From Online to Offline: Presentations of Self and Partner Searching Techniques among Women in Turkey on Dating Sites

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Abstract

Online dating platforms (apps or websites) have become instruments that are increasingly used by women in their practices of looking for a partner for romantic and/or sexual purposes. This paper focuses on discussing women's self-presentation (also called impression management) methods and their strategies for evaluating themselves as presented both offline and online within the context of *habitus*. To this end, field data were collected with the netnographic method on the dating site called "OkCupid". Afterwards, 11 university-educated white-collar women who were users of this platform in Turkey were enrolled in a semi-structured in-depth interview. While dating sites have offered women new opportunities in the intimacy market within modern society, relationships that start online and continue offline may not provide the anticipated satisfaction among daters due to several structural and technical reasons. The results of our analysis indicate that firstly, this online platform creates the insatiable idea in the minds of daters that they will find a better partner candidate at any moment. Furthermore, it decreases the possibility that daters that like each other will make long-term investments in each other. Secondly, after the rationally-built presentation of the self on the online stage, the mystery which brought about the emotional attraction has been significantly removed from the offline stage.

Introduction

In the digital age, the constraint of technological change and transformations within social life has subjected the intimacy market to a drastic alteration[1]. Over the last few decades, agents, who are defined as daters, have started their romantic relationships and sexual connections via online dating platforms of which its use and popularity are increasing day by day (Rosenfeld, Thomas & Hausen, 2019)[2]. Accordingly, daters perform their partner search in two sequential stages, that are online and offline, respectively. With the addition of a new stage to the partner searching techniques, the location where daters perform their first presentation of self has been moved from the offline public space to the online private space. Those platforms separate partner searching spaces from a series of public spaces such as school, workplace, entertainment, and recreational areas (Smith & Duggan, 2013). Furthermore, computer/mobile phone-mediated communication frees the partner searching activity from traditional instruments (i.e., dating agencies, newspapers matrimonial ads, and TV matchmaking programs) by putting it under the supervision of a third and natural/legal persons and individualized it. The process of eliminating inequality of women against men in the intimacy market (Dihn, Gildersleve, Blex et al., 2021) provides an improvement at a certain level and change to the spaces and tools of partner search (Scharlott & Christ, 1995). Indeed, in these modern times in which traces of the patriarchal society linger on at different scales depending on the social structure, men dominate public spaces such as streets of the city, entertainment venues, and cafes (McClean, 2014).This is with respect to the use and control of the space (Beebeejaun, 2017). On the other hand, women behave in accordance with the norms related to femininity and sexuality, while also trying to avoid social indictment and stigmatization. With online platforms, women bypass mediators such as family, neighbors, and close friends who impose supervision on them.

However, in the use of such an expanded space, female daters who possess relatively equal means to men continue to perform their presentations of self/impressions more independently and competently than in the past in the online realm, which is the first stage of the intimacy market. Part of the interactions between daters that starts online continues offline later. By these means, women seems to get a better chance to experience intimate relationship

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[1]This article focuses only on heterosexual relationships.
[2]In 2017, while there were 3.02 million active (free/paid) dating site users in Turkey, this figure reached 7.45 million in 2020, which corresponds to a 46% increase in the number of users in three years (Online Dating Turkey, 2021).

practices, which seem less "legitimate, especially for women, on the second stage, with the positive influence in their minds from their performance on the first stage (Mergström, 2012, p.115).

      This article analyzes online dating platforms using practices of educated, working, urbanite, and middle-aged women from the perspective of presentation of self/impression management in Turkey where semi-industrialized, acute traditional, and modern forms of life exist together. Following the theoretical approach and the methodological framework, the article attempts to comprehend the social reasons that make women orientate towards such platforms. Next, the article studies self-representations/impression management of women who use those platforms and the selves presented by the partner candidates will be analyzed, without objectifying them and exposing them as another, in light of the meanings they attribute to their actions

      In modern society, like men, women gravitate towards a model of living which is more calculated, planned, and features reason rather than emotions in their private lives, and it is based on social relationships within the constraints of urbanization, individualization, production and consumption, and technology. Daters want to find themselves the most suitable partners by using their time and energy at the lowest cost. Hence, they have been leaving the traditional methods and meeting environments and preferring the internet in recent years[3]. The number of users on dating platforms is rapidly increasing both in Turkey and around the world. The first online dating site was established in the US in 1994 (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2017, p.6). Later on, with the rapid climb in the number of dating platforms, platforms have also been diversified qualitatively by all kinds of pleasures, likening, and sexual orientation. According to the 2021 data, around the world, there are 371 million paid/free online dating site users. By gender, two in every three daters are men (31% women, 69% men) (Online Dating Worldwide, 2020). In Turkey, which is a transition country between Asia and Europe, siberalem.com was opened as the first dating site in the country in 2000, six years later than the US (Özseyhan et al., 2012). There were 8.7 million paid/free online dating site users in Turkey in 2021. Of the users, 21.7% are women while 78.3% are men (Online Dating Turkey, 2021). In other words, there are significantly more men in the online intimacy market in the country compared to the world's average.

      Like in the industrialized Western countries (Dutton et al., 2009, p.3-18), there have been a significant change in the rate of institutions/instruments that mediate/contribute to the meeting of future wives and husbands in

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[3]Whereas 2% of heterosexual couples met on the Internet in the US in 1995, the percentage reached 37% in 2017 (Rosenfeld et al., 2019).

conjunction with the increasing numbers of dating site users in Turkey. For instance, the percentage of family/neighborhood as the mediators that allow future married couples to meet decreased from 84.4% in 2006 to 78% in 2016. On the other hand, the percentage of the Internet as the meeting environment of future married couples remained the same at 0.1% in 2006 and 2011, and it increased to 0.6% in 2016 (TR Ministry of Family and Social Services, 2019, p.114). While representing a small portion within the total number, the percentage tending to increase quite rapidly in recent years suggests new trends in the market of intimate relationships. Notably, the percentage of those who meet online and get married is 0.6% and 1.2% in İstanbul and İzmir, respectively. These are the two most prominent cities of Turkey that are cosmopolitan in nature and Western in outlook (Turkish Statistical Institute [TUIK], 2016).

Consequently, there are no quantitative data on stable relationships outside the conjugal union, or "liquid loves" as called by Bauman (2003), and intimate connections that occur via the Internet in Turkey. However, our field observations suggest that the search for intimate relationships and the establishment of new connections via the Internet are common practices among white-collar single women who are at least university graduates in İstanbul, the biggest metropolitan city in Turkey, where the field research was conducted.

Theoretical Framework

The greatest novelty that dating platforms offer daters is the opportunity of a new presentation of self/impression management, which is quite different from the offline world where face-to-face (FtF) social interactions occur. Presentation of self/impression management which, is used synonymously, is a concept introduced to sociology by Erving Goffman in a period when computer-mediate communication (CMC) that supports interactions were not part of social life. Presentation of self/impression management is a conscious or unconscious process through which an agent organizes and controls true or distorted information in social interactions and tries to influence others' perceptions of themselves, another person, object, or event.

Goffman points out that agents gravitate towards impression management with various motivations such as consolidating their social status, exhibiting themselves as being better and more valuable than their competitors, or simply for their own self-esteem and desires. Agents create two types of impressions for their surroundings to express themselves in the interactions. One of them is the impression they give, and the other is the impression they send out. According to Goffman, the former refers to verbal symbols and their equivalents. Giving an impression is a process of

constructing the self that one works on consciously. Sending out impression is the sum of unconscious action, schemas outside the control of agents, in which they pretend simultaneously with their conscious actions (Goffman, 1959, p.2).

In Goffman's dramaturgical approach, the agent carries out the preparation phase of constructing the self and prepares for their role in the background. Later, the agent interacts with others and performs their role with their appearance and attitudes on a physical or virtual platform that is called the front stage.

In those action schemas, conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu as *habitus*, the agent both sends out impression and analyze and evaluate the impressions sent out and given by others through comprehension and mental structures that they gained via the socialization process and their own dispositions such as stances, behaviors, and attitudes.

However, matching algorithms of dating platforms can organize answers given by daters to a series of questions in their true or distorted form to control their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, thereby manipulating and directing their impressions of the outer world (*see* Tong et al., 2016). For example, there is a limited number of potential partner, candidates within the social circle of the agent in the offline world, which is shaped by their socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, this new instrument offers or pretends to offer potential partner candidates in the intimacy market more than women and men can choose in traditional living spaces such as schools, workplaces, and entertainment venues (Illouz, 2012, p.182-183). As articulated by the evolutionist David M. Buss, dating platforms "give their users the impression that there are thousands, or even millions of potential partners for them there" (Sales, 2019). In this case, differently from the offline world, this technical instrument creates the insatiable idea in the minds of daters that they will find a better partner candidate at any moment. How online platforms have created the impression of transition from the "market of scarcity" where there is a limited number of partner candidates to the "market of abundance" where partner candidates are limitless changes daters' expectations of the relationships. The possibility to replace an old product found in a catalog with a new one at any given time (Illouz, 2012, p.182) makes it difficult to attach and invest in the current product. In the offline world where the number of partner candidates is limited, face-to-face gatherings such as *Bachelors ball* (Bourdieu, 2002) or meetings joined by mediators such as family, neighbors, friends, and professional matchmaking firms, or the matchmaking shows on TV, aim to introduce the person to a candidate and build the conjugal union as soon as possible. On the contrary, online platforms offer one-day, short- or long-term relationship choices at first rather than marriage. The impression of limitless choices transforms not only the impression management of daters

during the partner search but also their roles within the relationship. While structures based on the conjugal union reproduce the traditional gender roles in society by nature (Kauffman, 2002, p.135), the constant possibility to find a better partner ambiguates the traditional roles and responsibilities of women and men, thereby decreasing the mutual expectations for a shared future. At least, the online platform itself creates such an impression on the user.

Consequently, this online instrument evaluates profile information of daters who are looking for partners for a romantic and/or sexual relationship and creates the impression that it will find the best candidates in the intimate relationships market through computable, foreseeable, and measurable quantitative data. The impression created by the instrument on daters transforms their attitudes and behaviors and compels them to develop new impression management strategies depending on its directions and the means offered by it.

In this new intimacy market, relationships are performed in a sequential-double-stage world in which each of them has a front stage and a backstage. First, daters construct a self online and create an impression about themselves. Next, they conduct a new performance on the offline stage based on the knowledge and expectations brought by that impression. On this second stage, bodies shaped are revealed by social experiences rather than the strategy used in interacting with each other.

In the offline world, agents perform through appearances such as clothing, hairstyles, accessories, and attitudes such as carrying the body, use of voice, and stance. Whereas, these are replaced by texts and photos which can be tempered freely in the online world. The presentation of self, which is visually and verbally carried out through the body for a certain tangible other person in the offline world, is directed towards a generic and abstract mass in which personal selves is gathered in the online world (Illouz, 2007, p.78-80). Matching algorithms mobilize the mind rather than the emotions, transforming practices and performances of relationships qualitatively and quantitatively. Eva Illouz describes this change as "intellectualization, rational management of the flow of encounters, visualization, commensuration, competitiveness, and maximization of utilities" (Illouz, 2012, p.180-182).

Methodology

The online environment is a space where agents interact with each other through writing, icons, voices, and fixed or motion images synchronously or asynchronously. In addition, the relationships that people have here harbor several creative and imaginative thoughts, but the online environment is still the extension of the real world (Ben-ze'ev, 2004, p.2).

Furthermore, it was designed and conducted through qualitative research, firstly the nethnographic observation and then the in-depth

interviews, for examining how women construct their presentations of self in the transition process from online stage to offline stage in the article. To this end, an online dating platform called "OkCupid", which was founded in the US in 2004, did not provide language support in Turkish at the time the research was chosen for collecting data[4]. Prior to the in-depth interviews, for examining how platform users create their online profiles, a profile with no profile picture was created for an average single male who is 44 years old, a university graduate, speaks English, and looks for a short- or long-term partner who is 33-52 years old and lives not more than 50 km away from the central İstanbul. With the netnographic method (Kozinets, 2015) which is adapted from ethnographic field research methods to review cultures and communities constructed through computer-mediated communication, a full observation was attained without interacting with other participants in any way. In this method in which the identity of the researcher is unknown to the community members, the profile remained as a passive participant despite being a member of OkCupid. Profile information of the first hundred women suggested by the matching algorithm for the male profile was recorded to be analyzed later. Even though these online profiles were created as open to access by an anonymous community, no written or visual information that would disclose the identities of the profile owners was utilized in the article (Kalinowski & Matei, 2011). Only the places where the profile photos were taken were examined, and questions were prepared for the open-ended and semi-structured interview form based on the profile information (relationship status, desired duration of relationship, pleasures, expectations, personal requests, etc.).

Field Research, Participants, and Profile of the Sample

Next, in-depth interviews were conducted between August 2019 and February 2020 by using a sample of women who were using the platform, were university graduates, finished their early youth, and living in Istanbul. Following the two pilot interviews, the open-ended and semi-structured interview form was finalized. The participants interviewed for this study were 11 women between the ages of 35 and 49. The interviewees were reached with the snowballing method through contacts. They were told about the purpose of the research and assured of the confidentiality of their credentials. Three of the interviewees gave their consent for voice recording. Written notes were taken in the remaining interviews. Furthermore, digitally recorded interviews and each written note taken during the interview were analyzed after verbatim transcription through the process known as "open coding". All 11 participants

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[4]After the completion of the field study, the platform started to support Turkish as a second language for the first time in the world in March 2021.

were working women living alone or with their children (two of them each have a child). Four of those women were divorcees. The participants were assigned numbers from one to eleven and their information including age, marital status, and being with or without a child was provided within brackets.

Table 1. Profile of the sample

Participants	Age	Occupation	Materials Status	Child
Interviewee [1]	49	Finance	Divorced	1
Interviewee [2]	43	Investment-real estate	Single	---
Interviewee [3]	39	Physician	Single	---
Interviewee [4]	44	Executive Assistant	Divorced	---
Interviewee [5]	41	Lawyer	Divorced	---
Interviewee [6]	35	PR specialist	Single	---
Interviewee [7]	36	Textile engineer	Divorced	1
Interviewee [8]	41	Mid-level executive	Single	---
Interviewee [9]	38	Architect	Single	---
Interviewee [I0]	39	Translator	Single	---
Interviewee [11]	48	Financial specialist	Single	---

Research Limitations

The research was limited to the women who were users of OkCupid only. It exists in tens of other platforms that are popular and have millions of users both in Turkey and around the world such as Tinder, Hot or Not, and Happn. It is thought that there is a group of daters who have different socioeconomic profiles on different platforms. Notwithstanding, these considerations were outside the boundaries of the research. The second limitation is the credence of participants' statements. The reliability of research on sexuality practices and intimate relationships is a controversial topic in the literature of sociology (Lewontin, 1995, p.24-28). It is known that interviewees might not always speak with all sincerity on a private matter. Hence, very extreme statements of the interviewees were avoided for citation, but frequent themes from their statements were focused on. It is not possible that events do not repeat in the same way due to the fluid structure of the social world. However, there was an attempt to check the conformance of the data obtained in this study with some of the previous studies in the literature (Kauffman, 2002; Illouz, 2007; Bergström, 2016; Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019; Bergtröm, 2019). The third limitation is about the hundred daters who were suggested by the matching algorithm and whose online profile information was reviewed by the author. Although the matching algorithm selected those daters according to our criteria, we do not know the exact evaluation criteria of the algorithm. The interviewees also had reservations about these criteria: "It suggests two people. Both have very high scores but

are irrelevant people" (Interviewee [2], 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, and no child); "One answered ten questions, the other one answered 100 questions. How could they have equal scores?" (I11, 48 years old, financial specialist, single, no child)

The qualitative research method used in this study does not include any claim that the interviewed samples represent the whole population. However, we think that our data generation technique provides important information about the group of women who are urbanite, educated, have a career, and use dating sites in Turkey.

Profiles of Online Daters

Daters who take action on the dating platforms in Turkey do not represent a homogeneous group as far as socioeconomics is concerned. In 2020, 36.4%, 22.7%, and 40% of all platform users were of lower, moderate, and higher-income groups, respectively (Online Dating Turkey, 2021)[5]. With no quantitative data on which income group is concentrated in a certain platform, based on the interviewee statements in the research, male profiles can vary by platform: "When it first came out, I was on Tinder, and then, it became a total disaster. Everyone was there. Then I went over to OkCupid because the questions were in English, thinking that it was a bit more elite place and there might be more decent people. But half of the people on Tinder are there now." (I2, 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, and no child) "I wrote the profile information in English fully. This way, I think I could eliminate people with a lower education level" (I3, 39 years old, physician, single). The fact that there is a shift among new daters from higher to lower socioeconomic groups on the dating platforms does not only apply to Turkey. This is also the case on the world scale with the democratization of the Internet. For instance, while the proportion of dating platform users at the age group of 25-65 who were executives or intellectual professionals was two times higher in France in 2016, the percentages were equalized in 2018 (Institut français d'opinion publique [IFOP], 2018). However, the democratization of the user population causes groups with higher socioeconomic status to migrate to online platforms that are considered more elite compared to popular platforms so that they can distinguish themselves from others (Bergström, 2016, p.17).

It is seen that age-dependent change in the social circle influences the shaping of age distribution among online daters. Young agents at the university age are more likely to find partners from their schools and circle of

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[5]Globally, of the online dating platform users, 36% are from lower-income groups, 34% are from moderate-income groups, and 30% are from higher-income groups (Online Datings Worldwide, 2020)

friends that has yet to be consumed. Hence, the proportion of the age group (18-24), which is at the university age, is only 17.39% among the dating platform users in Turkey. On the other hand, during the years when the relationship with the school is over and the career begins, the social circle is replaced with people from the professional environment. Therefore, as the circle of friends shrinks and is used up and the peer group starts to live as couples or families, agents resort to looking more for partners online. For instance, the age group of 25-34 corresponds to 47.83% of all dating site users.[6] With older age, the rate of using these platforms decreases since more and more people become couples. Nevertheless, for the abovementioned reasons, the most efficient space where women living alone can find a partner as they get older seems to be the online dating platforms: "It was something we would make fun of 20 years ago, asking a friend 'Is there anyone you can hook me up with?' But at your 40s, everything is so cast in concrete that your life, your circle slows down and shrinks" (I2, 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, no child).

Agents Who Become Lonely
    With familial and friend bonds starting to dissolve in modern society, the fact that agents become lonely in high building complexes within the metropolitan environment and the possible discomforts of having a romantic and/or sexual relationship with someone from the workplace prompts them to search for a partner outside the traditional meeting environments:

> I do not have any other space to find myself a partner. I am at work all day on weekdays, there is the kid at home; I have nowhere to socialize with others. Most of my acquaintances are married, and I will not find anyone from the business circle; it gets tricky. That is why I ended up with this application (I1, 49 years old, finance, divorced, one child).

    With a flowing rhythm accelerating day by day, daily life causes a change in the templates of traditional social life. This social situation called disruption of everyday life ("*dislocation de la vie quotidienne*") shatters the central position of fixed structures in our lives such as home, workplace, family, and place of residence (Virilio, 2010). As the time pressure arising from "mobility" and "speed" weakens the quality of social relations, daters perform their presentations of self via social media and internet applications in place of the traditional social circle. Online space allows daters to expand

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[6]In 2020, the age of the dating platform users in Turkey were 26.9% for 35-44 and 87% for 45-54 (Online Dating Turkey, 2021). Moreover, 43% of all users are in the age range of 25-34 as the largest user group, followed by 35-44-year-old users by 25% (Online Dating Worldwide, 2020).

their social network and make their first contact with people with whom they have no chance to meet under normal circumstances.

> I have been working at the same place for six years. About 80% of them are 10-15 years younger than me. The rest of the team is comprised of women. You cannot find anyone from the workplace anyway, period. I see many people during the day, but I do not like the group I deal with much. When there is a signal from them, I shut myself down. I do not even let it. The flow of life is clear: home, work, traffic, etc. Where would I find him? Friends are the same, and I cannot bring myself to join daytrips yet. Therefore, I resort to online dates. (I2, 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, no child). I signed up for the platform to increase my chance of meeting someone, which has become very difficult for reasons such as heavy private sector workloads, and long hours in İstanbul traffic. It is a last-ditch effort (I8, 41 years old, mid-level executive, single).

In the face of such timewise and spatial narrowing in the everyday life, online dating platforms promise lonely daters to find the best possible partner candidate by using the sources at hand in the most efficient way, or at least, they create an illusion of it.

Suggestion of a Friend

Notably, the women in search of new partners stated that they signed up on the dating platforms with the suggestion and even insistence of their female friends with whom they had relatively strong bonds.

> I do not understand and am afraid of these things. One day, we were at home with the girls, and they signed me up. They convinced me that it would be good for having some fun, having a conversation, and overcoming my loneliness." (I4, 44 years old, executive assistant, divorced, no child). "After I had broken up with my boyfriend, I killed time by sitting at home, watching movies and shows for a long time. Then, you say, 'It would not be bad if there was someone in my life.' One day, we, four girls, were sitting together. One of them said, 'Why don't you sign up on Tinder?' Two of them were married, and one was single. I would not have expected that she had a Tinder account. By the way, I am very open to others. I mean I signed up as a social experiment (I2, 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, no child).

Intentions of Daters

Examining the profile information, it is possible to divide the expectations of the female OkCupid users regarding the nature of relationships they seek into five groups. The first group actively looks for a romantic partner who will meet their long-term emotional needs. The second group looks for friends only. The third (short term), fourth (hook-up), and fifth (open to non-monogamy) groups are in the search of relationship forms that are considered only specific to and legitimate for men in the patriarchal social order. In the choice of relationships varying from one-night stands, hook-ups, to monthly and short-term relationships, in which both parties do not see each other as couples (Eastwick et al., 2018, p.749), women are seemingly in search of a "reasonable" man who will not interfere with their lives but also meet their emotional and physical needs. Those who are open to non-monogamy represent a negligibly small group. However, those groups are not homogeneous. As found in the profile reviews, the majority of these users included more than one of the choices above in their search criteria with different combinations.

Although a relationship that involves long-term verbal or legal obligations is the objective for many, women get the impression that they could not find the best one before trying all products in the economy of abundance.

> I would like someone with whom I will be together forever, but I know it is hard to find someone like that, and I cannot find him without knowing people, trying, and giving them and myself a chance. Maybe I am fooling myself thinking like this; in fact, I do not want to get attached to anyone. I really do not know... (I10, 39 years old, translator, single). Playing around, and being with someone is okay, but I am always asking myself if he is the right one or worth messing about my life (I5, 41 years old, lawyer, divorced, no child).

As stated by Pascal (1999, p.44), "human," as a social being, "is unhappy only because they cannot stay in their room silently." Therefore, the modern human becoming lonely among crowds needs another one at some point even though they are happy in their closed world at home. "I am happy with being with myself, living with my cats at home, but you sometimes want it; being with someone, having a conversation, eating, nice words..." (I10, 39 years old, translator, single).

Normalization

Online daters faced suspicion from society when such platforms were introduced in the US for the first time. Offering an anonymous community,

the online profiles that they create at their pleasure like a marketed product, daters were stigmatized as unreliable, lying, and deviant people who go after one-night stands. Such perspective has yet to disappear (Doan, 2010, p.31). Nevertheless, access and participation in online dating platforms are rapidly increasing due to the abovementioned constraints of daily life. Consequently, the performance of searching for a partner for romantic and/or sexual relationship via those platforms is becoming ordinary and normal in the eyes of society. As emphasized by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1993) in his article *Defining Deviancy Down*, society reorganizes its norms in accordance with the needs of the time. As for the Turkish people, dating platforms have been gradually ceasing to be a space where only womanizers or those who refrain from their circles exist with their secret and anonymous identities. With the change in cultural norms, agents from all levels of careers, students, younger and older people, and women and men are in the search of a long-term relationship or a short-term pleasure via those socially acceptable platforms. Nevertheless, it seems that not all platform users are ready to share it with their families, colleagues, and friends openly. Accordingly, daters follow different strategies for the presentation of self.

For example, the interviewed women had different opinions on sharing their photos on their profiles despite the rapid increase in the number of platform users in Turkey.[7] As reported by an interviewee who returned to Turkey after having studied for 4 years in Canada, there is basically no difference between sharing a photo that discloses the identity on dating platforms and sharing photos on other social networks. The interviewee stated that "Sharing your photo here explicitly is as normal as sharing photos on Facebook or LinkedIn. Why would looking for a friend be something to be ashamed of? It is not disgraceful" (I6, 35 years old, PR specialist, single). One interviewee told us that she was looking only for a friend and another interviewee with no child considered it unacceptable to create a profile with a photo that shows no face. "There can be no excuse of not uploading a photo. I have a family, friends, and a business circle, too. It is nothing to be ashamed of to want to meet new people and talk to them." (I9, 38 years old, architect, single).

On the other hand, women with children act more cautiously when presenting their selves due to social pressures. Only then, can they play the roles suitable for the values registered by the society (Goffman, 1959, p.35).

> I am a mother, I do not want my colleagues or mothers of my
> child's friends to see me here. It is not normal for someone with
> a career to share their photo here anyway. Everyone suspects

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[7]It was found that women uploaded their photos which show their faces clearly in 93 out of 100 female profiles suggested by the algorithm on OkCupid.

men with no photo, and thinks that they are married, but I think
no photo is the right way, especially in a society like ours (I1,
49 years old, finance, divorced, one child).

Another interviewee who was divorced one and half a year ago and has
a two-year-old child said, "If I had not been a mother, I would have shared my
photo. It is already a big step for me to create a profile here" (I7, 36 years old,
textile engineer, one child). As understood from these statements, sacredness
attributed to motherhood and pressures of roles expected from a divorced
mother in Turkish society can limit women's elbowroom even online and
prevent them from putting their photos on their online profiles.

Creating Online Profile
Creating profile on dating platforms is the first step of impression
management for online daters. However, giving others an impression is not a
random act. As highlighted by Goffman, the first impression on people is
important within the flow of daily life (Goffman, 1959, p.11). Hence, daters
work on the first impression meticulously. Nonetheless, there is a significant
difference between online interactions and real-world or physical interactions.
In offline, physical interactions, daters have historically subjected each other
to a series of criteria that disclose their appearance including *hexis corporel*,
which refer to the attitudes they internalize unconsciously such as stance,
forms of carrying the body, bodily arrangements, eating style, use of voice,
and *hexis vestimentaire* such as hairstyle, makeup, wristwatches, and jewelry
which are associated with the body as the symbol of pleasures and status
(Bourdieu, 2000, p.291).

In online interactions, daters give the impression through profile
photos that they carefully prepare and information including age, gender,
occupation, having/not having any child or pet, educational levels, the prestige
of being an alumni, the neighborhood of residence, and they receive the
impressions sent out by others (Bergström, 2016). Playing the roles of giver
and receiver, daters communicate with each other almost silently by encoding
their own profile information and decoding the profile information they read
(Tong et al., 2020).

Hence, visual and textual presentations, as indicators through which
pleasures, tastes, and choices are expressed, define the limits of the
relationship between daters and others and become the tools with which they
will make them feel their symbolic domination. While presenting their own
selves via visual and textual instruments, daters also analyze and evaluate
visual and textual presentations of the self, provided by the suitors who sent
those messages, or the partner candidates suggested by the algorithm. During
this evaluation process, the dater assesses the partner candidate's presentation

of the self based on perceptions, tastes, pleasures, action schemas, and dispositions (*habitus*) that they internalized and incorporated (*incorporé*) from their families and social circles (Bourdieu, 1982). This assessment/evaluation process is also accompanied by an evaluation score that presents the harmony/similarity of the two people matched by the algorithm on a scale of 100 points like a direct rational measure.

Ultimately, in those impression management practices, online daters present their own selves in the most ideal way for performance of intimate relationships that they desire in the eyes of others, as in the "looking-glass self" metaphor of Cooley (1964, p.184), while evaluating others' presentations of self. Appearances and attitudes in the offline world are replaced mainly by photos in the online world.

> You feel so many things when looking at a photo for matching with a congenial one at last. For example, first of all, I check whether he is wearing denim. I do not like suits. It says he attaches too much importance to his job. I also see that in men. I try to make certain inferences." (I2, 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, no child). "You can actually get what kind of a man he is from the photo. Some are gentlemen, others are clowns. He makes a show with his brand watch, car, or muscles. Hilarious, miserable types... (I5, 41 years old, lawyer, divorced, no child).

Through the framed instances that are photos within the flow of life, daters usually create an individual résumé in trying to exhibit their cultural and economic capitals which distinguish them from the majority of society, whether consciously or unconsciously (Goffman, 1986). Hence, in many images, female daters send out the impression that they have the time and financial means to spend for esthetic experiences at places considered luxury and class compared to the average in Turkey. When doing so, they use standardized, similar photos in line with the cultural values, norms, and tastes that are desired and held valuable within the consumer society.

Despite not representing the population, 38 of the 100 online profiles reviewed in the study (some of them had multiple photos) had photos taken at popular destinations (seemingly Paris, Rome, Venice, Barcelona, etc.) other than the ones taken in Turkey. The profile owners tried to create an impression of themselves with 48 photos taken in a luxury hotel, restaurant or bar; 14 photos inside a car; 15 photos doing sports such as surfing, skiing, paragliding; and 24 photos taken alongside pets including cats and dogs. "I have not thought about why I put my photos taken abroad on my profile before. I think I wanted to show that I like going on trips and do not want to be all alone at

home during holidays." (I4, 44 years old, executive assistant, divorced, no child)

Even if faces are hidden on the profile, the photo is used by daters as the most important tool to exhibit the social status, tastes, and pleasures in relation to cultural capital.

> I did not make much effort when creating the profile or follow any strategy. My first rule is not to show my face because most of the men I work with are here. But it was about giving something about me. So that people can see where I eat, drink and go, they can have an idea and accompany me there. (I2, 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, no child).

In the presentation of self and the process of having an impression of others, the second most important tool is the personal information on the profile and the language skills. In the profiles reviewed, it is seen that online daters send out the impression that their socioeconomic statuses are better (products) than their competitors in the market through texts as with photos. Therefore, daters often write on their profiles that they indulge in physical and mental health performances, which have become consumption objects and signs of social and cultural status (e.g., yoga, Pilates, eating at good places), and cultural activities (oversees vacations, exploring new locations) (Stempel, 2018). In line with Gabriel de Tarde's principle (2018, p.240), "subordinates imitate superiors", as people with relatively poorer economic and cultural capital try to imitate tastes and pleasures of richer ones, those tastes and pleasures not only gain value and superiority but also renew themselves by becoming a standard on profiles. Furthermore, as fresh online daters find out about such standardized pleasures and tastes of the daters in their area of interaction and imitate their communication tactics and strategies for the presentation of the self, they gain the advantage of moving more easily within the area and dominate the area (Goffman, 2017).

> I was not much sure about what to write when creating my profile. I also checked what other women wrote. I think they influenced me a bit, I copied them." (laughs) (I7, 36 years old, textile engineer, divorced, one child). This standardized presentation of pleasures, tastes, and social statuses is also performed by male daters as much as female daters. "It is actually an interesting environment. As if everyone was a traveler, adventurer... (I5, 41 years old, lawyer, divorced, no child).

The text used by daters when creating a profile, their writing styles when communicating with others, their language skills, and mastery are the

important part of the presentation of self (Ellison et al., 2006). Whether a person uses the language with strong or weak codes during the communication (Bernstein, 1975) is a significant element that indicates their cultural and symbolic capital. Women that are educated and working hold this skill important when evaluating other presentations of self. "How he addresses others, whether he can write affixes properly is very important to me. (I1, 49, finance, divorced, one child). "He wrote, 'Slm' (short form of "selam", the Turkish word for 'hi') and stopped right there. My 10-year-old niece writes to me like that. He should be more respectful and attentive." (I2, 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, no child).

Being in the Catalog

After having signed up on the platform, daters prepare their visual/textual presentations of self prior to profile creation. They also answer a series of questions on the platform about their tastes, pleasures, and preferences. By this means, daters are included in the catalog like a product to be marketed. Next, the algorithm makes calculations for matching the prepared product with other ones. Accordingly, the algorithm starts to suggest candidates with the highest similarity to daters measured by a scale of 100 points from the catalog. In light of this information, daters evaluate the candidates suggested for them. The biggest advantage of this phase over the offline life is the comfort of not being in the same physical environment with the potential partner candidate. Indeed, in this space where there is no face-to-face interaction, no one feels the urge to be well-groomed, makeup, or wear an ironed, clean and nice outfit. Until the first meeting where the bodies will get together in the offline space, daters have the opportunity to prepare for their self-presentations on their phones or tablets and to hide and change all their defects by their own perception, and also write and present their stories freely and design the meeting time at their own convenience. In their profiles, parties use their images which they deem the most suitable for representations of femininity and masculinity according to another's perception. In a research that checked the accuracy of online presentations of 80 dating site users with the cross-check method, it was found that the men lied about their heights the most whereas the women lied about their weights the most. It was observed that both genders cheated in the area of presentation the most through techniques such as makeup, design, exposure, lighting, and framing to support their lies (Toma et al., 2008, p.1023–1036). There is also the possibility that those images were embellished with cheats such as Photoshop or were genuine but noncurrent due to having been taken five or ten years ago. Nevertheless, since it is still possible for parties to meet face-to-face, numerical cheats about age, height, weight, and visual cheats such as Photoshopped images are not much exaggerated (Ellison et al., 2011). "I do not cheat in my photos. Maybe

there could be a little Photoshop. Consider it makeup. But in a meeting... It was obvious that he used his photo from ten years ago. I said nothing. I drank my coffee, said I had something to do, and left." (I8, 41 years old, mall management firm, single).

However, one should not infer that daters would always act strategically and be imposters or tricksters to check others' perceptions in the online phase. On the contrary, daters may expose the online presentation of their emotions more sincerely than in the offline space. In this environment where the body has yet to be involved in the relationship and textual and iconographic communication is carried out, "the waist is a terrible thing to mind" as told by Walther (1996). Therefore, the expression of emotions can be even more powerful than an offline relationship. Furthermore, the dater who can build a simulative identity at their own pleasure can also tell a stranger about their sincere feelings with the advantage of remaining anonymous. "I do not complain about living alone, I am even happy this way. But you sometimes look for someone to talk to in proper sentences. I do not know; you want to tell a total stranger about your dreams." (I4, 44 years old, executive assistant, divorced, no child).

Daters can talk to a stranger contacted randomly with whom there is no established relation or organic relationship through business connections about secrets and express their emotions like "confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person" as stated by Simmel (2016, p.30) at the beginning of the 20th century. In this case, also called the "stranger-on-the-train phenomenon" (Rubin, 1975), the agent expresses their feelings to a stranger with whom they have met in a public space and talks about their "disturbing" thoughts without being indicted by potentially negative attitudes and judgments of the social circle (Bargh et al., 2002, p.34-36; Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019). In the digital age where strangers has moved from the public space to the online space, anonymous daters may have strong feelings towards sharing their inner worlds and disclosing their selves as they are (at least in the first phase) (Albright & Conran, 2003; Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019). Indeed, Walther (1996) argued that online interactions might go offline in private encounters and introduced the concept of "hyperpersonal communication". "Okay, I am known as a serious, even authoritarian, person at the workplace and in the circle of friends. But sometimes, wild thoughts occur to my mind, and I can only tell a total stranger about them." (I11, 48 years old, financial specialist, single, no child).

It is observed that women are more inclined to open themselves to a stranger and express their feelings sincerely in online encounters compared to men (Katelyn et al., 2002, p.18). Indeed, women are more likely to contact a stranger and express themselves relatively and independently from their social

gender roles in the online world. In Turkey, which took 130th place among 153 countries according to the 2020 gender equality report of the World Economic Forum, a woman is expected by the society to behave in line with certain norms and roles as expected from genders in their encounter with a stranger in the public space. During the online encounter, women are not under the explicit/implicit supervision or control of the society that represents dominant values and norms. Therefore they share power and control the space alongside men. They get the profile information of strangers to be contacted beforehand. If they do not feel safe or are subjected to verbal or visual abuse, they have the comfort of deleting the other party with just one click. "There are men who talk impertinently and rudely, saying, 'Let me come over. What are you wearing now? Why don't we have sex?' I say nothing. I block them immediately" (I5, 41 years old, lawyer, divorced, and no child). With such assurance, women can act more freely than in the offline space. Moreover, while men are more likely to send the first message online (Schöndienst & Dang Xuan, 2011; Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019), female characters, who do not wish to be stigmatized as "manhunters" in the public space especially due to social norms, can exhibit more sociable, assertive, and "masculine" attitudes. "I cannot go to a guy at a café or restaurant and say hi, but I do it on the internet. If his type attracts my attention, I can make the first attempt and say hi" (G11, 48 years old, financial specialist, single, no child). "I have been always a sociable person, not a shy one. I have once hooked up with a man at a bar. Still, I am more comfortable here, on [OkCupid]. There have been many cases where I took the first step." (I2, 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, no child).

Capitals: Key to Relationship

In the offline world, the sociocultural and socioeconomic environment of daters determines what kind of a person they would meet and marry to a great extent. The online world is seemingly more democratic. Daters who possess different cultural, economic, and symbolic capitals and will not (possibly) share the same spaces in the offline world can meet and perform their presentations of self online. However, dating platforms fail to eliminate homogamous tendencies. When doing a catalog search or evaluating the requests from suitors on the online dating platform, daters carry out a screening in line with attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions they internalized from their family and social circles in the offline world and gravitate towards a person whom they can find suitable for their own socioeconomic status. As stated by Bozon and Héran (1987, p.946), formation of couples is not a product of coincidence; "a lightning does not strike a random point" (Bozon & Rault, 2012; Bergström, 2016, 17).

There is a saying in the Anatolian culture, like 'birds of a feather fly together'. I look at his photos, likes, educational background, whether he speaks a foreign language, his favorite books, movies, and so on. If those are OK, I reply to his greeting. How he writes, the schools he attended, his job are important to me. If we strike a harmony on that part, the conversation goes on anyway. Sometimes I even meet people with common friends (I1, 49 years old, finance, one child).

One interviewee who comes from a family of a moderate-high socioeconomic status and lived alone in a well-off neighborhood of İstanbul says, "There is no ugly or handsome man, his character should be nice; otherwise, the words are hollow. Cultural and economic equivalence is as important as mental, physical harmony to me." (I3, 39 years old, physician, single)

The female interviewees in the attempted search of equivalence and harmony through profile information think that men are not as picky as them. "When I first created my profile, I must have received over a hundred messages and likes. I wondered if they got notifications for newcomers. Plebs with faces that would stop a clock... I am picky. Men are okay with everyone." (I4, 44 years old, executive assistant, divorced, and no child).

Transition to Offline Life

In the online world, as observed by Illouz, textual extraordinariness at the beginning of a conversation is as prominent as standardization in visual and textual presentation of self. "I never reply a mere 'hi'. An extraordinary introduction, a word indicating that he read my profile, jokes, kindness, education... All of these are important." (I5, 41 years old, lawyer, divorced, no child)

If the parties have left positive impressions on each other, online meetings can evolve into offline (face-to-face ones). This transition occurs in a long correspondence process. "I have no time to waste. I do not want to waste time messaging constantly. I want to proceed to a cup of coffee with him two-three conversations later." (I2, 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, no child)

However, one issue to be pointed out is that the first meeting does not mean an introduction because algorithms have matched the parties. They have seen each other's photos, read their profiles, and the parties have acquired important personal information about each other in short or long-term correspondences and/or on phone calls. Therefore, love at first sight is not the case where one idealizes the other using categorical profiles suitable for the desired person and emotions go into action (Allan, 2006, p.77). Instead, dater

compares the differences/similarities between other's online and offline presentation of self rationally in the first physical contact. While daters evaluate the partner candidates based on their photos or a text written by them in the online environment according to their own internalized attitudes and action schemas in the first place, they now assess their body movement within a public space, their physical possessions, attitudes, and behaviors. "The first thing I do is to look at his face, mimics, laughs, tone of voice... Next, his speech, attitude towards the waiter, etc. If I do not like it, I do not leave right away but keep it short." (I3, 39 years old, physician, single).

As reported by the interviewees, the relationship abruptly ends most of the time after the first meeting that usually occurs in a public cafe, bistro, or restaurant due to security concerns:

> When I first saw him, he was so different from his profile photo; I would not have recognized him if he did not introduce himself. He appeared to be older and shorter. He had no sex appeal. But I had nothing else to do. We had small talk for a while. Then came the parting. We have never called each other. (I6, 35 years old, PR specialist, single).
>
> There is mostly no second meeting. Sometimes for understandable reasons, but sometimes for a very weird feeling. For example, there was once a man whom I found very fun and entertaining. Then, we met at a bistro. We had a long talk. But, when I meet with someone in person, I cannot describe it, but I felt it was not meant to be. It was not, indeed. It died out with a few messaging. (I11, 48 years old, financial specialist, single, no child).

When the relationship is becoming an offline affair, middle-aged women who have a certain social status in Turkish society may find it difficult to tell their family or circle of close friends about the man whom they met on a dating site and started a relationship. In the face of social indictments about their social statuses and intentions (Goffman, 1971, p.214), the relationship has a hard time going beyond the boundaries of two people. In this case, women play roles that align with the expectations of the social circle. "You have an established circle of friends, a social circle for years. You cannot simply say, 'I found this guy on Tinder, or OkCupid.' It is better to tell little lies like, 'We met on a trip abroad or a festival.' It usually does not go on long enough to introduce him to them." (I1, 49 years old, finance, divorced, one child). The relationships which have been developed almost "illegitimately" outside the

supervision and control of friends can end rapidly when parties do not start to perform as couples in the public space.

> The habitat part does not evolve. It does not evolve into going on a vacation together. We eat, see movies together but exist in a certain habitat; we could not get our circles of friends into the relationship. That part does not evolve or find its way out. It did not turn into a relationship, no one took responsibility. It is neither a friend zone nor a lover zone. (I2, 43 years old, investment-real estate, divorced, and no child)

Conclusion

Online dating platforms make it easier for women to access an offline romantic and/or sexual relationship. However, even warm/sincere contacts that start online do or may not turn into a long-term relationship in the offline world most of the time. The most significant factor preventing the relationship from becoming a romantic affair is that daters perform on two sequential stages, which are online and offline.

Indeed, in encounters where there are no prior online introductions, elements including the mystery, fathomlessness of the other party, and physical attraction beyond reason crack the door open for a love affair. We then see "that special one" and idealize them in accordance with our social history and desires. We consider them superior to us with a mixture of what we do and do not know about them (Illouz, 2007, p.102-103). However, on the first stage of the sequential double-stage performances, where bodies do not meet and contact, parties deliver a rather consciously constructed presentation of self. During the rationally built presentation of the self, perceptions and dreams, fantasies are under the influence of hard-labored and freely manipulated photos and texts. Parties have all the important, true, or distorted information about each other. When daters show up on the second stage with such information, two problems await them: Firstly, the mystery which brought about the emotional attraction has now been substantially off the table. Secondly, a presentation of self that is managed by the *habitus* which has settled into body and mind and has be governing the dater unconsciously dominates the second stage where face-to-face contacts occur. Elements such as attitude, stance, and behavior that are shaped by the cultural and social capital, and unconsciously engraved into the body, can turn positive impressions of daters on each other on the first stage into negative ones and the heightened expectations into disappointments. Furthermore, as performance continues on the first and second stages, impression of limitless and better potential partners, created by the matching algorithm, reduces the

possibility that daters like each other and make long-term investments in each other.

Consequently, dating platforms increase the number of contacts from the quantitative perspective, but it generally fails to provide daters with the expected emotional satisfaction. In most of the contacts that moved from the online stage to the offline one, the first meeting turns out to be the last meeting.

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