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## Online Dating: Expressing Personal Identity through Anonymity and of Systems Mired in Societal Values

Flirting and courtship as playful activities adorn an unusual layer in the realm of online dating where the resultant anonymity not only breeds a certain sense of behavioural freedom and expression of personal identity but also amplifies the playful aspects that are viewed as synonymous with dating. While the mechanics of dating sites are designed for a common purpose to foster maximal interaction by always offering potential matches to the users, the inherent anonymity allows independence for individual users to exploit the system in different ways for their own purpose. This results in a skewed low risk/high reward system where users operate behind a virtual veil and apply a combination of values both systemic and personal drawn from societal stereotypes and try to produce a desirable response from the other users.

### Beyond the Anonymity: Role-Playing and Expression of Personal Identity

To get a sense of all of this, it is first important to understand how the veil of virtual anonymity instils a sense of freedom among people and allows them to experiment with the boundaries of their personal identity. Some people exhibit this by projecting their ideal persona in online interactions, abstracting their own characteristics they see as most virtuous and desirable and trying to emphasize that in conversations. Many of these sites particularly OKCupid offer a blank canvas as a profile and match users based on questionnaires ranging from morality, lifestyle, sex, finance and tolerance, essentially granting users the freedom to

role-play by writing their own self-summary and answering questions. This allows different forms of play as described by the play theorist Sutton-Smith [1] to exist where even though the system may be designed to nurture a community with a common purpose, the individual players may utilize it in a different way. Some use such sites as a playground for social experiments by adopting different roles and a frivolous, playful behaviour while observing people's reaction to it. Encompassed within what Sutton-Smith described as the "rhetoric of play as identity" [1], a user may alternate between being the "good guy" and the "aloof loner" to see how differently potential matches react to him. This is similar to how role-playing games encourage repeat playthroughs among its players by offering different outcomes depending on your character's "morality" which is often governed by their interactions. Other users may fall closer to Sutton-Smith's "solitary play" rhetoric [1] who use the system with the intention to subject their own personality quirks to self-examination by tuning the things they would subconsciously say in the physical world and observing the response in a manner that is significantly low-risk courtesy the virtual anonymity. While an argument can certainly be made that such an element resembles a player interacting with a game system, but since the other person may not be aware they are part of the social experiment, it falls closer to what Roger Caillois calls as *paidia* [3] and informal play.

### Tinder: An Abstraction of the Superficial

Among all dating sites, Tinder abstracts most of OKCupid's complex systems and consequently also feels closest to a game. It simply reduces the process to the lone mechanic of swiping right or left to like or reject a person based on the photo, their age and the number of their shared interests. By reducing the context-sensitive action to swiping, the choices of people to purely their physical appearance and compatibility to mere numbers, Tinder acts as the ultimate abstraction of online dating by game scholar Jesper Juul's definition. As Juul

describes “abstraction as an optimization strategy by the player” [4], Tinder’s design basically achieves the same for its users by focusing purely on the critical elements, a frequent user of such sites would adhere to. In doing so, it also indirectly fosters a common value that physical attraction is attributed as a highly important factor for most users.

Moreover, as Liraz Margalit’s analysis of Tinder through evolutionary psychology [5] suggests, abstracting the determinants involved in the dating process not just makes it seem more like a “game” for the user participating in it but also offers a window to critically study machinations of thinking process and the values associated with it in deciding how an individual chooses to like someone in such a system.

While Tinder may mechanically resemble a highly simplified, one-action game, the fact it undervalues profile description and requires you to connect your Facebook account, makes the self-expression and role-playing element of OKCupid very difficult to emulate here. Such a high level of abstraction also makes it easier for people to “game” Tinder’s system and the algorithm behind it to achieve optimal results.

Like most online interactions between strangers, the exchanges on OKCupid are largely based on what Pelaprat and Brown describe as “perception and assumption” [7] than anything else. Most of these assumptions are largely grounded on personal beliefs often fostered by societal stereotypes. As Amy Bruckman’s Turing Test experiment showcases [5], individual perceptions on how people of specific gender or race would behave which are often shaped by the larger society dominates many of these thought processes preceding interactions on such sites. A user’s favourite book or film might give an interested user a hint as to which social clique they lean towards and thus give them a basis of assumption which is largely based on stereotypical notions.

### Values in Virtual Systems and its Participants

Even the systems that make up these dating sites foster certain values like the traditional gender binaries which it enforces upon its users to choose between either male or female. As a result, there can be a potential conflict between a user's personal values who may identify as genderqueer against the kind of values that OKCupid espouses. Online dating sites' inability to escape from the stereotypical values that encompass even modern-day dating and the variety of effects it has on the users interacting with their system can be attributed to what Flanagan and Nissenbaum describe as "values of play" [2]. These systems despite functioning in virtual domain are still rooted in values drawn from its designers that represent our actual society.

These values also influence a large subset of interactions that take place on the site. From the big data statistics collected from OKCupid [8] and viewing the behaviour of heterosexual users from that, most of the male users "like" female users abundantly hoping to elicit a response. Likewise, most of the conversations are initiated by the male users sending that critical first message. These situations mirror values drawn from the real-world stereotypes where men are supposed to "take the lead" in heterosexual courtships.

In an online environment where options are far from scarce, the actual interactions often boil down to a make or break act like the critical first-message which essentially attempts to evoke a response from the other person. What's interesting to observe is how different people approach this single element differently. One user may adopt a strategy to heap praises on another user's physical appearance while some another user may choose to ask question [8], wanting to appear interested in the potential match by catering to their narcissistic tendencies. In both the cases, the desired outcome is the same – to get a positive response and hopefully

meet in the physical world but the approach each user takes is different, partly dictated by their assumption of another user's personality and partly by their own understanding of the other gender – both of which are governed by their own personal values shaped by the society at large.

By adding a layer of anonymity, online dating sites gain game-like elements which allow its users a freedom to express personal identity through role-play and by achieving different goals within the same system. But when such dating sites are abstracted to their simplest elements, like we see in case of Tinder, it may result in interesting psychological analysis but also restricts the role-playing element thus making it feel less of a game at the same time. All of these systems are ultimately mired in the values of our society – either those implemented by the designers of the system or those applied by the users in their interactions. Even behind the virtual veil of anonymity, there is sometimes no escaping from the real-world context of values we hold as a collective society.

Works Cited

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