; Couch and Liamputtong, 2008) can be categorised as a set of “theories of Internet openness” that stress the potential freedom of self-presentation and (re)creation of the individual's identity online.

Scientific researches of internet dating cover wide range of aspects of the phenomenon. When we focus on internet dating among heterosexuals, issues as importance and dynamics of computer-mediated communication, profile contents, importance of attachment of photography in the profile, strategies of maximisation of individual's opportunities to find an interesting other, question of rationalisation of choice, on-line intimacy growth and comparisons to off-line dating are not rare (Žakelj, 2012). Contemporary studies that focus on aspects of gender and the Internet research mainly deal with issues as identity creation and re-creation (Barg et al., 2002; McKenna et al., 2002; Yurchisin et al., 2005; Couch and Liamputtong, 2008), online discursive practices (Eisenchlas, 2012), gender in web-based personals (Paap and Raybeck, 2005), the understanding of Internet infidelity (Docan-Morgan and Morgan, 2007; Whitty, 2007), the influence of gender on Internet communication (Herring, 2000; van Zoonen, 2002) etc.

With the focus on an analysis of the socially desirable expressions of femininity expressed by both men and women with experiences of Internet dating, the article will address next questions: Can we regard Internet as a new partnership and marriage market where gender expectations are loosened due to the possibility of free self-expressions? Are women free to express their sexuality on-line? And finally, does closeness to the ideal of respectable women play any role in the process of on-line choosing potential romantic partner?

2. Free expressions of self in the realm of Internet dating?

The Internet's flexibility in terms of self-presentation and identity (re)creation means representing the self in ways not possible in face-to-face communication, in ways representing “true self” the individual believes s/he is but cannot reveal as such in everyday communication and relationship creation (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna et al., 2002). Proponents of the positivistic approach to computer-mediated-communication support the idea of on-line free self-expressions and self-constructions. The search for an intimate romantic partner is defined in the context of Internet dating as a process of interpretation and self-construction (Hardey, 2004). Secondly, the Internet is believed to enable experimenting regarding sexual normativity. Anonymity as its central characteristic allows the possibility to try something different without the danger of being sanctioned or socially excluded for it. It is believed that due to anonymity the Internet enables sexual minorities to openly and freely express their fantasies and wishes related to sexualities (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004). Internet options for free self-expression and the expression of intimate wishes demystify so-called ‘deviance’, thereby promoting opportunities for self-discovery and the expansion of sexual boundaries (Lever et al., 2008: 243).
If the potential positive impact of online anonymity also functions in the case of Internet dating, expectations regarding gender roles and expectations regarding preferred expressions of femininity may lead to a weakening of double sexual standards. But the online dating realm differs from other computer-mediated communication environments in crucial ways that may affect self-presentational strategies. For instance, the anticipated future face-to-face interaction inherent in most online dating interactions may diminish participants' sense of visual anonymity, an important variable in many online self-disclosure studies (Ellison et al., 2006). In addition, in the case of Internet dating not only are face-to-face interactions anticipated but Internet daters mainly seek to build an intimate romantic relationship. The question that arises is whether Internet dating functions as a market of free self-expression or, on the contrary, as a market that strengthens gender norms.

Internet dating sites and the computer-mediated communication deriving from it can be understood in terms of another “trading arena” (Skeggs, 1997: 12) where the sexuality, femininity and respectability of women are judged in terms of a value whose level is established by others. Male and female profile owners present themselves in terms of social capital with the intent to maximise their potential to make contact with a promising other. The performance of femininity on Internet dating sites will be analysed through cases that present women's endeavours to build the status of a respectable woman and through cases of man's (dis)approval of the expression of non-traditional femininity.

3. Research methodology

The article is based on qualitative research of the sociological aspects of Internet dating. The research is grounded on qualitative data gathering followed by a thematic qualitative analysis. Qualitative research is frequently employed when examining different aspects of Internet dating (used by Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Couch and Liamputtong, 2008; Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008; Xie, 2007 and others). The data were collected by semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals who identified themselves as having experiences in the search for a partner on the Internet. The 34 male and 32 female survey participants were recruited in three steps: first online through an e-mail invitation to those who had participated in the first Slovenian online quantitative research about Internet dating in 2006 (Švab and Kuhar, 2007) and left their e-mail addresses as a sign of their willingness to cooperate in further research on this theme. Secondly, snowball sampling of contacts of the first participants was undertaken. In the third step, an invitation to take part in the research was published on some Slovenian web pages designed for Internet dating (Ona-on.com, Frendi&flirt.com, Flirtko.com, Spoznaj.si) and on some forums (www.med.over.net). Recruitment was accommodated to the response rate by which the diversity of the sample was obtained (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998).

At the beginning of the research, the participants were notified of the intention of the survey and the contents of the research. With the intention to assure anonymity, the participants were asked to fill short questionnaire and
choose a nickname. Because it was found during the research that some of the participants had used the nicknames by which they are known in some Internet networks and in some cases there was no chance to identify the gender of the nickname, all nicknames were codified as personal names that reveal the gender of the interviewee and assure the anonymity of the participant. Questionnaire included questions on duration of experiences with on-line search for a partner and general demographic data. The interviews were conducted in the period from 31 July 2008 to 15 January 2009. Sixty-six semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted. Due to one participant currently living in another country (Bosnia and Herzegovina), one interview was made via a Skype call, while all the others were made face-to-face. All interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission and transcribed in the second step. The interviews took between 23 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes, on average about one hour. The locality, spot and time of the interview were suggested by the participants. They mainly suggested public places such as quiet cafes etc.

Sample characteristics

The participants’ average age was 34.3 years. The youngest participant, female, was 19 years old and the oldest participant, male, was 72 years old. The average age of the female participants was 33.1 years while the average age of the male participants was 35.4 years. The participants declared that they had been searching for a partner on the Internet for at least 1 month up to 11 years. Approximately one-half of the participants obtained their experiences in Internet dating through “accidental” or “secondary” (Barraket and Henry-Waring, 2008: 153) online contact. They had no intention of finding a partner online at first, but were just trying to build a new friendship or were on the net with a social gathering intention. By the time of the research, 42 participants were in a partnership, including 31 partnerships (of 19 female and 12 male interviewees) that originated in Internet dating. Among those who were still searching, there were 15 male and 9 female interviewees.

Data analysis

First the recorded interviews were transcribed and, in order to preserve the respondents’ anonymity, imaginary names are used, followed by the real age of the interviewees. Colloquial language has been standardised, but the meaning and its different nuances have been preserved. The qualitative analysis involved three steps. The first entailed the organisation of the data and identification of the

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5 While gender is evident in case of the use of mother tongue (Slovenian language) for the purpose of this article, gender data follow the personal name.

6 Besides the 66 analysed interviews, eight interviews with homosexually oriented participants were conducted. These were excluded from the research due to the criteria of the research to focus on the sociological aspects of the Internet dating of the heterosexual population. Sexual orientation is believed to have an impact on predispositions that influence decisions on Internet dating. The context of Internet dating can also differ due to sexual orientation, which is the reason the research focused solely on heterosexuals. In addition, another interview was eliminated from the analysed material due to the fact the interviewee solely had experience as an observer of Internet dating.
topics/codes. Altogether 22 topics (such as the reasons for deciding to try Internet dating, the advantages and disadvantages of online dating, the ways personal online profiles are formed, the characteristics of key data in such profiles and other important information revealed in online communication (photographs and physical attraction, past family life, political and religious beliefs, views on gender roles), the characteristics of the intensification of sharing intimate matters, the frequency of simultaneous online relationships, the characteristics of moving into off-line face-to-face contacts, the establishment of intimacy in online communication, the fall in intimacy at the first face-to-face meeting, the characteristics and strategies of a sudden ending of an online-only communication and the ending of communication after a face-to-face meeting, the features of moving into a romantic relationship and other topics) were analysed. First the coding was followed by a descriptive step (identification of concepts, phenomena, categorisation and classification (groups of categories) and, finally, an analytical and interpretative step was made (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

For the purpose of the article the researched themes are analysed through the lens of expectations regarding gender roles with the focus on femininity. The concepts that gender expectations are analysed within are profile writing, changes of profiles, the criteria of communication initiative, the process of establishing computer-mediated communication, the transition to a face-to-face meeting, expectations regarding future relationships, sexualities and intimacy. The findings are supported by specific quotes within each theme7.

**Triangulation of results**

On the basis of the research methodology validity of the research results was checked by triangulation process that revealed several analysed dimensions of Internet dating (such as experiences of first contact making, femininity expressions, motherhood expressions, sexuality expressions, etc) support the idea on congruence of mans’ expectations regarding expressions of femininity and women’s endeavours to fit into the categories of respectable women. Some questions about expectations regarding gender roles in the research were asked directly, for instance how important are the opinions on gender roles in the phase of internet dating. As 37 year old interviewee Olga said: “These are things which you find out later, because here on the declarative level it could be completely different as it is later...” During research gendered expectations were revealed directly and indirectly in interviewees’ narrations on the importance of profile content, contact making, language style of the profile, preferences regarding gender roles, expectations regarding future family life etc.

**4. Results: Women’s respectability and other traditional gender expectations**

The conceptualisation of gender roles in the field of Internet dating is revealed through several aspects of such dating, for instance in making the first move in answers concerning what (kind of) women men are searching for, in

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7 Quotes are labelled by selected name, sex and age.
the hierarchical position of women’s statuses, in perceptions of women and men’s sexualities and in gender-specific narrations of the use of Internet sites to build intimate relationships etc.

4.1. Making the first move

One of the characteristics of Internet dating is the initiative of men to make the first contact (Whitty, 2004). There are several reasons for men taking the initiative and they encompass not only gendered expectations but also the technological characteristics of Internet dating. Internet sites usually enable users to choose the possibility of being informed when a new profile is posted. On the basis of such an announcement, men (as the prevailing profile owners) write an invitation for online communication to suitable newcomers. As one young female interviewee explained, after posting her profile the response from men was so numerous she could not even respond to all the requests for online communication:

The response was in fact very high right away. I think the next day, when my profile was approved, I got so many e-mails that I could not review them all. I do not know. Maybe there are fewer girls and this was the reason for such a response (Nika, female, 25).

Interviewee also explained the reason for such a rush of e-mail invitations as lying in the gender imbalance of the profile owners. According to information from the webmaster in the case of the Ona-on.com site the proportion of profiles regarding male/female gender is about 60:40. In the case of Internet dating sites with a smaller number of profiles, the gender imbalance is usually even greater. In Slovenia it can even reach a proportion of 4:1.

Other male and female interviewees also revealed it is mostly men who take the initiative for the first contact or for the first face-to-face meeting:

Usually a man suggested we go for a drink and I had to like them on the basis of their writing. Just to know I will have something to talk with them about (Breda, female, 32).

Male participants often revealed they had to invest lots of time and general effort to get a response from preferred women:

I started this way that I tried to contact girls, they were very besieged, there are substantially more men, it is hard to get any answer. It was quite miserable at the beginning. /.../ (Franci, male, 43).

You click lots of them, you invite lots of them, but only a few respond (Leon, male, 34).

Consequently Internet dating sites allow passiveness regarding women’s first online contact making. A man’s invitation for online communication is one of the unwritten rules of Internet dating8, which can be understood as traditional

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8 Other unwritten rules of Internet dating are: the rule of reading unintentional hints, respect of anonymity, expectations of revealing intimacy, the triangulation of revealed information to
norm of dating transmitted from of-line dating. Regarding first move norm in internet dating the question is, how much it is a consequence of gender im-
balance in profile number and how much it is a consequence of traditional order by which it is a men's role to start the process of getting in touch with potential partner. Women's invitations come into play in cases where their existing contacts and invitations do not meet their expectations. In addition, when men's invitations to computer-mediated communication do not achieve the desired response rate it becomes clear that men's profile characteristics are even more important than women's. The profile content and the style of writing are key factors that influence women's decision-making on responses to invitations for online communication (Žakelj, 2012).

4.2. Respectable women wanted

Respectability means an understanding of sexual appropriateness (Skeggs, 1997). Women's quest for respectability is a consequence of double gender standards (Jamieson, 1998) whereby men are allowed to express their sexual wishes and potential sexual permissiveness without any stigma, while the social expectations of women are the opposite. Moral expectations of women are strict and clear and influence endeavours to achieve the status of a respectable woman. Feminine behaviour should be strictly asexual in order to achieve a social reputation. Giving the impression of being respectable is part of the efforts of women searching for a potential intimate romantic partner (at the beginning online and later in off-line contacts). On the other side, men seek to maximise their options to get in touch with women recognised as respectable. The importance of women's respectability was revealed by the men and women included in the research. While women did not want to appear 'loose' and endeavoured to be recognised as respectable candidates, men expressed their interest in searching among respectable women. If women do not hide their sexual expectations or if they only reveal themselves as sexual beings they do not fit in the category of an appropriate match:

/.../ on the Internet these young mothers, all they are thinking about is sex. What shocked me most is this contradiction with women's logic. Women always have a headache, not men. Us men are always ready, aren't we? (Miro, male, 39).

This male respondent's impression of women searching for an intimate partner online was that it was "contradictory to women's logic". This comment is interesting for several reasons: first, women are supposed to represent themselves in an asexual way; second, the respondent does not say the women he got to know online did seek sexual contact but that he is disappointed merely by the impression of women just thinking or talking about sex; and third, as explained, it is socially normative for men to be classified as sexual, as the 'always ready' gender.

lessen the harm of intended and unintended lies, the rule of politeness, the rule of reciprocity, the rule of silence, the rule of search, the homogamy rule (Žakelj 2012).
Women's efforts to be recognised as respectable were also confirmed in the
gendered presentation of themselves in their profiles and the importance of it.
The focus of women regarding the general impression given by the profile was
not to appear ‘loose’ or eager for sex. Where women had the feeling their profile
was too provocatively written, the re-writing of the profile\(^9\) was the next logic
step to allow them to fit into the category of a respectable woman:

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\text{At the beginning a friend of mine wrote my profile in a teasing,}
\text{provocative style. Then I realised that I am not that kind of person, that I}
\text{am a more serious one, then I changed it. /.../ I wanted the main sentence}
\text{and the contents of the profile to reveal me as a serious person, I did not}
\text{want to look like I was searching for sex. Even though there is a question}
\text{how other people see this. I wanted this serious one (Anica, female, 54).}
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This middle-aged interviewee explained her doubts about the appropriateness
of her initial profile her colleague had written. Because male responses to the first
profile were different from what was expected, the interviewee concluded her
profile was too teasing. Since she did not want to give the impression of looking
for sexual contacts she changed her profile. As Skeggs says (1997: 115), to claim
respectability a disavowal of the sexual is necessary. And this is also evident in the
presumably ‘open’ partnership and marriage market of Internet dating.

4.3. A hierarchy of marital and parental statuses

One interesting feature of Internet dating is the feeling of choosing a partner
from among an almost unlimited number of profiles. The number of profiles that
match selected criteria seem countless, which is why someone searching for a partner
online can use relatively restrictive criteria in the selection of interesting others.
The status of the profile owner and preferred relationship are key characteristics
Internet daters consider. The expectations of the men included in the research
reveal a hierarchy of candidates’ status\(^10\). The most highly valued are women with
a clear unburdensome history (who have not been married or divorced yet, without
children etc., with no experience of living in a family of procreation):

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\text{I would not have a woman with a child. It would be easier for me to}
\text{be with a woman with a child than to be with a divorced woman. But I am}
\text{coming now into an age when soon I’ll be happy if it will just be anyone. It}
\text{will become increasingly difficult to get anyone normal /.../ (Žiga, male, 26).}
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Men pay special attention to the motherhood status of a potential intimate
romantic partner. The fact of having children is a serious barrier for female
Internet daters:

\(^9\) Re-writing of a profile was common when the reaction of Internet daters to the first profile
was not as planned.

\(^{10}\) For the purpose of the article we discuss only the role of marital and parental statuses.
Besides, other factors building social status as a whole (economic position, educational level,
nationality, religion, race, etc.) are also crucial for the selection of profiles among internet
daters. Reason lies in the principle of homogamy, that is the search among resembling others.
Yes, when I was searching I did not want to get divorced women and young mothers, that’s how I decided how picky I’d be. In fact, if this were a face-to-face meeting it would not be so important but if I had an option to choose, I said to myself this kind of woman I will not have. Because it is much easier, otherwise immediately there is a kind of a burden, a child, adjustments, whether I’ll love him/her.... I just said to myself I will not complicate my life in such a way (Andrej, male, 35).

I am sorry! If I saw that someone has (a child) I have to stay I stopped right away. /.../ Yes, I would start on my own and have my own children – that’s how I imagine it. And also if I meet her face-to-face, OK, I have to say it repels me a lot. I receive a kind of very protective click (Alen, male, 31).

Marital and parental statuses present the value of the profile owner. The status of being in a relationship discourages all those looking for a serious romantic relationship. Consequently, marital status is a piece of information that is highly subjected to falsification. On average, 20% of male and 16% of female heterosexual profile owners misrepresent their status in terms of presenting themselves as not being married/in a relationship even though they were (Kuhar et al., 2010: 54). When asking the interviewees if they ever changed profiles, in which points and why, young mothers revealed their experiences of a profile status change. They noticed that the fact of revealing they had children reduced their potential chance of being interesting for men searching for an intimate romantic relationship. Regarding this, two interviewees explained withholding the fact of having children:

/.../ Afterwards when I was Feromona I changed this information. I didn’t state there that I have children because I saw this was a problem. Then I noticed that, in time, when someone tried to get closer and I said that I have two children, at that moment the thing ended very fast (Daša, female, 40).

Yes, I did (change the profile, author’s note). Then at the point I erased this real fact, that I am a mother with a child. I said to myself, why point this out. In fact, I said to myself, if someone would like to know me, he will /.../ (Karmen, female, 32).

The changing of one’s profile or the additional posting of a profile (with a different style of addressing potential partners) with the aim to improve one’s chances of getting in touch with promising others are certainly a part of Internet dating characteristics. Changing one’s status to mask a motherhood status confirms the abovementioned preferences for building romantic intimate relationships with women without experiences in living in a family of procreation. The social capital of women who have no children (yet) is in terms of Internet dating greater than the social capital of mothers who would like to find a new romantic intimate partner online. Having options available to select a way to build an intimate relationship supports decisions about candidates whose status promises an easier and socially desired formation of a partnership and, finally, a family. But if being the mother of a child or children is an obstacle for women who engage in Internet dating being regarded as ‘worthwhile’ meeting,
on the other side many men concerning the question of which kind of women they are looking for and their expectations of sex roles and the division of work in a partnership admit they want a ‘motherly’ type of woman. While potential maternity is valued, social parenting does not seem an alternative, at least so long as options of building a ‘pure’ family seem to remain open.

4.4. Men’s expectations

When the male interviewees were talking about their preferences and wishes regarding the women they are searching for, their narrations often revealed wishes and expectations that can be labelled in terms of traditional gender roles. To have a woman who would be a ‘motherly type’, to prefer a patriarchal gender division of household and family work with the awareness they cannot expect it to be realised are wishes that confirm the idea of a “stalled revolution” in the area of the gendered division of labour (Hochschild, 1997).

I don’t know, a mother type, I am searching for a mother type and I would like to have that kind of woman /.../ One who would love me, and would love my children, nothing more demanding than that (Miro, male, 39).

The question here is what would be a description of the “mother type” of woman – is this someone dedicated to raising children, someone without professional ambitions, a person to take care of the housekeeping? Miro explains:

/.../ Then we would have to go back 300 years, a woman to cook by the stove at home, she would not talk, eee, she would cook nicely and take care of the children. Yeah, but we are 300 years forward, and this doesn’t go any more (laughs). Men would have it this way, but this cannot work /.../ (Miro, male, 39).

In the next statement by a younger man interesting connotations of a gendered division of work can be found. The understanding of sharing the housework is strongly limited by an explanation of the understanding of some task as “nonsense” which he expects will be done by his partner. His traditional aspirations are evident although masked by the idea of an equal division of work as a socially expected norm revealed in the views of young people:

I am still a little more traditional. I can cook, she should wash, clean and do that nonsense, otherwise half-half. Not this way: ‘You will be the housekeeper, at home by the stove’. No, this is gone, I mean it still exists, but not among young people (Nejc, male, 25).

Traditional gender role expectations not only refer to the division of work as the hierarchical social positioning of men is also evident: men should have the role of a family or partnership authority (“to be known, who ‘who wears the pants’, women should not engage in ‘feminist’ opinions and endeavours; being humble would be the right personal characteristic:

/.../ A standpoint on the role of men and women – I would say that I am old-fashioned in a way. I like a man to be a man, and a woman to
be a woman. That does not mean I expect women to wash, iron and cook, because I'll also do that. But in certain moments it is fine to know who strikes the table /.../ (Gregor, male 35).

I would like her to be emotional, open, sincere, serious; to have some ideals about a romantic, serious relationship. I like women to have self-confidence but, on the other side, I do not like it if she is feminised and superior. I'd like women to be humble but not in the sense of subordination, but in the sense of being simple (Bojan, male, 34).

4.5. Women's sexuality

Expressions of women’s sexuality are directly subjected to negative labelling. To have (many) sexual experiences, to write hints about sexuality in computer-mediated-communication, to be in unresolved relationships and post a profile with the intention to find someone else to have a romantic relationship with are examples of socially unacceptable feminine sexual behaviour. In the case of expressions of women’s sexuality the quest for women’s respectability is revealed in direct and indirect ways. First, it can be revealed in expectations regarding sexual experiences:

Yes, I do not want a woman with too many kilometres on the clock (Tim, male, 25).

Second, it can be shown in surprise over and the rejection of an uninhibited style of communication:

Yes, especially girls are much more relaxed. /.../ One had this webcam and I also have one. /.../ And then: ‘I’ll show you ... and then hi, hi, hi, and ha, ha, ha!’, but any further than this it did not go (Tomaž, male, 34).

This was right at the beginning, on Kupid. I talked to her, nice and normally. She evidently looked at my description and saw how old I was and said to me something like ‘You, old man, you’d like to have sex’. I said: ‘Thank you for your words, I haven’t said anything in this direction and good luck – search for it if you are interested in it!’. And she did not answer, neither did I (Ivan, male, 72).

The most direct incongruence of male expectations and the actual situation was recognised in the case of a woman who had searched for a romantic intimate partner online but was not single at the time:

/.../ The only information that was available (in the profile), to everybody, was that I am married. /.../ And some condemned me, that I am bad – from a bitch on, up to that I am cheating my husband ... (Marija, female, 42).

Saying the truth in the case of Marija’s search for a partner caused direct negative labelling. To be married and simultaneously search for a new romantic partner is culturally unacceptable. Unresolved relationships are quite common among those who are searching for a partner via Internet dating. But the statuses
of Internet profile owners are often intentionally different to the real life situation. Every fifth heterosexual profile owner lies about his/her real partnership status (Kuhar et al., 2010).

The next indirect evidence of socially undesirable expressions of women's sexuality was revealed by the fact that during the interviews the female participants did not talk about using Internet sites to search for sexual contacts or occasional sex. This lack of narrations regarding issues of sexuality indirectly reveals social expectations about women's sexual life or undesirable expressions about this aspect of intimate life. On the contrary, men felt free to talk about their perceptions of the Internet as a medium that also enables the search for sexual partners or contacts for occasional sex. We conducted interesting interviews with a young male (25 years old) who endeavoured to obtain 10 new contacts a day to get sexual experiences in a very strategic way; a middle-aged man (41 years old) who at the beginning (when still married) searched for a partner to have sex with and afterwards searched with his new partner for single sex partner or a couple for swinging with; and a man (46 years old) who had first searched for a woman to join him and his wife and, finally, because he was unsuccessful for a man to join him and his wife. ‘His’ profile is written in his wife's name where 'she' is searching for a man. He does all the computer-mediated communication on behalf of his wife. Only in face-to-face communication does his wife explain the actual idea of the search.

In the case of men searching for a sexual partner another contradiction of Internet dating was revealed. While men looking for a romantic relationship expressed their surprise over the free sexual expressions of some female profile owners, those occasionally searching for just a sexual relationship stressed the need to design a strategy to get a response from women searching for the same type of intimate relationship.

/.../ Women searched for serious relationships, while we men searched for chances for sex. This was very disproportional. So at the beginning you write the profile and you try to be very sincere to say what you do and what you want. Then you find out the expectations of others are mainly different. If you write your profile very precisely, you exclude yourself from 90% of communication /.../ (Matjaž, male, 41).

As the interviewee stressed this was also true in the case of using websites designed for people to get in touch with those searching for sexual contacts (such as urgenca.com).

On the contrary, women revealed no stories about searching for sexual relationships or experiences of mere sexual relationships based on Internet dating activities. When asking them questions about the use of Internet dating for occasional sex, they were quite restrained in their stories. Occasional sex was regarded as acceptable only when having the potential to result in either a romantic relationship or friendship:

I never had sex only because of sex. I always had this hope that there is something more. At least friendship or something bigger /.../ (Jana, female, 42).
5. Conclusion

Getting to know a (romantic) partner online can be a consequence of an intentional search for a potential partner through Internet websites designed to allow searches for different kinds of intimate relationships or a consequence of secondary online contacts through forums, network sites or other online communication types that do not have the primary goal of finding a romantic partner. In this context, the Internet is defined as a new partnership and/or marital market which, due to several social changes, is being increasingly used as a place for searching for a potential romantic partner.

The start of developing a romantic partnership is chiefly influenced by the characteristics of computer-mediated communication that largely shape the online building of interpersonal relationships. It is also influenced by basic technological demands regarding the strategies for building an online relationship that are planned to be transformed into a face-to-face interaction. Staring point anonymity, intimacy disclosure, reciprocity, lure of guaranteed replacements of candidates, apparently unlimited choices, choosing potentials, demands for posting interesting profile, reduced pain in case of rejection are only few characteristics that influence social behaviour in internet dating search (Žakelj, 2012). But the intention to transform the relationship into an off-line, face-to-face dimension is a key characteristic that stipulates (gendered) normativity in Internet dating.

One of the biggest ideas of building relationships on the basis of Internet dating is the notion of an open place that enables the building of intimate relationships and the search for a (romantic) partner by people with different values, opinions and expectations and those not fitting into the normative frame of the socially (most) desired people searching for partners. Results, though limited to research sample, question openness of the medium related to gendered norms. The virtual openness of Internet dating sites as a place to possibly meet a potential romantic partner only extends to the line of the socially acceptable uniqueness of those doing the searching. Not to fit into the concept of a ‘desirable other’ may present serious obstacle in the case of a search for a potential romantic partner on-line. Internet can be understood as an extension of physical space, where both places share socially accepted understandings of romantic partnerships, gender roles and expressions of femininity. Research data show a pervasive traditional normativity of partnership creation on on-line basis: who invites whom to start computer-mediated communication, for whom sexual expressions are socially acceptable and who has to endeavour to achieve the status of a respectable potential match.

Gender norms are replicated online and offline gender scripts and roles guide expectations of appropriate behaviour online (Manago et al., 2008). Internet dating requires one to behave in a gender-consistent manner (Postmes and Spears, 2002; Palomares and Lee, 2010). In this matter research results revealed interesting expectations regarding socially desired femininity. The hegemonic ideal of a woman who fits in with the idea of a potential romantic
partner seems to be clear. To present oneself as non-sexual, non-loose, serious, respectable, to have the wish to become a mother, and not to have experiences of living in a family of procreation represents the social capital of women that significantly improves the appeal of women available on Internet dating sites.

Analysis of the discourse on the Internet revealed that the idea of egalitarian discourse is simply an illusion (Herring, 2000; 2003) and stressed the persistence of gender asymmetry and male dominance in Internet discourse. Similar can be concluded about the idea of the openness of the Internet for free self-expression and expressions of expectations. With the use of the Internet to find a romantic partner the positive characteristics of computer-mediated communication influenced chiefly by anonymity no longer matter. Off-line norms related to gender expressions and expectations percolate to the media that in the case of Internet dating can not be marked as absolutely free and open. Instead, the persistence of double gender standards and the strength of the patriarchal order are evident also in this ‘untraditional’ partnership and marriage market. Gendered social norms are not abandoned online, nor are they being re-defined online. Instead of a democratic environment that can reduce social differences, gendered expectations remain firmly rooted in the Internet dating market. Gendered expectations are strongly binned to the interest of building joint future life, family etc. So the question arises what are the reasons for the support of identified (traditional) gendered norms? Is the search for a respectable woman supported due to its assigned promise of lasting relationship? Or perhaps it is an evidence of the symbolic meaning of sometimes normatively prescribed family life or partnership?

References


