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**LOVE ON THE LINE: The social dynamics involved with  
people meeting other people using New Zealand online  
dating sites**

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment

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by

**Maureen Margaret Marsh**

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## **Abstract**

The intention of this thesis is to explore whether New Zealand trends in online dating parallel those identified by overseas studies, or whether patterns are emerging that are unique to New Zealand society. The Internet Windows Messenger instant messenger service (MSN) was used to interview 32 subjects about their experiences with online dating, covering areas such as motivation for using online dating; types of relationships sought; barriers to online dating; online rapport and offline chemistry; online infidelity; and managing 'difference'. Drawing on these responses, this thesis presents findings pertaining to a diverse group of New Zealanders' attitudes towards and uses of online dating. Some of the key findings show that online rapport does not guarantee offline chemistry; that there are gender differences in attitudes towards appearance, age, and receiving sexually explicit material online; and that sexual experimentation and infidelity are being facilitated through online dating.

The issue of 'difference' as it relates to online dating has been largely neglected by overseas researchers, and for this reason was extensively included in this research. Key findings relating to 'difference' show that there is a clear split between those interviewees whose 'difference' impacted positively on their online dating experience (those with sexual 'difference' falling into this category), and those whose 'difference' impacted negatively (those with physical or mental 'difference'). In addition, those interviewees with a sexual 'difference' have been able to connect with other like-minded people through online dating, contributing to the 'normalization' of previously considered deviant behaviours.

Based on the research presented in this thesis, it appears that New Zealand online dating activities are consistent with overseas trends, although there are indications that some behaviour may be more specific to New Zealand society, such as gender differences in relation to bisexuality, and covert same-sex encounters involving men who are either

married or who state in their profiles that they are 'straight' or heterosexual.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Online dating looks set to establish itself as a significant part of the New Zealand social landscape, as it has in other parts of the world. Therefore it is important to understand the nature of computer-mediated communication and the social impact it might have on relationship formation within New Zealand society. The present thesis explores the social dynamics involved with people meeting other people using New Zealand online dating sites. Levine (2000) argues that computer-mediated communication provides people with the opportunity to feel understood and accepted, especially as people are experiencing increased isolation within society but still require contact and connection with others. Hollander considers the increase of personal advertisements, both in the newspaper and online, to be a reflection of “high divorce rates of past decades and the social isolation of modern, mobile urban life” (2004, p. 75). Using computers to communicate socially and form relationships is a growing phenomenon that potentially impacts on society in both positive and negative ways.

Online dating has become a world-wide phenomenon that crosses geographic and cultural boundaries and attracts extensive research interest overseas (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel & Fox, 2002; Anderson, 2005; Tommasi, 2004). There is a need to understand this phenomenon from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, as forming relationships online can have long reaching and profound effects on society. Levine considers that the insights potentially offered by “sociologists are important because this is a new cultural phenomena, a new way of understanding community in our ever changing, increasingly isolated, high technology world” (2000, p. 573). However, there is very little New Zealand literature or research available on how the use of the Internet has affected the behaviours and practices of contemporary social interaction locally; nor is much known about how people meet using New Zealand online dating sites, nor what their expectations of such meetings are.

Reflecting on overseas trends and acknowledging the lack of research in New Zealand into online dating behaviour, it is useful to ask whether New Zealand trends are consistent with those identified in existing overseas research. Some overseas trends include increased self-marketing evident within profiles, reflecting the competitive environment of online dating (Hollander, 2004); high levels of self-disclosure in online communication (Joinson, 2001); rapport being rapidly established online (Anderson, 2005); participants portraying a false identity as a way of 'acting out' online, e.g. portraying themselves as a woman when they are really a man (Suler, 2004); greater control online compared to face-to-face interaction (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel & Fox, 2002); significant differences between how men and women portray themselves in their profiles (Tommasi, 2004); and some degree of evidence that men are seeking sex, while women are seeking intimacy and commitment (McCabe, 2005).

The increase in the use of technology to facilitate social communication has attracted considerable criticism from non-users, some of whom view this practice as engendering a subculture of socially inept individuals unable to function in the 'real' world (Wildermuth, 2004). In particular, forming relationships online has attracted strong criticism from family, friends, media and academics alike, with suggestions that online love is illusionary and that "participants are lonely, shallow, impersonal, and self-absorbed" (p. 74). Despite such criticisms, online dating in New Zealand is a phenomenon that looks set to continue, with people using computer technology to access and form relationships from an increasing number of potential suitors (Frean, 2006).

This research looks closely at 32 individuals' personal experiences of using New Zealand online dating sites to form relationships. It specifically seeks to identify any anomalies in the experiences of my New Zealand participants, as compared with those discussed in overseas studies. This research also focuses on how people with 'difference' negotiate their

particular 'difference' on the online dating sites, and how their 'difference' impacts on their experience of online dating. For the purpose of this research, 'difference' includes any form of physical, mental or emotional impairment, belonging to an ethnic minority or having a sexual 'difference' (such as identifying with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, being involved in threesomes, group sex, bdsm<sup>1</sup> or having a fetish).

The data from the 32 interviews was mainly collected using Windows Messenger instant messenger service (MSN), with the addition of some email correspondence and one face-to-face interview. Using MSN to undertake in-depth interviews in a social research project is a new concept, and as such I have endeavoured to describe the process in detail in the Methodology chapter in order to assist other social researchers who may be contemplating using this medium in the future.

The following chapter introduces the reader to overseas research and literature investigating computer-mediated communication and how relationships are formed online. These studies come from a variety of disciplines including communications, psychology and sociology, and their findings have been organised thematically. Following the Literature Review is the Theoretical Framework chapter, which outlines poststructuralist, postmodernist and sociological theories on cyberspace, impression management, communication and stigmatization. A discussion of Berger's debunking, unrespectability, relativizing, and cosmopolitan motifs is also included to provide insight into my research approach. The Methodology chapter follows, and explains in detail the processes and challenges involved in undertaking in-depth interviews using MSN. It also includes a discussion of the epistemological assumptions that informed this research, issues around defining 'difference', and the various ethical

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<sup>1</sup> Bdsm is defined as Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism as experienced in a sexual relationship.

issues that pertained to this project. The Findings chapter follows, and draws extensively on the personal experiences of 32 individuals who have utilised online dating to form relationships. This chapter has been organized thematically, and looks at what brought the interviewees to online dating and the experiences they have had; the fluidity of sexual orientations; sexual experimentation and infidelity being facilitated through the online dating sites; and how people with 'difference' negotiate their 'difference' when online dating. In addition, the interviewees were asked to reflect on what they had learnt about themselves, others and society through their online dating experiences. A discussion of these findings highlighting parallels with overseas research as well as patterns of online dating behaviour that may be more specific to New Zealand society follows in the Discussion and Conclusions chapter.

## Chapter Two: Literature review

Researchers from a variety of disciplines have been drawn to study online interpersonal relationships partially because relationships established online are not yet considered socially normative (Anderson, 2005). Cyber-psychologist John Suler tells us that “studying what is revealed or hidden about people within the wide range of online environments can become a laboratory for understanding the subtle dynamics of the self” (2004a, p. 7). To date, the majority of research into online relationships tends to centre on concepts drawn from communication theory and psychological perspectives such as personality and social psychology, with a comparative lack of sociological research and analysis, which this thesis attempts to redress (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). Although this thesis is particularly centred on a sociological perspective, literature from both communications and psychology will also be discussed. As the Internet is a dynamic environment where changes occur rapidly, the research into this area has also become dynamic in that new insights and theories are being developed at an increasing rate and disseminated to academia and the general public alike through various online and print journal articles and books.

This literature review has been organised thematically, under the following headings: anonymity and self-disclosure; presentation of ‘self’ online; establishing a connection online; when online romance becomes offline reality; issues of ‘difference’<sup>2</sup>; and online infidelity. It is acknowledged that the issue of ‘difference’ is a relatively neglected area within existing scholarship and research. However, this thesis does attempt to address

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this research, I define ‘difference’ in a sociological perspective as any physical, mental, or emotional impairment, ethnic or sexual difference that may impact adversely on a person’s online dating experience.

this neglect by exploring how people with ‘difference’ negotiate their particular ‘difference’ online, and how they respond to the reactions of others, particularly when attempting to establish a romantic relationship online. Additional discussion of ‘difference’ and its role in relationship formation will be included in the Findings chapter.

### ***Anonymity and self-disclosure***

It has been pointed out by Capulet (1998)<sup>3</sup> in her self-published guidebook to online dating, *Putting Your Heart Online*, that anonymity is an important aspect of online dating as it provides a sense of safety to participants by concealing their identity. Based on her own personal experience and those of a large number of interviewees<sup>4</sup>, she explains that anonymity is maintained throughout online dating sites by the use of ‘user’ nicknames, with any emails going to the ‘user’ name at the dating site and then forwarded electronically to the user’s own email address (Capulet, 1998). McCown, Fischer, Page and Homant’s (2001) pilot study support Capulet’s findings. Their study was based on a self-completion questionnaire examining the personality characteristics of 30 undergraduate students from Detroit, USA, who were regular internet chat room participants, and found that both male and female users equally considered anonymity important to enable them to meet people comfortably online. In addition, Ben-Ze’ev (2004) suggests anonymity can reduce potential risk factors or constraints from social norms.

An online self-reporting questionnaire involving 487 psychology undergraduate students and 497 general public participants was the method undertaken for Weiser’s (2001) study looking at attitudes towards

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Capulet is better known in technical circles as Nancy Blachman of [Variable Symbols Inc.](#) She is a technical writer and is the author of several books on Mathematical software.

<sup>4</sup> She does not mention how many interviewees specifically, or where they were sourced.

Internet use, social integration and psychological well-being. He found that online anonymity was credited with encouraging people to explore a variety of identities and roles more than would be otherwise feasible as people can choose to hide their true identity online, and have more than one online profile active. It was further found that anonymity enabled people who felt marginalised to gain a sense of solidarity by connecting with other marginalised people online (Weiser, 2001).

However, other scholars have pointed to the less positive aspects of anonymity. Based on a meta-analysis of an unspecified number of online forums in the United Kingdom that displayed discussions and postings of personal online dating experiences, Ben-Ze'ev (2004) approaches anonymity on the Internet not as a means of protection, but as facilitating violations of social 'norms' due to the 'invisibility' that anonymity affords online participants, resulting in a lack of accountability via social sanctions. Suler (2004b) argues that the lack of accountability is caused by online anonymity whereby the participant's online behaviour is separated from their offline identity, resulting in dissociation<sup>5</sup>. In this way, Suler argues the "online self becomes a compartmentalized self", separated from a person's offline reality (p. 322).

Other consequences of anonymity have also been identified. Rosenberg (2004) examines how the Internet has allowed people to interact with each other without the limitations of the physical world. Although it is possible to manufacture a false identity in the physical world, he suggests that when these interactions are undertaken online, they can be anonymous and "open-ended in that gender can be concealed or switched, appearance enhanced, experiences manufactured and altered to suit circumstances" (p. 590). In effect, a person can represent themselves in multiple ways,

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<sup>5</sup> Dissociation is defined as the treatment of somebody or something as distinct or unconnected, or the fact of being regarded in this way (Chaplin, 1985).

revealing only the information that may serve their present needs, albeit false information that might be difficult to rectify if the relationship continues. Rosenberg (2004) contends that this process appears very calculated, but questions whether it is substantially different from when people meet face-to-face for the first time in that the process of getting to know a person is not a concrete one, but a fragmentary one of gradual discovery.

There is a general perception that due to the anonymity of online dating, misrepresentation and deception online is a major problem (Gwinnett, 1998). However, based on the findings of 36 in-depth interviews exploring online self-presentation strategies, Ellison, Heino and Gibbs argue that this perception is both “simplistic and inaccurate” (2006, p. 15). They argue that most online dating participants want to meet potential dating partners face-to-face at some stage, and because of this, misrepresentation online is considered counter-productive and is therefore not as prevalent as once thought. In addition, because of the intimate nature of the relationships they seek, online dating participants tend to be truthful in how they represent themselves online; hoping that this will be reciprocated by potential dates (Ellison *et al.* 2006). In an analysis of personal advertisements in *The New York Review of Books*, Hollander (2004) suggests that positive personal attributes are likely to be overstated and negative traits understated or not mentioned at all, as the participant’s aim is to attract the positive attention of others. Ellison, *et al.* (2006) found this to be true also in the online arena, in order for participants to be able to attract “desirable partners” (p. 15). Sometimes there is missing information in the online profiles or online communication, which creates a situation whereby responding participants substitute idealised information rather than what is factually true. In a phenomenological<sup>6</sup> enquiry into

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<sup>6</sup> Phenomenology is the study of conscious human experience in everyday life (Johnson, 2000, p. 226).

cyberspace utilising reception theory<sup>7</sup>, Barbatsis, Fegan and Hansen (1999) suggest that missing information in online communication acts as the “articulated negative volume of empty space [which] stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections” (p. 4). This can lead to misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the ‘self’ that is uncovered when meeting face-to-face.

### ***Presentation of ‘self’***

First impressions matter; however, it is the order of information a person chooses to share that is most important (Vaughan & Hogg, 2002). An important indicator of how a person may be positively evaluated, Vaughan and Hogg (2002) argue, is when a person’s most positive rather than negative traits are presented first, in what they describe as the primacy effect<sup>8</sup>. Social researchers have written about how the ‘self’<sup>9</sup> is a constructed entity which can be modified, rehearsed, and performed in association with other people (Vaughan & Hogg, 2002; Goffman, 1990; Butler, 1990<sup>10</sup>). Suler argues that “the idea of a true self is too ambiguous, arbitrary, and rudimentary to serve as a useful concept” (2004a, p. 5). Rather than just having one ‘true self’, he suggests that individuals are made up of constellations of selves that are expressed differently in different environments, with no one particular ‘self’ more true than the other (Suler, 2004a). He explains that whether a person is shy offline and outgoing online does not mean that one presentation is truer than the other, but that both are appropriate for the chosen environment (Suler, 2004b). Vaughan and Hogg state that “there are two general classes of

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<sup>7</sup> Reception theory involves the reader's reception of a literary text (books, film and TV) based on their individual cultural background and life experiences (Wikipedia, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Primacy effect is defined as where the “traits presented first disproportionately influenced the final impression” (Vaughan & Hogg, 2002, p. 33).

<sup>9</sup> The sociological definition of ‘self’ is a “relatively stable set of perceptions of who we are in relation to ourselves, to others, and to social systems” (Johnson, 2000, p. 277).

<sup>10</sup> This is described in her theory of gender performativity.

motives for self-presentation: strategic and expressive” (2002, p. 101). Strategic self-presentation is where a person alters their behaviours in order to create the desired impression, whereas expressive self-presentation is not dependent on situational or contextual settings (Vaughan and Hogg, 2002). Rosenberg (2004) is of the opinion that the “discovery of others is a process, not an event, as is the discovery of the self”, although he acknowledges that the Internet may give an “illusion that we are in control of this process both for ourselves and for others” (p. 619).

The written word is the main communication medium on the Internet, with the addition of some ‘emoticons’, webcam and photographic images. Capulet stresses that as there is no “body language, inflection, pauses, subtle tones of voice, or eye contact” on the Internet, words as text become the “most important commodity” through which to present oneself (1998, p. 96). Although the conclusions drawn above are reasonable, based on the research conducted, there is an assumption that the written word is the *most* important tool in forming a romantic connection online. However, although words may be important in the initial stages of making online contact, words alone are not enough when establishing whether there will be offline rapport, as my own findings show.

In an Australian study involving 60 in-depth telephone interviews with subscribers to a large online dating site, Whitty and Carr found that although “cyberspace might provide an opportunity to de-emphasise physical attractiveness in order to allow people to self-disclose more”, rather than the physical body being absent in cyberspace, it is still very much present in the form of profile photos and vivid descriptions (Whitty & Carr, 2006, p. 130). Hardy (2002) has researched embodiment and identity issues involved with online dating, describing online dating as “a space in which individuals seek to close the gap between the embodied and disembodied self, the public and the private individual, and anonymity and intimacy” (p. 579). Some researchers have suggested that males are

more likely than females to use physical attractiveness to judge whether a person is a potential dating partner (Vaughan and Hogg, 2002; Donn & Sherman, 2002). In an earlier experiment to test whether physical attractiveness influenced dating preferences involving 80 female undergraduate students from a Canadian university, Hadjistropoulos and Myles (1994) found that contrary to popular belief, “physical attractiveness was the single most potent predictor of dating preferences” when the female subjects were choosing who to date (p. 306). Similar to the above researchers, Donn and Sherman (2002), in their survey involving 91 graduates from an American university looking at attitudes towards online appearance, found that both male and female respondents valued physical attractiveness in relationships and were more likely to approach someone who had an online photo. This would suggest that Ben-Ze’ev’s ‘inside out’ versus ‘outside in’ theory is problematic, as physical appearance does seem to be an important consideration when choosing a date.

Using psychosocial theories to research online intimate attraction, Levine concludes that, “self-presentation is more fluid and under one’s control online” (2000, p. 567). She discusses Buss’s earlier research into the evolution of human intra-sexual competition in which he summarised ten acts that assist in attracting an opposite sex partner, some of which Levine considers can also be effective in an online environment. These include: “sense of humour, sympathetic to his/her troubles, good manners, effort to spend time together, and offering help” (p. 567). When presenting oneself in a face-to-face situation, Levine points out that personal hygiene, physical appearance and fashion sense are important. These things are also important when exchanging photographs with an online partner, she contends, as people look for a “photo that represents him or herself the way he or she wants to be seen by the other” (p. 569). However, she warns that these photos usually show the person, “at their peak – younger, thinner, with more hair, in better shape, etc”, which can lead to misrepresentation and subsequent disappointment when coming face-to-face with their online partner (p. 569).

## ***Establishing a connection online***

In a discussion of the literature comparing face-to-face and computer-mediated romantic relationships, Merkle and Richardson (2000) found that although they exhibited a similar social exchange pattern of seeking positive rewards, this is where any similarity between the two ended. According to Merkle and Richardson (2000), the numerous differences include a reduced reliance on physical proximity and physical attractiveness and an increased presence of anonymity and self-disclosure. There has been a general concern as to how anyone can form a deep and meaningful connection with another person online without the subtle visual cues afforded by a face-to-face meeting. This concern has focused on how people tend to create a fantasy around their online date that can get shattered when they finally meet face-to-face (Capulet, 1998). Although this is a risk, Gwinnell (1998) suggests that the building up of a fantasy of togetherness actually strengthens the online relationship, and that it is an important part of establishing a connection with another person. Ben-Ze'ev suggests that imagination fills the "informational gap" as only incomplete information is available about a person online, due to the lack of visual cues (2004, p. 8). He warns against relying solely on these underlying assumptions without sorting fact from fiction (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). He further suggests that romantic fantasies tend to feel more real in cyberspace; a legacy, he argues, derived from treating television characters as real.

Gwinnell suggests that it is the successful communication of "thoughts, opinions and descriptions" online that is important, and it is this ability that can lead to intense emotional connections where love can develop more quickly than traditional face-to-face approaches (1998, p. 96). In addition, Gwinnell points out that as the brain is considered to be the "primary sexual organ", there is no reason why passion cannot be part of an online relationship; although, she warns, without a physical presence this may occur through "transference, or the projection of daydreams and erotic fantasies onto the other person" (p. 97). Ben-Ze'ev's (2004) meta-analysis

found that it is the profound sharing of intimate information that leads to online love, especially as this facilitates getting to know someone from the 'inside out' rather than from the 'outside in', thereby increasing the quality of the connection.

Tidwell and Walther collaborated in a research project looking at how people "exchange personal information in initial online interactions, focussing on the affects of communication channels on self-disclosure, question-asking, and uncertainty reduction" (2002, p. 317). Based on this American based study involving 158 undergraduate subjects, they found that the higher level of disclosure initiated by direct questions reduced uncertainty and compensated for the lack of visual cues present in a face-to-face situation. In addition they contend that, "the increased intimacy of these micro-level behaviours may lead to perceptions of extraordinarily affectionate relations, or hyper-personal states" (p. 339). A Singaporean based study looking at the development of relational intimacy in computer mediated communication (CMC) involving 48 undergraduate students found support for Walther's hyper-personal communication model<sup>11</sup> (Han, Chuan, Trevor, & Detenber, 2004). They found that intimacy increased at a "faster rate in CMC than in face-to-face (FTF) interactions", with increasing online contact leading to greater intimacy (p. 9).

Although feeling safe online is an important aspect of anonymity, American psychiatrist Gwinnett states that it has also led to greater self-disclosure of personal information which, in turn, can contribute to the development of "intense intimacy" in a relatively short time (1998, p. xviii). This tendency has been emphasised by Banks, who likened online

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<sup>11</sup> Hyper-personal communication model posits that "CMC users sometimes experience intimacy, affection, and interpersonal assessments of their partners that exceed those occurring in parallel FTF activities or alternative CMC contexts" (Walther cited in Whitty & Carr, 2006, p. 18).

encounters to the story of Romeo and Juliet where one shares “words of love and shared secrets [that] can ignite passions in a matter of days” (1996, p. 84). However, just as words can ignite passion, words can also cause hurt and misunderstanding. Both Gwinnell (1998) and Ben-Ze’ev (2004) suggest that through the absence of visual and non-verbal social cues online such as distaste or shock, people may feel sexually freer and therefore reveal secrets and intimate information of a sexual nature that they would normally feel uncomfortable sharing in a face-to-face situation. However, emoticons<sup>12</sup> are commonly used in computer mediated communication to express a wide range of emotions, so this would suggest a weakness in Gwinnell and Ben-Ze’ev’s findings. As Gwinnell (1998) points out, however, the darker side of opening up freely online is that a false sense of emotional intimacy can be created; one that may be based on nothing more solid than what the person writes and wished-for fantasies, hopes and dreams. Conversely, Donn and Sherman (2002) argue, based on a survey of 235 undergraduate and 76 Ph.D. students from an American university, that this increased freedom of sexually intimate expression is a healthy outlet, in that it allows for explicit revelations of fundamental thoughts and feelings that might not be expressed offline. Although online sexual expression may be healthy when participants in a particular online space are open to such expression, if they indicate that they are not open to that type of expression, but the person continues to communicate in that way, at that point the ongoing expression is no longer healthy.

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<sup>12</sup> Emoticons are varieties of lexical characters read side-ways (head tilted to the left) that represent in graphical form the emotions that the writer wishes to express. For example ;) represents a joking or ‘cheeky’ disposition, :-) represents a happy disposition, while :( indicates a sad disposition, and >:-O represents an angry disposition.

When using computer-mediated communication, there are unwritten rules and norms involved that help to protect individuals' sense of self, although there are always people willing to ignore these (Hardey, 2002). Ben-Ze'ev considers written communication as both a sincere and safe means for establishing a romantic connection and considers that the ability to type quickly and write well is "equivalent to having great legs or a tight butt in the real world" (2004, p.166). However, he suggests it is more than just the written word that encourages romance online. He emphasises that utilising imagination can be seductive as it is not constrained by our physicality or social context. Availability of a wide range of potential dating partners is an important component of online romantic love, making it easier to meet potential romantic partners than traditional venues (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). Ben-Ze'ev (2004) also suggests that it is the dynamic nature of the Internet that requires intimacy to be formed quickly as people can find another potential partner so easily and quickly, and it is this instability that can intensify online emotions. It is this dynamic nature of the Internet and associated uncertainty that he suggests contributes to participants wanting to stabilise the relationship by moving it offline, thereby actualising the relationship and making it more real. In order for a relationship to flourish, he suggests it is necessary for it to incorporate a range of activities not solely confined to the Internet. Levine concurs with Ben-Ze'ev and concludes that "online relationships can be a practice ground for learning and exploring sexuality and relationships and then taking the knowledge and applying it offline" (2000, p. 572).

In her 2005 doctoral thesis, Underwood used two anonymous online surveys<sup>13</sup> to explore the demographics, personality and attachment styles of people involved in Internet affairs. From this Australian-based study, Underwood found that emotional rather than factual self-disclosures led to

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<sup>13</sup> The first online survey attracting 243 replies but only 75 usable responses, and the second attracting 467 replies with 133 usable responses.

greater intimacy, especially if the recipient of the disclosure appeared understanding, accepting and caring of the person disclosing. She concludes that it is through this process of 'uncovering the self' that intimacy online is established (Underwood, 2005).

### ***When online romance becomes offline reality***

Based on the contents of hundreds of interviews, workshops, and her own personal experiences with online dating, Capulet (1998) questions whether people can fall in love without meeting face-to-face. She argues that they may instead just be attracted to a particular writing style, or the way a person expresses themselves, a photograph or the image they have built up of them. According to Capulet (1998), until they move the relationship offline, they will not really know the 'whole' person to see whether there is physical attraction for love to be able to grow. Walther (1996) suggests the lack of a physical presence in online dating assists in the establishment of intimacy, as this allows people to be uninhibited and more themselves. Underwood (2005) agrees with the need to evaluate a potential partner's physical attractiveness before embarking on a serious relationship as it is such a subjective evaluation, and suggests that this acts as a 'gating' mechanism to determine whether the relationship could progress further or not. Further strengthening Underwood's conclusion, Whitty and Carr found that 65 per cent of their research sample met their date face-to-face within one week of initially chatting online (Whitty & Carr, 2006). The reasons given for this were to prevent wasting time getting to know each other online, to ascertain whether physical chemistry was present, and wanting to "get to know the 'real' person behind the profile as quickly as possible" (p. 127). A typical progression for an online relationship involves initial attraction; messaging via the website; email exchanges; telephone conversations; and then meeting face-to-face (Underwood, 2005; Donn & Sherman, 2002). Capulet (1998) points out that the timing for this progression is determined by how comfortable each participant feels towards the other and is usually agreed mutually, although she suggests migrating to telephone contact after only two or

three emails to avoid unnecessary disappointment. One of the findings from Underwood's (2005) online questionnaire showed that once the online relationship migrates successfully to offline, online communication between the couple often becomes redundant. Ben-Ze'ev (2004) considers this a significant disadvantage, as the online communication forms such an integral part of how the couple fell in love in the first place and could result in less satisfactory communication between them.

The importance of non-verbal cues in assisting people to judge the compatibility of a potential partner has been widely researched. Gwinnell (1998) suggests that a relationship conducted exclusively via a computer screen is no substitute for a face-to-face assessment in determining whether a particular person may be a suitable partner or not. In moving an online relationship offline, Gwinnell (1998) postulates that anxiety and fear are often present about whether the first offline meeting will be successful or whether previously hidden deceptions or misrepresentations will be exposed. Although fears of inadequacy, rejection, and unsuitability may also be present, Gwinnell argues that most initial offline meetings are "mutually pleasurable, since the steady stream of online messages has pre-programmed them to like each other" (p. 70). Ben-Ze'ev (2004) agrees with Gwinnell and suggests that this 'softens' the initial offline meeting as the previous online communication creates a more positive impression of the other person and reduces the importance of external physical features. Hardey (2002) researched online and offline identities and relationship formation within the Internet environment, by conducting an analysis of four major UK online dating sites and an email based questionnaire attracting 437 responses. His research findings suggest that the potential risks and embarrassment involved with a first time face-to-face meeting are reduced through the process of 'getting-to-know' each other through email first (Hardey, 2002). Gwinnell (1998), however, points out that unless the parties are sexually attracted to one another, any further romance is unlikely; therefore a face-to-face meeting can either strengthen or obliterate an online relationship, depending on whether there is sexual chemistry present or not. Hardey agrees with Gwinnell and states that "no

matter how open and honest individuals have been, meeting each other in the flesh was the crucial test for previously virtual relationships” (2002, p. 580).

As well as sexual chemistry, other compatibility issues become apparent once a couple spends more time with each other offline. Gwinnell (1998) asks the question of what happens to a relationship when the writing stops and the hard realities of living together start, especially if the principal tool of communication between the couple – the Internet – has been replaced by having to share a bathroom, chequebook and house. Banks (1996) also shows a concern that just because there may be a ‘meeting of the minds’ online, it does not mean that it will translate offline, as someone who writes great email may not inevitably be a great person. Gwinnell warns that a person who may be “verbal, articulate and funny on the Internet may be anxious and shy in person”, and even though a couple may feel totally in tune with each other online, once the relationship has shifted offline, issues of conflict can and do arise that require careful negotiation (1998, p. 196). Additionally, Gwinnell (1998) purports that where a couple who met originally offline have the advantage of being able to practice their face-to-face communication, progressing from superficial to more intimate levels of conversation, a couple who originally met online must move from intimacy, developed through the sharing of personal information online, to the realities of daily life. Gwinnell also advises that couples who have met online should not rush into matrimony<sup>14</sup>, but incorporate a ‘dating’ phase into their courtship so that “mutual interests are established and day-to-day communication skills are developed” (p. 108). However, having said that, Gwinnell (1998) asserts that if there is adequate physical attraction between couples who already

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<sup>14</sup> Various assumptions are made here – firstly, this is hetero-normative, since gay couples can not marry in most countries; it also assumes people are looking for a long-term relationship, when my research clearly shows that is not the case for many.

share an established online intimacy, a strong romantic relationship is definitely possible.

In her case history examination of two couples who had met online, Baker (2000) sought to understand why some couples were successful in maintaining their relationship through the transition from online to offline, while others were not. She found that physical appearance<sup>15</sup> and having values in common were important indicators of whether a relationship will successfully make the transition or not, together with commitment, resources and what a person was willing to risk in order for the relationship to thrive offline. Another factor involved with whether a successful migration from online to offline will be possible is the influence of opinions from others. Wildermuth (2004) researched stigmatizing discourse and how this may impact on relationships initiated online. Her web-based questionnaire was completed by 159 relationship partners and revealed that online partners had a higher level of stigma awareness in correlation with the “more severe, disapproving, and explicit messages from offline family and friends” they received (p. 73). In addition, the higher the level of stigma experienced by the relationship partners, the higher level of dissatisfaction experienced in the online relationship (Wildermuth, 2004).

### ***Issues of ‘difference’***

‘Difference’ in the context of this research includes any physical, mental or emotional impairment, belonging to an ethnic minority, having a sexual ‘difference’ such as having a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, or having a fetish or being involved in bdsm, threesomes or group sex – in fact, any ‘difference’ that might impact adversely on a person’s experience of online dating. When researching in the area of ‘difference’, there is a

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<sup>15</sup> Based on a subjective evaluation being made by individuals in terms of how attractive they find particular others.

risk of adding to the stigmatization often already experienced by these people by emphasising 'otherness'; however, it is through the perspective of the interviewee's who have a 'difference' that a more realistic look at society can take place, as will be expanded on when discussing Berger's unrespectability motif in the Theoretical Framework chapter of this thesis.

There appears to be little academic scholarship specifically addressing 'difference' and how 'difference' is negotiated online. However, feminist theorist Irigaray (2000) contends that society needs to rethink love and family formation, as traditional forms of relationship are being challenged by increasing issues of 'difference'. She points out that although in the past, class issues were the main challenge individuals in a relationship had to overcome, now there are ethnic, religious, and many other 'differences' requiring negotiation. She believes these new 'differences' are "concrete proof that we have now entered a new era in History for which the already existing institutions are no longer adequate" (p. 5).

Well-known for his analyses of human interaction in face-to-face situations, Goffman states that "interactional 'rules' facilitate the building of 'trust' between participants and the supporting and saving of 'face'" (cited in Hardey, 2002, p. 577). These rules are translated onto the Internet environment and explained by Hardy as encompassing "authenticity, reciprocal revelation of personal details, the building of trust, turn taking, and the dialogical establishment of intimacy" (p. 577). Hardey (2002) mentions how sensitivity to these rules and rituals can assist individuals with a 'difference'. An example he provides is a man who is in a wheelchair but who chose to omit this information from his online dating profile, only revealing it once he had established an online relationship and trust with someone, explaining that:

The advantage of the [online dating] system is it allows me to decide when to reveal this aspect of my life which I don't want potential girlfriends to see as the thing that defines me (John cited in Hardey, p. 577).

In this way, text-based communication allows an individual to be free of constraints (in this case, a physical impairment), in order to have the opportunity to communicate and establish an online relationship without having to negotiate their particular 'difference' in the initial stages (Hardey, 2002).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) can also provide important social support, especially to those who may have limited access to face-to-face social interaction due to a particular 'difference'. Coleman, Paternite & Sherman (1999) state that people who are "shy<sup>16</sup>, insecure, or even disfigured in some manner may find refuge in the lack of physical social cues [in CMC] and may be acutely aware of being viewed as an individual with something to say" (p. 54). Scharlott and Christ (1995), in their survey of 87 subscribers to a major American online dating site, found that shy people used online dating as a way of overcoming "inhibitions that may prevent them from initiating relationships in face-to-face settings" (p. 199). In their sample, more men (56%) than women (35%) stated they had an issue with high levels of shyness, and the anonymity afforded online dating subscribers was credited with enabling shy users to interact with others without the fear of being rejected. They also suggest that online dating sites such as the one they researched would be useful for those people with a physical impairment who find it difficult "to meet prospective dates in face-to-face situations" (p. 203). Research into social communication that is facilitated via Internet chat rooms undertaken by Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel and Fox (2002) further strengthened Scharlott and Christ's findings. Based on 40 questionnaire responses from chat room participants in Israel, Amichai-Hamburger *et al.* (2002) conclude that those individuals who had an introverted or neurotic personality

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<sup>16</sup> Shyness is defined as being "tense and inhibited in the presence of others" (Scharlott & Christ, 1995, p. 196).

benefited from being able to express themselves online and connect with other like-minded people. However, Boies, Cooper and Osborne (2004) argue that, based on their survey of the online sexual activities of 760 American university students, their results “do not support the hypothesis that online social affiliations around sexual activities serve as a significant source of social support” for marginalised people (p. 217). Rather, they found that “those relying on the Internet and the affiliations it provides appear at risk of decreased social integration” (p. 207).

Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan and McCabe (2005), conducted an exploratory study into identity re-creation in online dating profiles involving an ethnographic in-depth interview of eleven people, four of whom were gay or lesbian. They discovered that their informants found anonymity an important aspect of online dating, especially if they were not yet “out of the closet offline” (p. 742). This allowed them to explore their status as gay men or lesbians and in effect they could “try out being out, as it were, and to explore this aspect of their identity that they currently did not possess offline” (p. 742). In a case study researching image management involving two female subscribers to an Internet chat site that specialises in bdsm, Palandri and Green (2000) found that one of the participants felt ashamed of her online persona and still wished to maintain her more conservative public image. They conclude that through actively being involved with online chat rooms dedicated to the bdsm lifestyle, “female chatters may still be experimenting with their layered selves, and emerging to embrace aspect of themselves that have been repressed and denied as socially acceptable” (pp. 640-641).

## ***Sexual identity, sex<sup>17</sup> and infidelity***

I have included an overview of the Kinsey Reports (1948, 1953) and the Hite Report (1976) to provide an important historical framework for understanding my own findings, some of which, particularly in the area of sexual identity and sexual practices, surprised me. Although the research into the sexual behaviour of men undertaken by Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin (1948), followed by Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin and Gebhard's (1953)<sup>18</sup> research into the sexual behaviour of women, could be considered 'dated', I personally consider some of their findings still relevant, as reflected in my own findings.

Twelve thousand men and eight thousand women took part in the research undertaken by Kinsey *et al.*, providing insights into their sexual orientations and behaviours. There are two areas I wish to address specifically from their research - sexual identity and extra-marital intercourse. Kinsey *et al.*'s findings on sexual identity went against the commonly-held beliefs of the time, causing considerable controversy (Geddes, 1954). Among their findings, they found that rather than people being strictly divided into categories of *either* heterosexual, *or* bisexual, *or* homosexual, there was more fluidity of sexual identity, with gradations rather than set points (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 1953). They proposed a 'scale' that would better reflect what was happening in society, whereby a person may fluctuate anywhere across a scale of 0 to 6, depending on their life's circumstances and stages of life (Kinsey *et al.*, 1948, 1953). Although an earlier Terman-Miles Attitude-Interest Analysis Test scale measuring masculinity and femininity was developed by Terman and Miles (1936), it was not until Kinsey *et al.*'s research that sexuality was measured using the following scale (Kinsey *et al.* 1948).

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<sup>17</sup> For the purpose of this research, the term sex is used to represent sexual behaviour rather than biological sex as in male/female.

<sup>18</sup> These two reports are commonly referred to collectively as the 'Kinsey Reports'.

**Table 1 The Kinsey Scale**

Rating	Description
0	Exclusively heterosexual
1	Predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual
2	Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual
3	Equally heterosexual and homosexual
4	Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual
5	Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual
6	Exclusively homosexual

(Sourced from Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinsey\\_scale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinsey_scale))

This scale was developed by Kinsey *et al.* (1948), based on their findings that 11.6% of white males aged between 20-35 years rated 3; 7% of single white females aged 20-35 rated 3; 2-6% of females aged 20-35 rated 5; and 1-3% of unmarried females aged 20-35 rated 6 (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 1953). They conclude that a significant portion of the population at some time combine both “homosexual and heterosexual experience and/or psychic responses” (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, p. 639). Using a three point scale (homosexual/bisexual/heterosexual) is therefore considered inadequate by Kinsey and his colleagues as it does not reflect the realities of human sexual experience, with their seven point scale better reflecting the many “gradations that actually exist” (p. 656). They suggest that the “capacity of an individual to respond erotically to any sort of stimulus, whether it is

provided by another person of the same or of the opposite sex, is basic in the species” (p. 660).

Kinsey *et al.*'s work has not gone unnoticed by critics however, with the main criticisms revolving around Kinsey's zoologist background being reflected in his tendency to systematically compare human sexual behaviour with mammalian sexual behaviour (Barber, 1954). In addition the Kinsey Reports have been criticised for omitting the impact of social controls, together with influences and conditioning, upon sexual behaviour (Barber, 1954; Trilling, 1954). Trilling's (1954) main complaint is that as the initial report (*Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*) was written as a preliminary work, but then published and made available to the general public and academics alike, it made conclusive statements which he felt were inappropriate in a scientific 'work in progress'. He is also critical that the research was restricted to North America; therefore generalising to the general population could be problematic (Trilling, 1954).

Hite's nationwide study of female sexuality<sup>19</sup>, involving 1844 women, found supporting data for Kinsey *et al.*'s hypothesis that sexual “preferences can change during a lifetime, or can change several times; what is called 'gender identity' is not so cut and dried” (1976, p. 262). Hite was surprised at the number of women who stated in their questionnaire response that they “might be interested in having sexual relations with another woman, or at least were curious” (p. 262). In addition, she argues that there are no standard measures of sexual performance, therefore people should be “free to explore and discover [their] own sexuality, to learn or unlearn anything [they] want, and to make physical relations with other people, of either sex, anything [they] like” (p. 527). Hite advocates that people will

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<sup>19</sup> The Hite Report was much criticised for methodological deficiencies such as the data not being a probability sample, therefore difficult to generalise to the general population and subject to bias.

always choose to relate through intercourse as it is a “pleasurable form of physical contact”, however she suggests that coitus will become de-emphasised as women learn they have the power to choose what type of physical interaction they have with men (p. 377). She also suggests that “heterosexual sexual intercourse is too narrow a definition to remain the only definition of sex for most people most of the time” (p. 377).

Technological advances since the release of the Kinsey and Hite Reports have enabled sex to become a non-contact interactive experience mediated via a computer. As a contemporary feminist theorist, Blair argues that the “Internet offers a unique place for the exercise of power by women because the system is based on discourse” (1998, p. 205). She suggests that through mastery of online discourse, women will be able to control their sexual lives, with net sex<sup>20</sup> providing empowerment for “both men and women because it allows sex to be freed from the physical and dwell in the intellect” (p. 208). Blair (1989) does warn, however, that if a woman chooses to reveal her identity online, she risks leaving herself vulnerable to unwanted sexual advances and persecution from men. However, she considers net sex physically safe with “the only virus that can be spread [being] a computer virus” and with the risk of pregnancy being nil (p. 216). Blair puts forward the view that net sex is ideal because there are “no commitments, no attachments, no pressure” and the computer can be turned off at any time if one does not choose to continue (p. 216). However, there is a very small risk of a breach of internet security whereby ones anonymity can be compromised, hence it may not be as safe as Blair suggests.

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<sup>20</sup> Net sex is an alternative term for cybersex. Cybersex is commonly understood as “synchronous communication in cyberspace where two or more individuals engage in discourses about sexual fantasies, typically accompanied by masturbation” (Whitty & Carr, 2006, p. 21).

Since the 1990s as increasing numbers of people began turning to the Internet for sexual encounters, psychologists noted a change in “patterns of sexual behaviour, sexual health and education, and social communication” (Cooper, McLoughlin and Campbell, 2000, p. 521). Sexuality was particularly impacted as cybersex became more popular, with Cooper *et al.* (2000) noting that in a one month period, 15 percent of people online contacted one of the top five American adult online dating websites. They suggest that the reason for the increased traffic on these websites is because of the accessibility, affordability and anonymity of the Internet. Although net sex can be exciting, Cooper *et al.* warn that it can also be destructive, with “people acting on or compulsively overindulging in an accelerated, eroticized pseudo-intimacy” (p. 522). With an estimated 6-8 percent of Americans classed as sex addicts, Cooper *et al.* (2000) are concerned that for those individuals who are at risk of sexual compulsivity, the Internet will exacerbate this problem by providing another place for them to act out. The impact on ‘real life’ relationships is also a concern for Cooper *et al.* (2000) due to the risk of social and sexual needs being met on the Internet instead of offline, which can result in online infidelity. They suggest that “cybersex use can be a symptom of deeper problems with closeness, dependency, and abandonment and can cause difficulty in couple relationships” (p. 523).

In her role as a sex therapist, Levine has researched the area of cybersex and concludes that “many people turn to the Internet to flirt and find erotic satisfaction because the desire has slipped from their daily interactions and they have a need to rejuvenate it” (2000, p. 572). However, with the allure of anonymity and easy accessibility of the Internet, many people who are married or in committed long term relationships are also turning to the Internet for online intimate relationships that often migrate to offline sexual encounters. In their paper on digital dating and virtual relating, Merkle and Richardson (2000) differentiate between face-to-face relationship infidelity and online infidelity by stressing that online infidelity usually involves considerable geographic distance, making it harder for

sexual intercourse to physically take place between the online couple and thereby limiting the potential for sexual betrayal. They propose that because of the greater disclosure that occurs online, *emotional* infidelity may negatively impact on the primary relationship, which suggests that “infidelity within cyberspace is better accounted by emotional betrayal than sexual involvement” (p. 190). They call for a redefinition of infidelity to better reflect the complexities involved with online infidelity and how that impacts on offline relationships, suggesting that empirical research is needed to “define the boundaries of betrayal, and whether infidelity is as destructive to such relationships as it is in non-computer mediated relating” (p. 190).

Online affairs appear to have become an increasing cause of marriage dissolution, being cited in one-third of divorce litigations in the USA, based on 2002 figures (Mileham, 2004). In a randomised telephone survey of 1013 Australians taking part in the Swinburne National Science and Technology Monitor Survey, it was shown that of the 78 percent who had used the Internet, 13 percent had formed online social relationships with “equal proportions of single and partnered individuals admitting they had experienced online romance, indicating that many cyberdaters may be cybercheaters” (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006, p. 1). In an American ethnographic investigation into online infidelity, Mileham (2004) conducted in-depth interviews with 86 married chat room participants who were involved in a cyber-affair<sup>21</sup> to ascertain the dynamics involved with online infidelity, motivations to cyber-cheat, whether they considered their cyber-affair as infidelity, and what dynamics they were experiencing within their marriages. The findings showed three major constructs: anonymous sexual interaction; behavioural rationalization; and effortless avoidance

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<sup>21</sup> “A cyber-affair is defined as any chat room contact that the individual feels must be kept hidden from the spouse due to its sexual and/or emotional nature” (Mileham, 2004, p. 12).

(Mileham, 2004). Mileham states that “anonymity carries with it an inherent element of ‘freedom’ to express oneself while remaining unexposed and even to experiment with facets of the self that ordinarily remain hidden” (p. 16). New experiences can be accessed online that may not have happened without access to the Internet, providing opportunities to stray or experiment sexually (using text, visual images or meeting face-to-face) with unpredictable outcomes for both online and offline relationships (Mileham, 2004). Mileham reports that 83 percent of the research participants rationalized their online behaviour as: “since there is no physical contact, online-only liaisons are not a form of infidelity” (p. 20). The online sexual exchange was considered by these research participants as just “another form of fantasy entertainment within a virtual playground” (p. 20). Interestingly, Mileham makes the point that “if these contacts are simply ‘harmless fun’, then it is difficult to explain the need to hide them” (p. 20). Avoidance of issues in a relationship is a common problem; however it becomes easier to avoid problems in a primary relationship when one has access to stimulating company within chat rooms. Mileham states that most cyber-sex participants rationalise their behaviour as ‘caused’ by a lack of physical sexual interaction in their marriages, which he considers is “intimately tied to other deeper emotional issues” (p. 26). When asked to describe their marital sexual encounters, the research participants generally described them as “lacking excitement, eroticism, and sexual fulfilment” (p. 26). Mileham concludes that the “challenges lie with the human element’s choice when operating technology-based means of communication” (p. 29).

For her doctoral thesis, Underwood (2005) undertook two empirical investigations into individuals involved in online affairs. Although based in Australia, her online surveys attracted participants from America, the United Kingdom, Australia and several other countries, with 75 people participating in the first survey on demographics, frequency and method of contact, and relationship fulfilment. The second survey attracted 133 participants, and looked at personality and attachment styles. The findings of the first study revealed that 82 percent of women versus 47 percent of

men communicated every day with their online partners (Underwood, 2005). Although the difference is small, more respondents had experienced previous online affairs (53%) than previous offline affairs (48%), however, the mean number of previous online affairs were six, compared to three for previous offline affairs (Underwood, 2005). Two-thirds of the participants had migrated from online contact to alternative means of communication, including telephone (68%), letter writing (37%), and meeting face-to-face (34%). They were also more likely to share secrets, personal problems and discuss sexual preferences with their online contact compared to their primary relationship (Underwood, 2005).

There were stark gender differences in what men and women found satisfying in their online affair. The male respondents found the following satisfying:

The sex; an intelligent and sexually satisfying relationship; the sexual experimentation is satisfying; purely a sexual meeting for mutual satisfaction and release; erotic release; companionship and sexual conversation; sex with no strings; it relieves me because my partner is frigid; great sex; our sexual encounters are satisfying (Underwood, 2005, p. 46).

Conversely, the female respondents found the following satisfying in their online affairs:

we share so much and have the joy of talking for hours about everything and we care about each other; I have searched for years for a man who shares my dreams and interests, and I have not found him until now; my heart is uplifted every time we talk; we connect better than our (marital) partners, and we are understanding of one another; I can talk about anything; it is an honest and true friendship; we share and communicate ideas and the ups and downs of daily life; someone cares and shows love (p. 46).

As illustrated in the above excerpts, male respondents emphasised the importance of the sexual side of their online affair while the female

respondents stressed the emotional support they received as being the most satisfying aspect of their online affair (Underwood, 2005). Nevertheless, most participants stated that their “primary partnership was more important to them than their online relationship”, despite gaining greater satisfaction from the later (p. 55). Underwood hypothesises that this may be best understood in terms of Investment Theory where they are “conscious of the things that they valued in their primary relationship, such as their children, possessions, shared friendships and financial security” (p. 56).

The second survey on personality and attachment styles of people involved in online affairs showed that 57 percent of the participants had been corresponding for approximately one year with their online partner, with most of their primary partners unaware of the online relationship (Underwood, 2005). There were high levels of depression reported, particularly from the female respondents, and “slightly higher than mid-range levels of sexual compulsivity” from both men and women (p. 115). The male respondents reported higher levels of dominance, which suggests a “tendency towards self-centred impulses, and low self esteem” (p. 116). Underwood concludes that the personality and attachment style of people involved with online affairs is to some extent different from those involved with offline affairs, and speculates that “a percentage of respondents comprise individuals who would not engage in face-to-face infidelity” (p. 119).

In a 2003 survey of 1117 participants asking about attitudes towards online and offline affairs, Whitty and Carr found that “there are separate components of infidelity that need to be considered, including sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity, and pornography” (2006, p. 94). She found that it was not necessarily the “amount of physical contact or the idea that one’s partner is masturbating, but rather that their partner *desires* another and is seeking out a sexual encounter with another individual other than themselves” (p. 95). Whitty and Carr conclude, therefore, that cybersex should be considered ‘real sex’ as it can have the “same impact on an

offline relationship as one's partner having sexual intercourse with someone else" (p. 96).

As illustrated in this chapter, a number of researchers have investigated how relationships might be formed online, with some focussing on the mechanics involved, while others focused on the consequences of being able to anonymously access potential dates and what that might mean for established relationships. However, there is a lack of any research into online dating in New Zealand online dating activities to assess if they parallel those identified by overseas studies, or whether patterns are emerging that are unique to New Zealand society, and it is with this in mind that this thesis was conceived. Considering New Zealand's Internet penetration rate is 74.9 per cent of the population<sup>22</sup>, one could conjecture that a significant proportion of the population are using the Internet for dating purposes.

Although I was interested in how New Zealanders approached online dating, I was particularly interested in the types of relationship people were seeking and what kind of experiences and responses they received. In addition, as there was very little research in the area of 'difference' and how that is negotiated online, I was concerned to find out how New Zealanders with 'difference' approached their online dating experience and how they dealt with any negative responses they receive. As the majority of research into online dating has been limited to self-completion questionnaires distributed to university students, this thesis is an opportunity to provide rich data gathered from in-depth interviews with subscribers to New Zealand online dating sites.

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<sup>22</sup> Based on 2005 figures and accessed from Internet World Stats: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats6.htm#oceania>

## Chapter Three: Theoretical framework

Rather than being limited by the realities of their everyday lives, people who use computer mediated communication (CMC) are free to create whatever 'reality' they wish within the confines of the online environment. The poststructuralist perspective is well suited to the study of CMC, as the typed word is used to construct a particular social reality that may not be reflected in the offline world. Poststructuralists and postmodernists share some similarities, in that they consider there are different and profuse meanings with no coalescent culture. However, poststructuralists focus on language and how meanings are contextualised, while postmodernists focus on how reality is actually constructed (Swingewood, 2000; Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). In addition, postmodernists embrace the concepts of "difference, ambiguity and heterogeneity" as they consider there is no one 'truth' or "universal standards and criteria to make absolute judgements" (Swingewood, 2000, p. 223). Thus, a number of postmodernist and poststructuralist social theories will be explored in this thesis. Further, although Goffman's work more accurately bridges modernism and postmodernism, a particular focus on his theories of impression management and stigmatisation, together with Berger's debunking, unrespectability, relativizing and cosmopolitan motifs, will form the basis of the theoretical framework.

Poststructuralists such as Turkle look at how cyberspace provides an arena for "participants to 'play' with identity – in particular the use of computers to [construct] 'multiple selves'" (Bell, 2001, p. 74). Turkle is a pioneer in researching the area of human interaction with computer technology, and states that "computers embody post-modern theory and brings it down to earth" by bringing computers into the homes of everyone instead of only academics (Turkle, 1995, p. 18). She is of the opinion that rather than the computer being considered predominantly as a calculator, it has now been developed to include simulations, with some social theorists predicting that in the near future there will be an interaction with

computers using simulated people on monitors to help manage both private and professional lives. Turkle concludes that society is now entering a post-modern era of simulation. From the initial understanding that computers could broaden a person's skill set, Turkle argues that people are now realising that they can also extend their "physical presence...via real-time video links and shared virtual conference rooms", with some people utilising this capability for shared sexual encounters, commonly referred to as cybersex (1995, p. 20). In addition, Turkle believes that computers not only perform tasks *for* individuals, but also have a direct effect *upon* individuals in that they can positively or negatively affect relationships and the way people think about themselves and others. Through accessing the Internet via computers, Turkle argues that individuals are able to "experiment with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize post-modern life" (p. 180).

Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum - a "copy of a copy with no original" - resonates with the suggestion that an illusionary world can be produced on the Internet, thereby creating a "computer-generated simulacrum" (Bell, 2001, p. 76). Turkle (1995) argues that environments like Disneyland and shopping malls also involve aspects of simulation, with television being a major contributor to introducing simulation into households, and computers and the Internet acting as an extension of this post-modern process. She further argues that Internet experiences aid in developing post-modern models of psychological well-being that are both diverse and flexible, recognising the "constructed nature of reality, self and others" (p. 263).

Although Foucault's work did not focus specifically on computers, his theories on discipline, power discourse, surveillance and the Panopticon<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The Panopticon was the central watchtower whereby individuals in a prison did not know whether they were being observed or not and therefore would become self-surveillant (Bell, 2001).

all offer insights into the workings of cyberspace and computer technology (Bell, 2001). Turkle states that Foucault's work challenges the idea that CMC engenders freedom as in his view it is the way each person internalises self-surveillance, rather than the power of modern society's domination over the population that enables control to be achieved (Turkle, 1995). This self-surveillance, Turkle suggests, is facilitated through discourse rather than force, and is effective in controlling modern society via the computer. Deleuze suggests that computers have "ushered in 'control societies' in place of the previous 'disciplinary societies' described by Foucault" (Bell, 2001, p. 80). However, within the online dating sites, disciplinary action can and does take place if a person contravenes the site's rules, usually resulting in the cancellation of their membership and a ban from that particular site. The image of the Panopticon (first proposed by Bentham) where prisoners learn to view themselves through the eyes of the prison guard, appeared in the online community with the introduction of censorship, either by site administrators or "intelligent agents capable of surveillance", resulting in a level of self-surveillance in online behaviour (Turkle, 1995, p. 248). With specific reference to the various online dating sites, self-surveillance has been facilitated through having a site administrator available to deal with any complaints and whose job it is to monitor the site and message-board discussions for any infractions of the site's rules, including abusive behaviour, inappropriate language or harassment. In addition, the threat of being 'outed' on the message-boards for inappropriate behaviour can act as a deterrent.

Online dating is a useful edition to the social landscape where people can meet other people to form a variety of relationships, increasing the opportunities for people to meet a potential partner, and can be understood from a symbolic interactionist view where societies are made up of people interacting with each other (Johnson, 2000). Blumer considers language to be the mechanism for both creating and representing symbolic objects within society, by producing specific meanings requiring negotiation between individuals in order to gain

understanding of those objects (Swingewood, 2000). The online dating community is part of a greater Internet society where the use of written language is the primary communication tool, with participants taking part in message-board discussions with the wider online dating community and in one-on-one online interactions with a variety of dating prospects. Social environments are considered by Goffman as being “any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place”, and he sees any such environment as suitable for studying impression management by utilising a dramaturgical approach<sup>24</sup> (1959, p. 231).

Goffman is acknowledged as a major influence on symbolic interactionism with his study of “everyday life and the mechanisms people use to navigate through their interactions with others” (Johnson, 2000, p. 369). He describes how people have a ‘front’,<sup>25</sup> which is what they project to their audience, and for the purposes of this research ‘front’ could include the online dating profile that is viewed initially by online dating participants. Goffman suggests that this ‘front’ is often an idealised version (defined in terms of a pure form that is not inevitably apparent) of the self, and cites Cooley’s view that “if we never tried to seem a little better than we are, how could we improve or ‘train ourselves from the outside inward’?” (cited in Goffman, 1959, p. 44). Goffman (1959) also suggests that accentuation and suppression of various aspects of a person can take place in order to maintain a specific impression. He points out that accentuation tends to take place in the ‘front’ region, while suppression tends to take place in the

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<sup>24</sup> Goffman’s dramaturgical approach utilizes “theatrical metaphor of stage, actors, and audience to observe and analyze the intricacies of social interaction” (Johnson, 2000, p. 95).

<sup>25</sup> Front is defined by Goffman as the “part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” and includes the setting, appearance and manner (1959, p. 32).

'back' region or what he terms the 'backstage'<sup>26</sup>. For the purposes of this research, 'backstage' could include the online dating participant's offline life or how they are in person, rather than just how they present themselves through their online dating profile. Difficulties arise in maintaining a particular impression when an audience comes across a 'backstage' performance that does not relate to the 'front' initially encountered through the online profile. In addition, there is the potential for tension when it comes time to merge the 'front' with the 'backstage'. For example, when a person chooses to meet someone with whom they have maintained a particular online 'front', they may have difficulty maintaining that 'front' in a face-to-face environment.

In many social situations, communication often entails a considerable degree of 'putting out feelers' that "involves guarded disclosures and hinted demands" in order to ascertain whether it is safe to proceed with a more intimate communication that does not require maintaining a more impersonal social distance (Goffman, 1959, p. 188). Because of the absence of visual social cues, this is particularly true in CMC, especially in the area of online dating where innuendos and ambiguous comments are often made to a potential romantic partner to ascertain whether it is safe to move the relationship from an impersonal dialogue to a more personal one. Double-talk<sup>27</sup> is important in this kind of exchange, as "neither participant need place [themselves] in the hands of the other", but may continue to maintain a sense of independence and control (p. 191). Goffman argues that the "performer who is to be dramaturgically prudent will have to adapt [their] performance to the information conditions under which it must be staged" (p. 216). He continues to explain that the more

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<sup>26</sup> Backstage is defined by Goffman as "a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted" (1959, p. 114).

<sup>27</sup> Double-talk is defined by Goffman as "the kind of innuendo that can be conveyed by both sides and carried on for a sustained period of time" (1959, p. 191).

information that is available to an audience about a performer, the likelihood of them being influenced by their interaction is lessened. On the other hand, where they have no prior information about the performer, the information obtained during the interaction could be considered vital. The profiles displayed on online dating sites, therefore, could play an important part in providing in-depth information about participants for those viewing them, enabling a smoother transition from online communication to offline interaction. Despite this, every interaction runs the risk of embarrassment or humiliation, with Goffman hypothesising that “life may not be much of a gamble, but interaction is” (p. 236).

Goffman’s research into the area of stigma<sup>28</sup> has particular relevance to this research as people who have an issue of ‘difference’ or stigma often find they need to address negative responses and stigmatization from others. Most contemporary societies are sufficiently diversified that almost any stigma will be prominent in some contexts but not in others, and the internet is no exception to this. However, it is when people without stigma (whom Goffman labelled as ‘*normals*’), and those with stigma enter into a sustained conversation that the “causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides” (Goffman, 1963, p. 13). Stigmatised people may feel unsure of how those without stigma may react to them, which can lead to considerable anxiety in social situations for the stigmatised. Goffman (1963) concedes that those without stigma may *also* suffer anxiety due to not knowing how to respond without causing unintended offence, which sometimes results in them treating the stigmatised person as a ‘non-person’ by ignoring them.

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<sup>28</sup> Stigma refers to an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” and can include physical deformities, character flaws, and tribal stigma such as ethnicity and religion and is sometimes also called “a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3).

Goffman noticed that some stigmatised people protected themselves by forming identity beliefs of their own which include believing they are “full-fledged normal human being[s], and that we [the ‘normals’] are the ones who are not quite human” (1963, p. 6). Nevertheless, he points out that there are two sets of ‘sympathetic others’ who are prepared to share the feeling that the stigmatised are human and ‘essentially’ normal. The first are other stigmatised people, and the second are normal persons who have a special bond, understanding and sympathy with stigmatised people, and these people usually find themselves accepted by the stigmatised group. However, Goffman points out that even if a stigmatised person manages to negotiate their way through their school years with some illusions of ‘normalcy’ intact, “the onset of dating or job-getting will often introduce the moment of truth” (p. 33).

Controlling how and when information about their particular stigma is revealed to others when it is not visually apparent becomes a concern for people. Goffman states that they are faced with decisions involving “to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (1963, p. 42). The process of revealing one’s stigma can involve what Goffman (1963) calls ‘disclosure etiquette’, where the individual admits their stigma in a matter of fact way that prevents those present, who are presumed to be above such concerns, from trapping themselves into showing that they are not. Sometimes the stigmatised person may choose not to reveal their particular stigma but try to pass as ‘normal’. This learning to pass as ‘normal’ Goffman argues, represents one phase in the socialisation process of a stigmatised individual, but this can result in being discredited once the stigma is discovered, thereby impacting negatively on their social as well as individual identities (p. 75). On the other hand, he points out that eventually the stigmatised person may decide they are above passing as ‘normal’ and instead just accept themselves and their stigma without feeling the need to hide it.

Berger approaches his research from a humanistic perspective whereby society is studied not just as an object that can be quantified, but as a human embodied space that requires a deeper qualitative understanding. In order to be able to 'see through', or 'look behind' specific social phenomena when undertaking social research, Berger suggests adopting a set of 'motifs' such as the debunking, unrespectability, relativizing and cosmopolitan motifs.

The *debunking* motif involves looking at "a situation from the vantage point of competing systems of interpretation...unmasking the pretensions and the propaganda by which [people] cloak their actions with each other" (Berger, 1963, p. 51). Rather than choosing to not disturb the status quo, the sociologist may need to challenge commonly held assumptions as a result of their research. Berger points to Weber's work that focuses on the "unintended, unforeseen consequences of human actions in society" as an example of the debunking myth (p. 51).

The *unrespectability* motif has come out of Berger's observation of American culture where there is a distinct split between 'respectable' and 'unrespectable' society. Although traditionally, American-based sociology has focused on the 'respectable' mainstream aspects of American life, Berger noted an "undercurrent in American sociology, relating it to that 'other America' of dirty language and disenchanting attitudes...the worlds of hipsters, homosexuals, hoboes and other 'marginal men' [*sic*] where people are excluded, or exclude themselves, from the world of middle-class propriety" (1963, p. 57). Berger suggests the work of Veblen, and particularly his Theory of the Leisure Class, as a good example of the unrespectability motif in action, where Veblen's "irreverent curiosity and clear-sightedness" provides a clearer view of what society is really like, rather than viewing society purely through the "goggles of respectability" (pp. 58-59). According to Berger, being detached from the "taken-for-granted postures" of society should be the goal of sociologists, and in particular being prepared for the possibility of unrespectability, warning

that “total respectability of thought will invariably mean the death of sociology” (p. 61).

The *relativizing* motif is based on Berger’s observation that through increased opportunities to experience other cultures and ways of living through travel and the advent of television, there is “awareness that one’s own culture, including its basic values, is relative in space and time” (1963, p. 63). In addition, Berger suggests that “social mobility, that is, the movement from one social stratum to another, augments this relativizing effect” (p. 63). He sums up the relativizing motif by stating that “it is impossible to exist with full awareness in the modern world without realizing that moral, political and philosophical commitments are relative, that, in Pascal’s words, what is truth on one side of the Pyrenees is error on the other” (p. 64). Berger considers the relativizing motif vital for sociologists as “the awareness that not only identities but ideas are relative to specific social locations” needs to be acknowledged when undertaking sociological research (p. 66).

The *cosmopolitan* motif was developed by Berger in recognition that “going back to very ancient times, it was in cities that there developed an openness to the world, to other ways of thinking and acting” (1963, p. 66). It is this openness rather than a “narrow parochialism” that Berger urges sociologists to embrace, being “inwardly open to the measureless richness of human possibilities, eager for new horizons and new worlds of human meaning” (p. 67). Although the cosmopolitan motif is not considered by Berger to be as vital as the other three motifs, he still considers it useful to enhance them. The four motifs have helped guide my own research approach, particularly in the area of ‘difference’, and I argue they are as valid to sociology today as they were when Berger first proposed them.

Like Goffman, Berger was a proponent of role theory whereby people undertake to perform a variety of roles depending on society’s expectations, changing situations or their own inclinations. Considered from a sociological perspective, Berger argues that “the self is no longer a

solid, given entity that moves from one situation to another, it is rather a process, continuously created and re-created in each social situation that one enters, held together by the slender thread of memory” (1963, p. 124). Despite social and internal pressure to maintain consistent roles, they can be segregated at times when one role could conflict with another, thereby facilitating “attention only on that particular identity that they require at the moment” (p. 126). Berger suggests this segregation of consciousness occurs particularly where “socially disapproved sexual acts or morally questionable acts of any kind” transpire (p. 126). An example given by Berger of consciously segregating one’s identity is worth quoting in full:

The man who engages in, say, homosexual masochism has a carefully constructed identity set aside for just these occasions. When any given occasion is over, he checks that identity again at the gate, so to speak, and returns home as affectionate father, responsible husband, perhaps even ardent lover of his wife. (p. 126)

In addition, Berger comments that there is a possibility for individuals to succeed in “capturing enough of a following to make their deviant interpretations of the world stick, at least within the circle of this following” (p. 146). This can result in a previously considered deviant behaviour becoming ‘routinized’ within society, illustrated in part by how homosexuality is increasingly considered a legitimate part of mainstream society and no longer viewed as a psychological illness. Berger expands on this hypothesis by suggesting that if enough people join in with an alternative way of thinking, a counter culture or sub-world evolves that contains its own discourse and rules and is “carefully shielded from the effect of both the physical and the ideological controls of the larger society” (p. 153). Berger’s insight into the fluidity involved with the construction of the ‘self’, sexual identity and counter cultures, together with the segregation that can occur, is reflected in my own research. Some interviewees adjusted the content of their online dating profiles to suit a particular type of dating site (for example, generic or adult), while others

had fluid sexualities and/or belonged to various counter cultures. These will be discussed further in the Findings chapter of this thesis.

Berger, in collaboration with Luckmann, extrapolated on his earlier work by exploring the social construction of the reality of everyday life, which is experienced “in terms of differing degrees of closeness and remoteness, both spatially and temporally” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 36). They contend that face-to-face interactions represent a ‘close’ subjectivity with the other becoming fully real, and where misinterpretation, misrepresentation and anonymity are more difficult to maintain, whereas “all other forms of relating to the other are, in varying degrees, ‘remote’” (p. 43). Language is considered by Berger and Luckmann as “the most important sign system of human society [where] everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language shared” with others (p. 51). They argue that “through language an entire world can be actualized at any moment” (p. 54). In addition, they suggest that socio-cultural factors influence how identity develops, this being variable with the human individual possessing plasticity, especially in the area of sexuality. They go so far as to suggest that the term ‘normality’ cannot be applied to human sexuality as it takes on many different forms due to being a “product of man’s [*sic*] own socio-cultural formations rather than of a biologically fixed human nature” (p. 67). However, through a process of socialisation which involves the internalisation of cultural expectations, rules and norms, there is the “comprehensive and consistent induction of an individual into the objective world of a society or a sector of it” (p. 150).

Nevertheless, within society there are sectors that are not successfully socialised due to ‘differences’ such as physical, mental or sexual ‘differences’, or some other ‘difference’ that sets them apart from what is considered the ‘norm’. In such cases, “incipient counter-definitions of reality and identity are present as soon as any such individuals congregate in socially durable groups” and can lead to a process of transformation in thought within wider society, resulting in the group initiating its own socialisation rituals (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 185). However, Berger

and Luckmann caution that if an individual internalises an alternative reality for the purposes of manipulating specific situations, especially if this becomes widespread within society, then the “institutional order as a whole begins to take on the character of a network of reciprocal manipulations” (p. 192).

All of these theories are relevant to the subject matter of this thesis. Turkle’s description of how the Internet has become a new place to ‘play’ is reflected in the Findings chapter where several of the interviewees discuss how they use online dating to find sexual ‘playmates’; Goffman’s ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ theory is illustrated when interviewees discuss their disappointment when the online presentation of a potential date (‘frontstage’) does not match the offline reality (‘backstage’) when meeting face-to-face for the first time; Goffman’s research into the area of stigmatisation will be heavily drawn from in the Discussion chapter in order to understand the dynamics involved with ‘difference’; and Berger and Luckmann’s research into the social construction of reality and their examples of counter-definitions and alternative socialisation rituals will also be explored when analysing those interviewees with ‘difference’ in the Discussion chapter. The present chapter has also discussed a variety of post-structural and post-modern social theories that will be helpful in understanding the dynamics involved with online relationship formation. The following chapter will outline the methodology used in this research project and discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of using MSN<sup>29</sup> as the data collection method.

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<sup>29</sup> MSN is the moniker for Microsoft Network and utilises the Messenger instant messaging service in order to facilitate real-time chat online.

## Chapter Four: Methodology

### *Introduction*

Although in its fledgling stage, social scientists are starting to use the Internet to study the social aspects of cyber-culture, with new disciplines such as cyberpsychology<sup>30</sup> and cybersociology<sup>31</sup> emerging. Hine is one United Kingdom sociologist who now calls herself an Internet researcher, incorporating what she terms “virtual ethnography” into her methodology (2005, p. 239). The data collection methods used by these researchers included email to distribute open-ended questionnaires (Baker, 2000) and ICQ to conduct in-depth interviews (Palandri & Green, 2000). However, the most popular method was the use of a unique URL to host online self-completion questionnaires (Joinson, Woodley & Reips, 2004; Chak & Leung, 2004; Hitsch, Horacsu & Ariely, 2004; Weiser, 2001; Wildermuth, 2004; Scharlott & Christ, 1995; Boies, Cooper, & Osborne, 2004; Underwood, 2005).

Every method of contact in research has its advantages and disadvantages. However, ideally the method chosen by the researcher needs to fit the topic or objectives to maximise any advantages and minimise any disadvantages. Initially, surveys and interview schedules were conducted in a house-to-house and face-to-face situation with the postal questionnaire developed for easier access to a much larger data pool at a cost effective rate (Moser & Kalton, 1975). This system has been augmented by the telephone interview process and computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI). However more recently, especially in the area of market research, researchers are using a range of Internet modalities such as online self-completion questionnaires, e-mail exchanges, and

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<sup>30</sup> refer to their website for further information: [www.cyberpsychology.com/](http://www.cyberpsychology.com/)

<sup>31</sup> they have an excellent online magazine accessible through: [www.cybersociology.com/](http://www.cybersociology.com/)

one-to-one or group chat using the real-time chat function (MSN or ICQ) (Decision Analyst Inc, 2006). Some of the reasons for this shift to Internet based research includes enabling worldwide access; superior sampling across a range of geographical areas; minimal bias due to reduced social pressure; increased honesty due to the anonymous nature of the online environment; convenience; and thoughtful responses (Decision Analyst Inc, 2006).

### ***Methodology***

The sampling frame (Internet chat users who use New Zealand based online dating websites) is in keeping with the decision to use the Internet to collect a large data pool drawing from dating agencies' customer bases. The advantages of data capture (chat transcripts being automatically saved) and low costs involved with the collection of data were also important considerations. Initially, I intended to collect data using:

1. a sampling frame based on a thematic and content analysis of online profiles sourced from self-selected volunteers' profiles listed with internet dating agencies;
2. an online self-completion questionnaire using The Survey System 8.1 comprising a mixture of open and closed questions, Likert scales and answer-specific expansions, accessible from an official University of Waikato website; and
3. a qualitative semi-structured in-depth interview conducted either face-to-face or online through Windows Live Messenger (MSN).

The intention was to draw on a large pool of subjects from throughout New Zealand using these three methods. However, time and cost became a major concern when it came to conducting face-to-face interviews due to the geographic distance of the interviewees, therefore I decided to explore the MSN option further to undertake these interviews. I also started to observe message-board discussions on one online dating site in order to inform me of any relevant issues that would need to be included in the interview schedule.

The online questionnaire was to be accessed through a designated University of Waikato web link which was to be distributed to a variety of online dating agencies that had agreed to put the link on their sites, as well as the web link being advertised in all major New Zealand newspapers. The in-depth interviews were originally to be limited to 10 or 12; interviewees had already been selected from the original group of people who had emailed me expressing an interest in my research project following an interview on TV3's *Campbell Live* programme earlier in the year. Initially, the in-depth interviews were intended to merely augment the online questionnaire data.

An email invitation, along with a consent form and information letter (see Appendix 1) was extended to several people who had made contact with me after the television interview, asking them whether they would like to take part in an in-depth interview, either face-to-face or via MSN. These people were selected to represent a diverse range of online dating experience, and 12 people accepted the initial invitation. However, due to the low response to the request for online profiles to be analysed, and owing to technical difficulties with the online questionnaire software whereby the University was unable to facilitate the questionnaire to go online, these two parts of the methodology were subsequently excluded. After discussion with my supervisors, a decision was made (with their full support) to increase the number of in-depth interviews and base this research solely on the data obtained from them. Unfortunately this meant that I could no longer do a quasi-representative sample that would reflect the general population, and instead had to rely on a self-selecting sample. Although this increased the risk of bias by possibly attracting respondents with their own agendas, the self-selected group, particularly those with 'difference', were of relevance to the research questions. This group, although not necessarily representative of the general population, were of intrinsic interest (Bryman, 2001). By utilising a qualitative research approach, greater depth, richness and diversity could be obtained, together with greater flexibility as I could pursue alternative lines of enquiry if and when necessary. Further, Walther argues that it is sometimes

sensible in online research to have a targeted sampling strategy with a “well-defined, electronic sample [rather] than an electronic random sample, or an offline sample at all” as this could elicit more relevant data (2006, p. 6).

A second email invitation (see Appendix 2), consent form and information letter was sent to everyone who had originally contacted me. They were also asked to contact other people they knew who might be interested in taking part in an online in-depth interview about their online dating experiences – in effect creating a snowball sample. In addition, I personally approached people I knew who were or had been online dating in the hope that they might be interested in taking part in the research. In the end, 32 individuals agreed to an in-depth interview, including one couple. The in-depth interviews followed the format of the previously designed online questionnaire, but focused particularly on the areas pertinent to each person (see Appendix 3). A post-modern approach was used in the interview process as it accentuated the “way in which a reality is constructed in the interview and the relationship that develops between researcher and interviewee” (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003, p. 140). Three reflexive questions<sup>32</sup> were also added at the end of each interview for each participant to have an opportunity to reflect back on their experiences and how it mirrored on their self, others and society. Interestingly, some of the richest data came out of their answers to those three questions, which will be outlined separately in the Findings chapter.

The research participants, although self-selected, did represent a diverse range of people within society with the advantage that, rather than providing a more generalised response as might have been obtained via an online survey, they shared particularised and highly specific information

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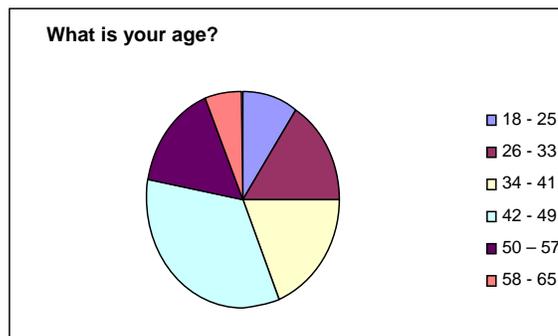
<sup>32</sup> What have you learned about *yourself* during your online dating journey? What have you learned about *others*? What have you learned about *society*?

about their own individual online dating experiences. One adult online dating site was particularly helpful in canvassing for research participants, resulting in a possible skew in the data collected.

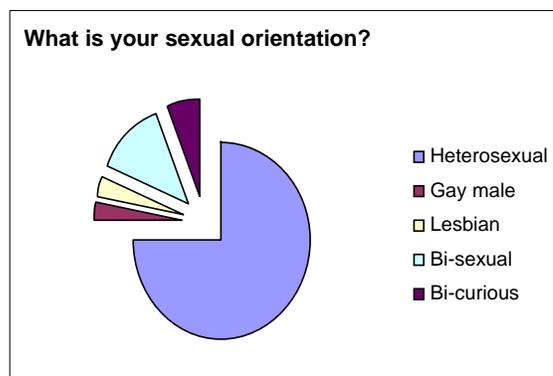
In addition, some epistemological assumptions need to be exposed, such as assumptions about the kind of knowledge I have of online dating and whether the sources of that knowledge are reputable or not. Firstly, I assumed that my own previous experience with online dating, spanning a period of three years, would inform me of some of the minutiae involved. Secondly, I assumed that the research participants would have insight into their online dating experience and be able to express that in a comprehensive way. Thirdly, I read widely to gain an academic understanding of the phenomenon of online dating and these journal articles and books had sound methodologies, often were peer reviewed and occasionally attracted critics. Lastly, by utilising a theoretical framework inclusive of interpretivist and post-modern sociological perspectives, I assumed that I was provided with a well-balanced base from which to assess the quality of the knowledge I was accruing. These three perspectives influenced how I approached every aspect of the research project. Kant and Dilthey are credited with developing interpretivism, with Kant stressing the importance of perception and Dilthey the importance of understanding a person's 'lived experiences' within "a particular historical and social context" (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 7). Interpretivism is considered by Snape and Spencer to be at the core of the qualitative tradition, as "it stresses the importance of interpretation as well as observation in understanding the social world" of the interviewee (2003, p. 7) Originating from the work of Mead and Blumer, symbolic interactionism suggests that humans are able to communicate because they share the "significant symbol" of language which allows them to become conscious of the views and attitudes of others, and in turn "acquiring the self-consciousness that is essential to the co-ordination of the collective life" (Cuff & Payne, 1984, pp. 119-120). According to symbolic interactionism, it is through this process that social life is established from within society itself and out of the processes of

interaction between the members within it (Cuff & Payne, 1984). Postmodernism rejects the supposition that “‘truth’ is grounded in a specific subject such as a social class, human nature or reason”; rather it proposes that there are no absolute ‘truths’, only “differences and ambiguity, multiple paradigms and conceptual frameworks” (Swingewood, 2000, p. 223).

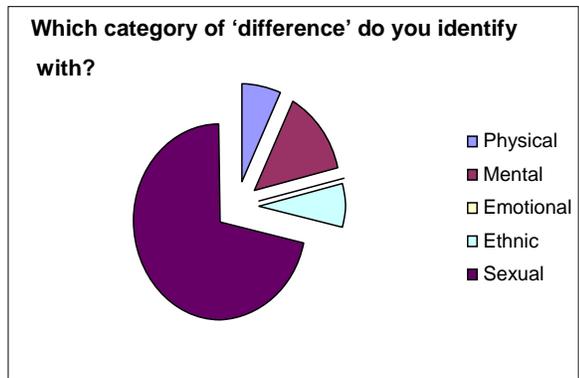
The participants ranged in age from 20 to 61 years (see Figure 1); gender, with one-third male and two-thirds female; sexual orientation (see Figure 2); and having what they or others would perceive as a ‘difference’ that might impact on their online dating experience (see Figure 3). Of the 32 participants, 14 identified as having one ‘difference’ and one participant identified with two ‘differences’. The ‘differences’ included: physical (1), mental (3), emotional (0), ethnic (1) and sexual (11).



**Figure 1 Age Range**



**Figure 2 Sexual Orientation**



**Figure 3** Category of 'difference' among those interviewees who identified with having a 'difference'

***Windows Messenger (MSN)***

Having examined the literature, I discovered that the market research industry in the U.S. utilises MSN real-time chat on the Internet as an effective mechanism to collect data from both individuals and focus groups across diverse geographical areas. As my research was focussed on online dating and the dating agency clients often used MSN to communicate with others within the agency<sup>33</sup>, the use of MSN appeared to be an appropriate data collecting tool for this particular research project. This method had positive elements that overcame the challenge of geographic distance, cost and time of travel. In addition, by using MSN, the actual interview was conducted through a series of individually typed questions, giving the respondent time to type their reply, and leaving on the computer screen the complete interview which could be saved to the hard drive and also printed out, by-passing the time consuming and costly work of transcribing. An added incentive to use MSN was the opportunity to further test its usefulness in a social science research setting, as Palandri and Green (2000)<sup>34</sup> had restricted their research to two case

<sup>33</sup> Based on my own experience with online dating.

<sup>34</sup> They are the only social science researchers that I was able to find who had used real-time chat function (ICQ) to interview their subjects.

studies and collected their data through a combination of interviews undertaken through ICQ, email, and chat sessions on a specific website relating to their research topic. Although not demonstrated in a controlled comparative way, it was also a chance to see if the advantages of using real-time online chat (MSN) already outlined by the market research industry could be transferred successfully to the social science research field, without compromising data 'richness' or the interview process.

Another aspect of my decision to use an online research tool such as MSN involved the desire to keep the methodology in line with the modes of communication often used by the respondents involved with online dating. Many people who use online dating find they migrate to using MSN or some other real-time chat facility such as ICQ to communicate with people they've made contact with through the online dating sites. My assumption was that they would be familiar with this form of computer-mediated communication and would not find it strange to be interviewed in this way. As I have already discussed in the Literature Review, various literatures have highlighted the possibility that people who communicate through real-time chat facilities such as MSN tend to reveal more than they would generally reveal face-to-face due to the disinhibition effect facilitated by the anonymous nature of the interaction (Suler, 2004). This possibility was a tantalising incentive, as I wanted to probe into people's personal experience of online dating, some of which could involve sensitive issues that may have been embarrassing or uncomfortable for them to share during a more formal face-to-face interview situation.

My own experience with using MSN for in-depth interviewing, however, did not proceed without encountering certain practical and logistical problems. Of the 32 interviews, one interviewee declined MSN as an interview option and requested a more traditional face-to-face interview. Two people experienced computer problems that adversely affected the functionality of MSN and had to complete their interviews by email. One person had English as their second language which resulted in a delayed written

response to questions. In addition, I interviewed one couple through MSN and found it both clumsy and disjointed as they were sharing a computer and each individual had to wait for the other to type their response to each question. In future, if interviewing a couple I would interview one person at a time.

There were also occasions where the MSN site was experiencing technical difficulties or heavy use at peak times, which tended to slow down the speed of sending and receiving messages, so it became not so much an 'instant message' as a 'delayed' one. This delay occasionally created misunderstanding between interviewer and interviewee as the sent questions or the received answers would 'cross over' each other in an inconsistent fashion, however this phenomena is reasonably common on MSN, therefore respondents supposedly should have had experience in coping adequately with it. In addition, when the MSN service was experiencing heavy use at peak times, either party could be disconnected from the MSN site without warning, and subsequently have difficulty gaining access again until some time later. I personally found 9am and 4pm to be peak use time for MSN, so tended to avoid booking anyone for an online interview at those times. I have included an excerpt from Lana's interview to illustrate the frustration experienced when these technical problems occurred:

Marama says:

okay... and what has been your motivation in NZ?

Marama says:

for using online dating

Marama says:

are you there Lana?

Lana says:

this is frustrating! many of my messages weren't delivered!!!

Marama says:

hmm...hang on a sec... I will make a quick enquiry brb

Lana says:

ok

Marama says:

have you been able to use msn with others?

Lana says:

yep... im wondering if its msn.... busy time of day with all the school kids home from school!

Marama says:

msn might be having some trouble... or the internet connection might be a bit 'dodgy'... apparently... lol

Lana says:

ok... lets try again!

Marama says:

he said it could help if you reboot...

Marama says:

if you get kicked off again, just try rebooting...

Lana says:

well if it happens again ill do that

Marama says:

okay... now can you cut and paste those answers that didn't come thru earlier?

Lana says:

no... sorry. i lost them when i reconnected to msn

Marama says:

:( well, shall I ask you the last question again? so sorry about this.... it is usually much more reliable

Lana says:

ok

Marama says:

okay... and what has been your motivation in NZ for using online dating?

Despite these practical difficulties, I found MSN to be an effective method and suggest that it be explored further as a viable social science research option, especially in situations where social researchers wish to include participants who are dispersed across geographic spaces. I personally found that online-rapport was easy to establish with each interviewee, evidenced by the steady flow of informal dialogue, and the positive comments elicited from the interviewees when asked how they were finding the experience of being interviewed using this modality. I believe the fact that both the interviewee and myself were in the privacy of our own homes, relaxed and comfortable while chatting online about various online dating experiences, added to the establishment of rapport. The Internet is becoming an increasingly mainstream form of communication

and most people with Internet access are comfortable chatting online, so in practice interviewing using MSN could be considered a valid interviewing tool. By way of a practical suggestion for those contemplating this method, I recommend that emoticons<sup>35</sup> are turned off on both the researcher's and the interviewee's computer, as they can be very distracting during an interview as many are animated and leave blank spaces in the printed transcript. Further, the researcher does need to make sure that the MSN automatic save option is switched on so that the interview is not accidentally erased before saving. Both of these functions can be performed from the Tools Options on the MSN menu bar.

### ***Honesty***

One area of concern was whether the interviewees would be truthful in their responses. However, after accepting that even in a face-to-face interview situation interviewees are still able to be deceptive if they wish, and that there is a level of trust required on the part of the interviewer that the interviewee is being truthful, I decided the advantages of using MSN outweighed any concern. Although it was difficult to know whether interviewees were being honest with me without the usual unconscious visual cues involved in a face-to-face interview situation, as the type of questions I asked did not seek personal details about the respondents' identity, the likelihood of people offering false information was hopefully minimised. Although there was no possible way that I could be certain that all interviewees were open and honest with me, I did find that each interview developed its own particular 'flavour' in that some became more informal than others, with the cues from the flow of information leaving an impression of honest communication. The following extracts from the interview scripts illustrate this.

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<sup>35</sup> Emoticons are the typed characters or images used to express emotions online.

### Extract One:

**Marama says:**

okay... now thinking about your profiles, how accurate are the descriptions of yourself in your profiles? (re: height, weight, drinking/smoking habits, children, sexual orientation/preferences, fetishes, etc)

**Andy says:**

99%

**Marama says:**

so are there any things about yourself that you deliberately didn't mention in your profiles, or weren't entirely honest about?

**Andy says:**

modest porky re age

**Marama says:**

lol... okay... did you put your age up or down?

**Andy says:**

u must be joking!....down of course - like most everyone else. 'Net is the cure for aging didn't you know?!

**Marama says:**

yes... I had heard... although it doesn't work for me... lol

**Marama says:**

so, how many years did you put it down by?

### Extract Two:

**Marama says:**

what made you use online dating in the first place... :)

**Colin says:**

Shy in public

**Marama says:**

hmmm... can you tell me more about that?

**Colin says:**

Not sure, could be lack of exposure, schizophrenia or Autism

**Colin says:**

I am diagnosed with schizophrenia, but I may also have aspergers i suspect

**Colin says:**

Probability of 1:10,000 to have both

**Marama says:**

okay.... so do you find it easier to meet people online rather than face to face?

**Colin says:**

Yes I find it easier to meet people online than in real life because it's hard for me to

understand or pick up on body language

**Marama says:**

how do you manage to pick up on messages online?

**Colin says:**

Things are more obvious for me it seems lexically, body language I have problems reading

**Marama says:**

hmmm... okay... so do you ever get confused by messages people give you online?

**Colin says:**

Or sometimes i read body language and I don't give the normal response as if I am unaware of the right response, I have to / choose to go away and think about it.

**Colin says:**

Not particularly

Although I acknowledge this was a self-created construction informed only by the exchange of lexical characters via a computer monitor, I would argue that different cues such as speed of response, type of phrasing used, typographical errors and style of response became an integral part of the mechanism by which I could form this construction. I found, as the interviewer, that the system of typing a question and waiting for the written reply took pressure away from me and gave me the opportunity to digest and respond with further questions in a relaxed and clear manner. The subjects in return appeared to be comfortable in using this system, as it was their usual means of communication when on the Internet dating sites.

### ***Interview schedule***

Several of the initial respondents to my television interview were invited to test the strengths and weaknesses of the interview schedule using MSN as the communication medium, checking the length of time it took to complete, any questions they felt were omitted, and indicating any areas they felt were particularly relevant. Because of the testing, there were alterations made to the interview schedule to make it easier and clearer for participants to respond. The chapter on 'difference' was reorganised to make it clearer and more concise as there were a number of conflicting interpretations of 'difference' by the test subjects in terms of how it might

apply to individual respondents. However, despite undergoing this process of testing and revision, when the issue of 'difference' was broached with the interviewees, the term continued to be problematic<sup>36</sup> as several perceived they were being further stigmatized with being labelled 'different' within the context of the research project. Some interviewees insisted that they were in fact 'normal' and that everyone else was 'different', while others considered my definition of 'difference' too narrow and outdated, especially in the area of sexual 'difference'. For example, some interviewees resisted the term 'bisexual' when describing their sexual preference, stating instead that they were more *curious* about experimenting with same-sex sexual encounters than committed to changing their heterosexual lifestyle. The term 'bi-curious' therefore was included in the list of sexual orientations within the interview schedule. It may be useful in future research when looking at areas of 'difference' to be sensitive and aware of how using such categories can negatively impact on the research subjects. Additionally, great care should be taken to define such potentially conflict-ridden categories in such a way that the research subjects do not feel further stigmatized.

Each interview took approximately one and a half hours to complete with the shortest taking 20 minutes, and the longest taking two and a half hours. When the length of the interview was discussed with several participants, they did not consider it excessive and reduced my concern with comments about how interesting they found the subject matter. Two of the interviewees initially expressed reservation about using MSN for an in-depth interview, but when questioned at the conclusion of the interview stated that they were surprised by how positive their experience had been and by the depth to which the subject was examined. At times, I was concerned that some of the answers a few of the participants gave were

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<sup>36</sup> Problematic from the point of view that a single understanding was sought, but insightful from another point of view, as discussed in the Findings and Literature chapter.

too brief; however this phenomenon is peculiar to computer-mediated communication in that it is easier to extrapolate verbally but harder to do so when typing. To counterbalance this, if during the interview I perceived a need for further follow-up, I would prompt the interviewee to expand on their response or reword the question and come back to it later in the interview to see if that would elicit any further useful data.

At times I was surprised by what was being revealed by the interviewees, particularly in the area of sexual orientation. In my naivety, I had assumed that everybody would fit into mutually exclusive sexual orientation categories and that these would remain reasonably stable through the course of a person's life. However this was challenged on a number of occasions, with one interviewee stating that at the time of the interview he was a 70/20/10 percentage split between heterosexual, bi-curious and bisexual. Having not yet read the Kinsey Reports, I was unaware of the possible fluidity of sexual orientations and was momentarily excited to think that I had stumbled upon some new phenomenon. However, after a thorough reading of the Kinsey Reports where the fluidity of sexual orientation was discerned by the researchers rather than reported explicitly by the respondents, I was surprised that this phenomenon had been studied and documented as early as 1948. Kinsey suggested that rather than subjects having to choose a specific sexual orientation when questioned in a research situation, a heterosexual-homosexual rating *scale* should be used to more accurately reflect sexual orientations within society<sup>37</sup> (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948). In my own research data, however, some respondents were conscious of and reporting their own sexual fluidity, thus providing a more self-conscious self-identification of fluidity. The implications of this for future research include the need to replace categories with scales when questioning subjects about their

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<sup>37</sup> I discussed this in the Theoretical Framework chapter.

sexual orientation, and the recognition that orientation can, and often does, change through a person's lifetime.

### ***Interview analysis***

Due to the decision to not continue with the profile analysis and online questionnaire (which would have involved media content analysis and quantitative analysis using Statistical Program for Social Science (SPSS)), a thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews was undertaken utilizing interpretivist, symbolic interactionist and postmodern sociological perspectives. The 32 interviews (comprising 374 pages of transcripts) were subject to a cross-referenced analysis using a "code and retrieve" method whereby a selection of categories were applied manually and collated using numerical codes (Spencer, Ritchie & O'Connor, 2003, p. 203). This facilitated data management, enabling a first level analysis to take place and revealing connections and an emergent series of themes that formed the basis for further analysis. A summary of each interview was made in the form of an annotated transcript, focusing on the most significant points in each interview and "based on interpretations of meaning" that would contribute to the future "production of descriptive and explanatory accounts" (Spencer, *et al.*, 2003, p. 213). This proved an important part of the interpretative process, with the resulting collective thematic analysis outlined in the Findings chapter.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

The interview schedule was designed around a number of themes in order to guide my questioning. These themes were originally designed to provide a foundation for analysing the research data and were based on relevant literature (outlined in the Literature Review) as well as suppositions I had formed from my own online dating experiences and what I had observed in various online dating message-board discussions. However, these themes became a 'work in progress', as during each stage of the development of this research project different themes emerged, either instigated by the literature that I was reading, or the data being obtained in the initial interviews. Occasionally, a significant shift in

focus developed. For example, how people with 'difference' initially presented themselves and negotiated their 'difference' online was originally only going to be introduced as an area of interest. However, due to the lack of research and literature in this area and some of the profound sharing by earlier interviewees about their own experiences in this regard, the decision was made to expand this section and delve more deeply into the lived experience of people who are online dating and who also have a 'difference'. The resulting themes look at the drivers that bring people to online dating; barriers to and limitations of online dating; fluid sexualities; 'difference' and the issues involved with negotiating those online; and how online dating has been used as a form of self-discovery.

### ***Ethical issues***

As mentioned earlier, I had initially planned a three-pronged approach for my data collection that included thematic analysis of online profiles, an extensive online questionnaire to be distributed nation-wide, and approximately ten in-depth interviews, in order to provide a representative sample. Each of the proposed methods raised specific ethical issues. For example, the online profile analysis required a selection of profiles that proved more problematic to obtain than originally thought as I needed to decide whether they were part of the 'public' or 'private' domain. The question of what is considered a 'public' or 'private' domain online is part of an ongoing debate between researchers that has not been adequately resolved, although the ethical dilemma involved has been debated widely and is covered well in the University of Leicester's online research ethics module<sup>38</sup>. However, Frankel and Siang argue that it depends on the "psychological perception of the subjects with regard to the information" shared online rather than its accessibility that should determine whether information be considered within the 'public' or 'private' domain (1999, p. 11). In this instance, although the online profiles could be accessed from

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<sup>38</sup> See bibliography for reference details.

the 'public' domain of the Internet, I felt that the psychological expectation of the profile creator is that the profile is to be viewed by a specific audience (namely other subscribed online daters) and therefore part of the 'private' domain of an online dating site. In line with Frankel and Siang, I decided to err on the side of caution and rather than mining data from the various online dating sites, I only approached those people who had already emailed me expressing an interest in taking part in the research to ask if they would be willing to submit their profile for analysis. While most initially agreed to my request, when it came to submitting an actual profile for me to analyse, many potential participants became rather shy and resistant, while others had already found a partner so no longer had a profile available for me to analyse.

Apart from the usual ethical considerations such as informed consent and publication of findings, this research attracted extra attention in a few areas from the Ethics Committee, specifically because of the sensitive nature of the research data and the way in which the data was to be obtained. Anonymity became paramount to protect both the participants' online and offline identities. Pseudonyms were used and any identifying features concealed. The transcripts of the MSN interviews have been edited to exclude any identifying markers and to bring out the salient points of each interview without losing their essence. An information letter and consent form was emailed to each participant with the requirement that the consent form be acknowledged and dated by the participant and returned to me by email before participation in the research could commence (see Appendix 1). A debriefing was offered at the completion of their participation due to the potential risk to participants where sensitive issues such as sexual or relationship matters may arise as a result of taking part in the interview process. This was to take the form of discussing with them the process of their particular involvement in the research and asking them if they required support from suitable agencies in dealing with issues that may have arisen for them as a result of their involvement. Recommendations and contact details of various agencies

able to offer further assistance, such as Lifeline and Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, were provided if required. However, when I made enquiries at the completion of each interview, the majority of interviewees expressed no negative effect. The few that did experience emotional upset during the interview insisted that they were fine and able to deal with their own feelings without outside help (see Appendix 4).

Due to the sensitive nature of many interviewees' responses, securing the data was also important. The printed in-depth interview data were stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office and I also placed a password on my computer to protect any data stored on my hard drive. I should also note that the use of MSN itself for performing an in-depth interview is as secure as an in-depth telephone interview, due to both using a telephone line.

This chapter has outlined the research processes and methodology involved with researching online dating in New Zealand using MSN to facilitate and collect the interview data. The following chapter sets out the research findings and includes relevant transcript excerpts, initial analysis and links to literature and theories previously outlined in either the Literature Review or Theoretical Framework chapters.



## Chapter Five: Findings

The research presented in this thesis explores the social dynamics of online dating, focusing on how the use of computer technology has extended and diversified the behaviours and practices of contemporary dating, with a particular focus on the online dating experiences of people with a 'difference'. For the purposes of this research, 'difference' is defined as any physical, mental, or emotional impairment which is either immediately apparent, or would become apparent with ongoing face-to-face contact. Difference also includes any ethnic or sexual difference that is not just a difference from others (since we are all different from others) but is rather a minority difference that is likely, given current dominant social norms and associated probabilities of stigmatization, to impact adversely on a person's online dating experience. Goffman's (1963) classic exposé on stigma acts as a reminder that when researching in the area of 'difference', there is a risk of adding to the stigmatization often already experienced by people. However, it is through the perspective of the interviewees who have a 'difference' that a more realistic look at society can take place, as Berger (1963) points out with his unrespectability motif.

Although there are no national statistics available at the time of writing to indicate how many people in New Zealand are using online dating, New Zealand does have the second highest Internet penetration rate in the world<sup>39</sup> which would suggest a substantial number of people may utilise the Internet for online dating.

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<sup>39</sup> In the 2005 Internet World Stats usage and population statistics, New Zealand ranks second at 74.9% of the population accessing the Internet.

While some ideas explored by this research formed from my own personal experience with online dating and the reading I had done, others evolved directly from the 32 interviewees' often very candid responses. When combined, they developed into five distinct themes. Theme One explores what brought the interviewees to online dating; Theme Two explores various experiences the interviewees had with online dating; Theme Three explores fluid sexualities, including sexual experimentation and online infidelity; Theme Four explores 'difference' and the issues involved with negotiating 'differences' online; and Theme Five concludes with an examination of what the participants have learnt about themselves, others and society during their involvement with online dating.

In order to protect the identity of the interviewees, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms and any identifying features such as locality have been carefully protected. The presentation of the findings gives voice to the individual lived experiences of people who have used online dating in order to find a partner, whether for short term sexual encounters, or long term commitment. As such, I have used the language of the informants where necessary as it provides additional layers of meaning and indicators of socio-cultural and socio-economic positioning. However, I have chosen to edit the interviewees' typographical errors in order to make clear my understanding of the text where it might be unclear or ambiguous. A brief introduction to each interviewee is included in Appendix 5.

### ***Theme One: What brings people to online dating?***

#### **Motivations for using online dating**

The motivations identified by the interviewees for why they used online dating and what types of relationships they were looking for were many and varied. The majority of interviewees turned to online dating after a relationship had ended when they were faced with the prospect of dating again, as Tina (44) explained: *"I had been married and after a period of just over a year and half decided I would like to meet someone new and didn't want to go the conventional way i.e. pubs clubs etc"*. Online dating

was considered the easiest way to meet people by 12 of the 32 interviewees, with three also feeling they had no choice other than to use online dating, as illustrated by Muriel (52): *"My marriage had broken up and I was moving on but as I don't drink or go to pubs I couldn't think of any other way to meet guys at my age"*. Anne (59) also felt a person's age to be a factor in choosing online dating to search for a partner, stating that *"I told them that I was meeting guys that way and when you get, I think, to a certain age these days... how else do you meet people...because, you know, you don't have the same sort of organised activities nowadays that perhaps you did, you know, 20 years ago...or even 10 years ago...so for someone in the sort of 30s, 40s whatever, it is the primary way of meeting new people I think...and used properly, I think it is a good way to meet people."*

Some of the interviewees found dating after being in a long term relationship a difficult prospect but recognised the need to start socialising again. At the time of the interview, Andy (51) was *"half heartedly"* in a long term relationship with a woman he had met online, having been involved in online dating for about five years after the break-up of his 14 year marriage. He found it hard to start dating again after being in his previous relationship for so long, stating: *"'before' I was in my 30s - had single friends & went places & did things that 30somethings do...'After' I was 40 something - hardly knew anyone anymore - none were single - My 'social' life was dinner parties etc. I had a lot of adjusting to being 'single' to do which took about 3 months...It was all the advertising for the Millennium events that made me realise there was a world going on out there, and I had to get back into it. Being on the net since '96 I was aware of dating sites so @ early 2000 I signed up on some...Wee haw!!"*

Four interviewees found that their loneliness or boredom motivated them to use online dating to meet people, with Paula (49) saying: *"I was sick of being on my own and wanted to meet other people"*. Two interviewees mentioned shyness as their main motivation, and as shown in Scharlott and Christ's (1995) research, the anonymity afforded online dating

subscribers was credited with enabling shier users to interact with others without the fear of being rejected. Colin (28) was schizophrenic and turned to online dating seven years ago to look for a long term relationship because he was shy in public, stating: *“I find it easier to meet people online than in real life because it's hard for me to understand or pick up on body language... Things are more obvious for me it seems lexically, body language I have problems reading... Or sometimes I read body language and I don't give the normal response as if I am unaware of the right response, I have to choose to go away and think about it”*.

Anonymity and safety online was important for three of the interviewees who were currently in a relationship but using online dating to organise sexual encounters outside their primary relationship. Samuel (50) had used online dating for the last six years to organise discreet, sexual encounters preferably with married women both here in New Zealand and in other parts of the world, stating: *“I am married, and saw this as a safe and anonymous way to meet other women, with the underlying cause that my marriage was having a rough patch, and I had never experienced another woman before, so there was also a curiosity factor there”*. Elaine (29) had found online dating safe, making it easy for her to find someone for extra-marital sexual encounters and allowing her to be completely honest about what she was wanting, as she was looking for someone to just have sex with. As she explained: *“friends in the bedroom but not outside it”*.

The accessibility and efficiency of online dating were mentioned by a number of interviewees as being important factors in choosing to use online dating to search for a partner. Henrietta (57) was initially online dating in her own country from 1998 to 2003 before moving to New Zealand to be with her partner, whom she met online. When she first started using online dating, it was: *“at first, to try it and after, for the flexibility and the fact that I did not need to go physically anywhere to find someone”*. Other interviewees found the efficiency of online dating

appealing as they were looking for a specific type of relationship. Wendy (48) was seeking a lesbian long term relationship and found the *“pressure of work and home life”* motivated her to use online dating, stating: *“I was a single mum and working like 60hrs week...[it was] not easy to meet gay people”*.

Being able to target a specific online dating audience proved important for some interviewees. For the past nine months Mary (25) and her partner had been using online dating to look for other people to join them for sexual encounters. They found targeting a more adult online dating site efficient for this, with Mary stating: *“Me and my partner wanted to meet some new people and this seemed the easiest way...when we started we didn’t know which [site] was going to get the best responses. Some sites you had to pay with no guarantee it could work, [one is] full of straight people. [One] has more options for stuff like bdsm, 3sums 4 sums etc so you can narrow your search heaps”*. Richard (36) and his wife had a couple’s online dating profile targeting a specific audience, with Richard stating: *“We wanted to meet likeminded couples...friends/couples to play with via web cam and couples to meet for sex”*. Garth (44) had found online dating an efficient way of meeting different types of people, stating: *“The difference between real life and the Internet is that on the Internet you can focus on very material aspects of a relationship even as you seek something meaningful... So...I have joined sites based on ethnicity...or on sexual preference...or focussed around particular interests...It’s a way of meeting people who you might take years to find....quickly... it has been effective”*.

Some interviewees used online dating because they were curious to see who might be available as dating prospects, as Denise (27) stated: *“Broke up with long term boyfriend, just started to have a look around, as you do”*. Cindy (24) was interested in getting to know a range of people intellectually before meeting face-to-face, as she explained: *“the desire to meet people from different places, to make connections with people on an intellectual basis, rather than just physical.”* Others were encouraged to

try online dating because friends or family were already online dating. Jane (20) described how she first started using online dating: *“Well i went on it as i saw my flatmate on it so thought i would give it a go and see if anything happens!!! just a bit of fun at the start then i guess to see if i could find mr right!! hehe if there is such a thing!”*

### **Types of relationships sought**

A variety of different types of relationships were sought by the interviewees, although five interviewees were not sure what type of relationship they were seeking initially, as Cindy (24) explained: *“I didn’t really know what type of relationship i was looking for until things started to happen. but i suppose something serious.”* Muriel (52) was not sure what type of relationship she was looking for online either, stating: *“At that stage I didn’t really know- just someone to chat with to start with... [but now I am] still not sure .. i would like to go out , have fun but not necessarily commitment... my husband is back on the scene (did that as soon as I had formed a relationship with a guy I met on line) so that has complicated things a bit.”* Denise (27) was not sure either, but soon found she was approached by someone online who helped her: *“[I] didn’t know to start off with. But I met someone very quickly on [the site] who introduced me to the whole world of BDSM, so started looking in earnest for a Dom or others involved in the Lifestyle.”*

Nine of the 32 interviewees were using online dating specifically to find a long-term partner, however of those nine, only Colin (28) articulated a wish to formalise a relationship, although expressing doubt that he will achieve this, stating: *“I think the relationship status we seek is dependant on what we can acquire...if we find it hard to acquire a relationship we may value having one...if the scarcity of relationships is low we may value them less...if the scarcity of the value of sexual relationships is low we may value those also less...however if they are scarce, we may value them more...the supposition of relationship economics...Long term with view towards marriage...Been that way since i first started, relationships to me or a partner to me doesn’t seem like a cheap commodity.”* Conversely,

Anne (59) was clear that she wanted a partner, however, she did not desire to get married, as she explained: *“yeah I was looking for a permanent relationship, I was...not necessarily [looking for] somebody to marry, I have been married, I didn’t want to particularly want that, but I did want a partner. I was looking for a serious relationship, I was not looking for casual sex.”*

Some interviewees found they changed their minds about what type of relationship they were searching for online, with Andy (51) wanting a variety of relationships depending on his interests at the time, stating: *“Well initially it was to meet all sorts [men and women], later it morphed into meeting just women, then more recently it has morphed again to meeting all sorts...for sexual encounters, long term relationship, or friendship only - but primarily the first two. Some become friendships later.”* When Fiona (35) first started online dating, she was searching for a long term relationship, however this had changed during her time online, as she explains: *“i was looking for eventually a long term committed relationship...now i am mostly just on there coz its kind of fun... i am not currently seeing anyone...i have met a few guys online...and have dated two of them for a few months each, but i have largely lost interest in the internet as a dating option at the moment, and just go on there mostly coz its just fun to see if i got any messages.”*

Other interviewees were keeping their options open by making friends online with a view to seeing if a relationship would develop, as Jane (20) illustrates: *“well obviously meet online first then meet in person. i guess friendships are good to have but if anything else came from it i.e. becoming partners then that would just be a bonus.”* Keith (61) was philosophical in his approach to online dating, stating: *“Well I was looking for a friend and I suppose whatever happens will happen.”* Lana (48) was not sure what type of relationship she was looking for in her first experience with online dating, stating that: *“initially it was to make friends when i lived in UK and didn’t know many people...i was looking (if I’m totally honest!) to meet a man!..for a relationship...initially short term...but i*

*thought it would be nice to meet someone who i would fall in love with etc and end up in a permanent relationship...i enjoyed being married and having a partner...i didn't much like being on my own, after the first novelty of it all."* Ruth (40) was not actively seeking a romantic relationship, however they developed anyway, as she explains: *"i didnt have any motivation..... i wasn't on here for that initially.... i was just here to take time out from doing varsity papers and kill time... wasn't really looking for [a relationship]..the relationships just kinda evolved."*

Seven of the 32 interviewees stated explicitly that they were using online dating to find people to have casual sexual encounters with. Michel (29) stated that he *"wanted to meet guys for sex, mostly"*; while Richard (36) said that he and his wife were looking for *"friends/couples to play with via web cam and couples to meet for sex"*. As Elaine (29) was looking for extra-marital sexual encounters, she liked the fact that she could be honest about what type of relationship she was looking for online. Other interviewees just wanted to develop casual relationships online, as Henrietta (57) describes: *"Just fun relationships, nothing long term or for marriage or the like"* while Val (45) wanted *"casual but regular sex with one person...not a relationship."* Sally (38) said she was too busy for a relationship, and was happy with the casual arrangement she had formed with a man she had met online, as she explained: *"friends and sexual partners, right now I'm not but that's what I've looked for in the past... [now I am looking for] nothing, i found a fuck buddy<sup>40</sup> online and am happy with our arrangement, I'm too busy for more."*

### ***Theme Two: Experiences with online dating***

Although most interviewees expressed positive comments about their experiences with online dating, a number encountered various problems

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<sup>40</sup> Jargon for a "friend or acquaintance with whom a person (regularly) engages in sex without the expectation of a romantic relationship" (OED online).

that impacted negatively on their online dating experience, with some interviewees encountering issues with age, body size, appearance, and financial situation, while others found their particular 'difference' adversely affected their online dating outcomes. These experiences offered examples of the propensity for online 'flaming'<sup>41</sup> and Suler's (2004b) online disinhibition effect, where online anonymity shields people from accountability, although a few interviewees were also insulted in person. A consideration of Goffman's (1959) theory of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' behaviour is also useful in understanding this phenomenon. The disappointment of discovering a lack of offline chemistry after establishing a strong online rapport was also mentioned by several interviewees as being problematic. This chapter concludes with a look at the gender disparities that were revealed between the interviewees, especially in the area of preferred appearance of potential dates, receiving unsolicited sexually explicit materials, and online deception.

## **Age**

Five interviewees perceived there was an age barrier online, indicated by the number of responses from potential dating partners fluctuating significantly if the interviewee stated their age was above or below certain milestones. Andy (51) was mainly accurate with his profile details, although he said he told a "*modest porky*" about his age, dropping it to below 50 so that it would start with a '4' instead of a '5'. Garth's (44) profile was also mainly accurate, however he did put his age down to 40 years, as he explains: "*My age is one thing I have lied about now I think about it... well, I am rather sprightly for a 44 year old guy... and so I put it down to 40 on a website i used to visit... There are certain boundaries that people have in their head...and you need to comply with them to be*

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<sup>41</sup> Flaming is defined as the "sending of messages that include bad language or repeat messaging especially of undesirable or obscene text" ([www.netalert.net.au/01990-Glossary.asp](http://www.netalert.net.au/01990-Glossary.asp))

*considered...so...a woman who is in her early 30's will not consider a guy over 40...often...but once they know you it doesn't matter...But then I decided I just wasn't going to lie about ANYTHING so I changed it to my real age...It just means you get a whole different group contacting you...Under 40 I get women aged 28 – 38...As a 44 year old I get 40 plus...all the way to 60...You can see why a guy would lie about his age...You learn a lot about how we all pigeon hole each other...How much we categorise without realising it...I have now made some neat friends out of older women.” Peter (43) stopped using the online dating sites for two weeks over Christmas because he also kept getting approached by older women, as he explained: “i was approached by two women...but they were 49 & 50...wanting a 3sum...I guess to be honest it was not really unwanted at the time...they were just older than I would have preferred. so i didn't respond...It had been a Looooong time if you know what i mean...but i wasn't desperate...I went off the site for about two weeks around xmas because i kept getting approaches from older woman. So when I went back on I dropped my age from 42 to 39.”*

When Anne (59) was online dating she was in her early to mid 50s, but she lowered her age to 49 as she thought there was a barrier at 50, and her profile photo was a professional ‘glamour’ photograph where she considered she did not look 50. However, there were unintended consequences which a number of the other female interviewees also encountered, as she explained: “I got hit on by a lot of very young men... one of the things that I did was that I...I presume you are going to do some demographic stuff...so I am 60 this year...when I was doing this, obviously it was a little while ago, so it was in my early 50s, I always put my age as 49 because I think there is a barrier at 50...people think ‘Hmm... 50!’ and I had a really nice professional photograph taken from that Body Shots place, so I certainly didn't look like I was 50...but I got hit on by a lot of kinda 20 something year olds and again I was saying ‘Go away, don't waste my time!’ Ahh, they all said the same thing...they all said ‘Oh, experienced older woman...I would like to have sex with an

*experienced older woman’...But that is what they all said...‘No, no no...it will be really really good...you know...I am really energetic...I have heard that older women really like to have sex with younger men’...I just said ‘Don’t waste my time, I am looking for a partner, I am not looking for casual sex...I can have plenty of casual sex if I wanted it, but that is not what I am after here.’ One of the funny things that happened was that I got hit on by the son of a friend, a person that I knew...and I went back and said ‘Does your mother know you are doing this?!’ and I called him by his proper name, and he went...‘How do you know who I am!’ That was quite funny...poor guy.”*

### **Size and appearance**

Sandra (46) had experienced several unpleasant experiences with negative attitudes from men during her time with online dating, one when she had sent an email to a man expressing her displeasure at what he had written in his profile, as she explained: *“once i did send an e-mail to a guy who strongly preferred a slim good looking mid forties lady, got me grrrr...he said well only a FAT lady would send that to him, he said not into large people at all, no way...i am a size 18 and not treated with same respect or as a whole person by men in my experience, i understand men are visual, but doesn't help, we are people too. Makes me feel so sad and even more lonely in my search.”* She also found that men did not want to chat online for long, but would prefer to meet and see if the relationship was likely to “go” anywhere and if she would suit them physically. If they considered her physically unsuitable, they tended to be rude and abrupt, as she described: *“they have not a lot of time for idle chit chat, a lot are rude. could say a real eye opener... [they want] to meet, see if [it will] go anywhere, see if you are what suits them more physically than anything else. if not [suitable, they are] rude and abrupt and [say] i won't waste anymore of my time or yours, you are not what i'm looking for, i have others to meet. byee... [makes me feel] like crap!! I don't even get to have the coffee... most [men] do [let me have the coffee] but a few haven't, one guy just leant over a rail as we met, had a good look and said....hi nice to meet you, [and] your personality is just lovely, but you are not what i [am]*

*looking for, you are too fat, maybe loose some weight...and that did happen.”*

### **Financial situation**

Sandra (46) found the issue of her being unemployed at present problematic for most of the men she met, with one even saying: *“Look me up again when you get a job!”* She felt they considered her a *“gold digger”* or that the fact she was not working required them to pay for everything, which they seemed reluctant to do. Sandra considered that the men she had met did not like to spend any more money than they had to, least of all on an unemployed person. She personally felt that this was wrong, however she was told that this was how it is in the 21st Century – *“pay your own way or not at all.”* Colin (27) was financially reliant on the sickness benefit and had found this had negatively impacted on his online dating experience. He explained the usual reasons why his romantic relationships did not last beyond an average of 18 days: *“The vast majority of times I suspect from financial limitations and from feedback i have acquired when it has been available because of poor finances... Study on xtra highlights increase of poverty or less financial wealth is conducive or associated to less partners/relationships.”*

### **Negative attitudes about online dating**

Along with dealing with negative attitudes from other online dating participants (as people who use online dating have often been portrayed by popular media as being ‘desperate’), participants often needed to negotiate preconceived ideas about online dating with family and friends. In Wildermuth’s (2004) research into stigmatizing discourse and its impact on relationships initiated online, there was a strong correlation identified: the higher the level of stigmatizing discourse received from family and friends about online dating, the higher the level of dissatisfaction experienced in online relationships by those research participants. Sometimes the fear of other’s judgements meant the online dating participant did not reveal they were online dating at all. It then became a hidden activity that involved lying about how they may have met a current

partner when it came time to introduce that partner to the participant's wider circle of acquaintances. When any relationship ends, it can be helpful to discuss the break-up with family and friends as part of the process of healing. When an online relationship ends, however, some participants found it impossible to discuss the break-up with family or friends due to feeling that they did not understand the depth of heart-break being experienced, especially if the relationship had existed solely online.

Although Sandra (46) had told her family previously that she was online dating, after a six month relationship ended with the man her family had met, she had not told them that she was back online dating again because she felt embarrassed that she had to go about finding someone this way and was afraid of their judgements. When Sandra told her children initially, they had been supportive of her online dating; however they were disappointed when *"nothing happens"* for her as they wanted her to have someone special. However, when she initially told her mother, she was not so supportive, saying: *"eeewww how could you, you don't need anyone anyway."* Previously when Sandra told some of her friends she was online dating, she received such negative reactions from them that she had not told them she was back online again, as she recounted the exchange: *"girlfriend are you that desperate that you have to reduce yourself to dating sites, how could you...go get yourself a sleeeeze then. Made me feel horrible, like [I was] not supported, [that] they knew better...[they] kept telling me i was insane...they said to join country and city contacts, or if there's nothing about, then leave it out girlfriend...cause they think only freaks and desperate people go on internet dating."* Interestingly, the friends she told were already in established relationships themselves.

When Henrietta (57) lived in her own country, online dating had been common since 1996, so people had no problem accepting it as a legitimate way to meet others. When she came to New Zealand to be with her present partner, he did not want her to tell anyone how they had met, so they *"had their own little 'lie' story"*. However, since that time, online

dating in New Zealand became much more acceptable and he no longer had a problem with people knowing how they met. Cindy (24) felt apprehensive about telling her friends that she was online dating because she was aware of the “*stigma*” surrounding it, with people thinking that they could not really know someone if they had only communicated with them online. She felt that it was the authenticity of her feelings and the online relationship in general that were being questioned; however, that did not eventuate. However, Natalie (34) told her family that she was online dating and received a very negative response from them, as she explained: *“They were worried about my safety and the fact that I’m disabled was challenging for them to accept that I had the same needs [of] any non-disabled women, both in terms of sexual experiences and friendships.”*

Ruth (40) was in the process of recovering from a broken long-distance online relationship that she was involved in for over two years. The extended family she was staying with did not know that she and her online partner had broken up as she felt that people did not understand about the intensity of online relationships. She found it hard to explain the dynamics of online relationships to other people and the fact that she had had a legitimate relationship, as she explained: *“i was in a relationship and i was going to [country]...but he stopped calling me...and talking to me...and got his phone cut off...so i didn’t go...i had the tickets and everything...i don’t know why he did that...he broke my heart...he was everything to me...and then there was nothing. Talking to people about online relationships is a joke...there are always the questions...cause they don’t understand...they say shiit like...but you never met him...and I’m like....i know...but i know his family [and] everyone...and i trusted him. Anyway...its over and i got to live with it...I’m over the whole internet thing...i just come to see my friends now.”* At the time of the interview, she felt that if she could have done anything differently, she would not have become romantically involved in the first place, and was adamant that it would never happen again, although she stated that if he had lived

in New Zealand things might have been different because she would have met him face-to-face straight away. However, she was no longer willing to meet anyone through online dating, as she felt that what trust she had was completely gone. Ruth (40) stated that she would have found it easier to tell her family and friends about the break-up if she had met him in a more traditional way, rather than through the Internet, as he would have been more physically present and “*real*” to them.

### **Online rapport versus offline chemistry**

As discussed by Ben-Ze’ev (2004) and outlined in Walther’s (1996) hyper-personal communication model, online rapport can very quickly be established between people. However that does not guarantee that there will be chemistry when those same people meet for the first time face-to-face. Gwinnell argues that most initial offline meetings are “mutually pleasurable, since the steady stream of online messages has pre-programmed them to like each other” (1998, p. 70). Ben-Ze’ev (2004) agrees, and suggests that the online communication softens the initial offline meeting as it creates a more positive impression of the other person and reduces the importance of external physical features. However, chemistry between two people is a very subjective experience and involves all of the senses, not just the limited senses used with online communication. Indeed, some of the interviewees were surprised and disappointed with the lack of face-to-face chemistry, especially as they had developed a deep and often passionate rapport with that particular person online, sometimes over a long period of time. Other interviewees, however, were philosophical and approached their online dating experience systematically and with great pragmatism, while others were fortunate to experience instant face-to-face chemistry.

Over the last year Ruby (43) had been on dates with at least 15 men she met online. However she had not met anyone with whom she would like to have a long term relationship. This had surprised her, as she had felt that after meeting 15 men she would have found at least one suitable for her. When asked whether she had any idea why she had been

unsuccessful in finding a romantic partner online, she replied: *“Because I’m quite fussy and also because ALOT of guys have a real thing for looks and if you don’t look a certain way they are not interested whereas an average looking guy with a neat personality is attractive to me... [I know they have a real thing for looks because] they want to see your photo and I’ve been told by a couple [of men] that looks were important and if they didn’t find me attractive then I wouldn’t hear from them again...which happened.”*

Henrietta (57) stayed with her partner she met online initially for two months before moving to New Zealand permanently to live with him. Although they had talked on the phone and chatted online extensively before she arrived in New Zealand, she was still very nervous to meet him, fearing that the *“magic”* would not be there when they finally met face-to-face. However, it became evident to both of them within a few seconds of meeting that it was still present and she attributed the success of their first face-to-face meeting to the previous five month long-distance correspondence, as she explained: *“In those 5 months, we exchanged a lot in writing, talking etc...I think we learned about each other completely before the physical part of it...and in our case, it confirmed that each other had what we were looking for in the future...also, we were very honest, being of a certain age there was no need to play any game.”*

For Anne (59) and her partner, who had previously gone out for coffee dates with 60 women before he and Anne met, there was an instant attraction. She attributed her success to the fact that she was extremely focused on what she was looking for and would not settle for anything less than that. Most of her online relationships had ended because the physical reality of the person was not appealing to her, or they were completely different in person than online. She recalled one earlier online dating experience where she had a wonderful online relationship with one man who lived in the United States but when she travelled there to meet him, he turned out very different in person, as she explained: *“the guy, this particular guy, was kind of abrupt and directive in person in a way that he*

*wasn't, you know [online]... he was inconsiderate frankly... it was very weird."* Nevertheless, they continued to chat online once she came back to New Zealand, and because they seemed to get on really well online she went back for another visit: *"and the second time I went back, I didn't last very long and I just went 'That's it, I'm out of here'...and went home...flew home standby all the way...I just wanted to get out...it was a disaster...it was awful...he physically wasn't appealing to me and I don't think I was [appealing to him] either...but he didn't know what to do with that...and I was still trying to go 'How could we have this great rapport online but in person be just sooo not on each others wavelength?' So I gave it another chance, but it clearly was not a good thing."*

Kerrie (47) felt that although it was possible to build chemistry over time online with someone, she found online dating very difficult as the relationship only became real for her when physically spending time together, as she explained: *"I think taking the time to get to know someone will build chemistry...online dating is very difficult...it only becomes real when you spend time together...because you build someone up to be something in your mind (fantasy) and when you meet it is rarely there."* However, when Peter (43) met his current partner after being online dating for less than two months, he discovered that she was very easy to talk to, as he explained: *"[it was] very easy to have a conversation with [her]. No different to meeting people in the real world. Some are easy and some are hard... We had similar backgrounds...[and I would advise other guys to] jump in at the deep end, bite the bullet...yeah but you need to know, most importantly, if there is chemistry...You don't [know] until you meet them...so the sooner the better."*

Fiona (35) had largely lost interest in online dating at the time of the interview, explaining that: *"virtually every guy I talk to wants to meet.....sometimes I meet them for coffee but most of the time nothing comes of it...and I think I'm kind of bored with having so many fruitless coffee dates... I think because its very hard to tell if you are going to click online...some people you know very quick after chatting that you will not*

*click...but for many that can't be determined until face to face...when it becomes clear to one or both of you.*" In this respect, she likened online dating to going on a blind date. She usually chatted online with a person for long enough to establish that they would be nice when they met, however she had never been *"blown away by love at first sight"*.

### **Differences between genders**

Of the 32 interviewees, 11 women and three men have received unwanted sexual comments, images or approaches online, with many of the women expressing annoyance at this, while the men mostly responded with humour. When the male and female interviewees were reading the physical descriptions on the profiles of online dating participants, they had often responded differently, with the female interviewees generally not as interested in physical appearance as the male interviewees. This tendency whereby males are more likely than females to use physical attractiveness to judge whether a person was a potential dating partner had been previously noted in the work of Vaughan and Hogg (2002) and Donn and Sherman (2002). Some female interviewees expressed the opinion that men were only online looking for sex. However, in this particular study, of the 32 interviewees, only three males compared to six females were utilising online dating to search for sexual encounters exclusively. One male interviewee considered that the introduction of online dating had brought about a more competitive dating environment in which men had to compete against each other based largely on their appearance in their profile photo. He felt that the 'goal posts' had definitely shifted in that men had become just as concerned about their appearance as women had traditionally been; a result he argued of being judged by how one presented oneself, especially on an online dating site. Finally, there were a number of female interviewees who had been pursued online by much younger men, an anomaly worth noting.

Although Sandra (46) had received a lot of unwanted sexual comments, advances and images online, especially from young men in their 20's *"wanting a mature woman for sex"*, she used humour to deal with these

rather than confrontation. She agreed to meet up for a coffee offline with one man she met online, however she had an unpleasant encounter, as she explained: *“Had another [man] I talked to for some length of time on here...it was going good to, we met up for coffee, he said how long will he have to wait till I let him have sex, he said if it was going to be a drawn out thing he didn't want to bother waiting, so needless to say he was gone.”* She did not persist with that relationship option as she commented: *“he made me feel YUCK and that I'm in his eyes only good for one thing - SEX.”*

Samuel (50) had received some advances from men and women that he did not want to pursue at all as they were either the wrong sexual orientation, too young, or were not likely to ever meet because of distance. He was not influenced by whether a person included a photo or not in their profile, however it did help him get some sense of attraction from a photo and if there was no attraction, he would not go any further. Keith (61) took a very cautious approach as to what he said online because he realised that the people he was chatting to were complete strangers to him. He had received some unwanted sexual comments from women online, however this did not bother him and he tended to turn it into a joke and make some humorous comment back rather than to introduce any conflict. It was top priority for Andy (51) to view a photo when looking at a possible long term relationship candidate and he would not contact them if they did not include one, as he felt that if they did not include a photo, then they were probably not good looking.

Anne (59) had received a number of unwanted online sexual comments, advances and images from both married and very young men during her time with online dating. Often the married men would say they are happily married but they just wanted to chat or they just wanted casual sex: *“they would usually admit quite quickly that they had a partner, they were happily married but they just wanted to chat or they just wanted casual sex, something like that...and um, my response always was ‘Don't waste my time...I'm here to find a partner, I am not interested in somebody who*

*already has a partner’...and they go ‘Oh... don’t be like that...we’ll just chat for a while’ and I say, ‘Nah...leave me alone, just don’t waste my time’”. She had also discovered, while involved with online dating, that there were a lot of men out there looking for sex, as she described: “There is an awful lot of guys out there looking for sex (laughter)...there are...the world is just full of guys who want more sex...it is really interesting...I wouldn’t have thought there were so many poor deprived men but boy there are! And I don’t know what this says about men, but I think they are not getting their needs met one way or another in the relationships that they are in...and I don’t know why that is...it might be something about umm...men’s communication skills...interestingly, I hark back a bit...when my marriage broke up, because I was married for about 13 years and had one son and I thought we had quite a good marriage until he went off with somebody else...but afterwards he said to me that he had masturbated every day and we had sex I suppose three times a week or something like that, and I didn’t think that was particularly abnormal, but he told me that he had masturbated every day, sometimes twice a day...he never told me that and at the time I said, ‘why didn’t you say something? We could have done something about this’...but he never did, and I suspect that is what happens with a lot of guys, they don’t talk about it with their partner, they don’t, they are not kind of upfront with what they need or don’t need.”*

Gloria (46) and Patrick (50) was a married couple who met in a chat-room on the Internet and had been together for the last two years. They both had received unwanted online sexual comments, advances and images and Gloria was quick to deal with these by blocking them; however the images were only accessible if people wanted them, so they were easy to ignore. Patrick was approached by Asian women trying to “hook up” with him from overseas and he also received advances from some men, however he “led them up the garden path, but generally told [them] to get lost”. Gloria (46) said she would be less likely to approach a man who described himself as very attractive as she would think he was lying, as

she felt that good looking people usually do not need to date online, however, Patrick (50) said he would be much more inclined to approach a woman if she described herself as very attractive. Nevertheless, they both agreed that talk was more important than appearance as they could tell a lot about a personality chatting online.

When asked whether she had ever received unwanted sexual images or advances, Denise (27) said: *“Christ yes. All the time...Idiots. I have fairly open profiles. They say I'm perverted, kinky, open etc, but monogamous (sp?!) to my man, and looking to chat only. Every horny teenage twerp of course then emails...Seriously a 17yr old guy from GORE will email, on his profile he says he is into cars etc! And he emails ME saying 'I'll spank ya!' \*sigh\*... But anyway...I probably don't respond to about 87% of messages because they're idiots. The rest are genuine.”* Richard (36) and his wife received unwanted sexual comments, advances and images all the time from single men who were just *“trying their luck”*, which became very annoying for them as they stated in their couple's profile that they were looking for other couples *only*. Muriel (52) had been approached online a few times by much younger men, however she was more amused than insulted and would chat to them online, but refused to meet face-to-face. How a person looked was not that important to her as she was more interested in reading about their thoughts and the way they expressed themselves on issues and about themselves. She really appreciated a great sense of humour and stated that it was what was inside a person that counted, not their outward appearance.

Val (45) initially joined two adult orientated online dating sites as she was just looking for sex, however recently she had also joined a mainstream online dating site to look for a long term relationship. Unfortunately she had not had many replies from her mainstream profile as she felt that all the men were just looking for sex. She justified this statement by saying that she had received only 20 replies on the mainstream site, but about 8000 replies on her current adult orientated site. Val received many sexual approaches from men online, as she described: *“guys looking for*

*one off sex...instantly...like that night...I am not interested in one off sex! I want a regular fuck buddy...so I usually tell them to find a hooker!! lol... tell them it is cheaper and easier! Probably 95% [of these men] would be married...quite a few are young guys...like 19-24 [years old].”* Val became very frustrated with the amount of young men who contacted her, especially as she clearly specified in her profiles that she wanted a man aged 35-45 years. She found that these young men wanted to go to sex clubs and wanted “instant sex” as she explained: “*They can’t get into a sex club as a lone male.... they need a woman to get them in... so... they chat you up.... tell you they want to play and want to go to [X Club] etc.... then I am pretty sure they would dump the fat old bag as soon as they got into a room of other naked people!! lol*” She often asked these young men why they did not approach women closer to their own age, as she explained: “*I often ask them that...if I am feeling generous and don’t send them a nasty message telling them to fu\*k off!! They say that older women know what they want...and are more fun!! yeah...right!! Bet they don’t think that about their mum!! lol cos if you try and recall...our parents didn’t have sex!! lol got to ask why though? god.. gravity is a bitch...and wrinkles etc!! you know...when you are naked and shagging it doesn’t matter what you look like!! Young women are very obsessed with their body etc...and they don’t really put a lot of effort into shagging...apparently...they are more worried about that bit of ‘flab’ around their tum!! and don’t let loose and make lots of noise!! and apparently they are starfish...just lie there...don’t participate...according to the guys.. that is...I have asked them this myself...and this is the sort of reply I get.”*

Garth (44) believed that men and women were becoming more equal, and that women could always find a lover, but if a man was “ugly” he would be ignored or insulted, as he explained: “*Guys are becoming as self conscious about their looks as women have been in the past...the pressure is now felt by all...But men have traditionally been positioned as the chasers...The women are chased...now [men] are just another photo*

*on the web...They must attract just like every other person... Men no longer can get away with beer bellies etc...I think women are gaining confidence to chose their men...Good for them but bad, as I said, if you are not the most handsome son of a gun.”*

### ***Theme Three: Fluid sexualities, sexual experimentation, and online infidelity***

#### **Fluid sexual orientations**

The Kinsey (1948, 1953) and Hite Reports (1976) have already provided valuable insights into the fluidity of sexual orientations within society. The Kinsey Reports suggested that a scale encompassing a variety of sexual orientations would provide a more accurate measure of sexual orientation than the more traditional categorical measures with set points. In addition, Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) research into the social construction of reality contended that sexual orientations were socially-culturally formed rather than being biologically fixed. These conclusions were certainly mirrored in the current findings when some interviewees expressed their confusion over the requirement to choose just one sexual orientation category during the demographic question segment of the interview. They felt that what was happening in their lives at a particular time influenced what sexual orientation they chose to have and this could, and often would, change throughout their life, and occasionally be directly influenced by their online dating experiences. Some interviewees opted for the nebulous sexual orientation category of bi-curious<sup>42</sup> rather than bisexual, where being bi-curious acted more as an adjunct to being heterosexual rather than a definite shift away from their main sexual preference. Some

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<sup>42</sup> Bi-curious is a term commonly accepted by people who may or may not actively experiment with same sex relationships. They may be curious about a same sex sexual encounter rather than being committed to changing from their heterosexual orientation. Some choose to act on their curiosity and may have one or more same sex sexual encounters, while others may just fantasize about it.

of the interviewees did not realise they were bi-curious until they were directly exposed to this option through their online dating experiences.

Although Garth (44) had earlier in his life fantasised about sexually being with another man, he said he enjoyed being with women too much and did not have enough interest at that time to pursue a same sex encounter. However, when he became single, he decided to explore this part of his sexuality, initially by exploring the various online dating websites, then posting an online profile himself to allow him greater access to the site in order to read other men's online profiles, as he described: *"Then I see some stuff [online] that turns me on and I think ok - I have to try this if it is turning me on...So I met a guy - in his late 50's and we do some stuff but I decided it really did not do it for me."* Although he did not find his first experience satisfying, he soon met another man online with whom he formed a more enjoyable three week sexual relationship. However, at the time of the interview he was actively looking for a female partner online as he realised that for him: *"as much as it turned me on there was nothing to 'Gay'...It has no point...Hetero relationships result in children...Life is about the continuation of Life...People can be lovely whether they are men or women...but life needs two genders to continue."*

Andy (51) wanted his sexual orientation to be classified as a 70/20/10 percent mixture of heterosexual, bi-curious and bisexual. His sexual orientation was classed as very 'fluid' as it changed fairly frequently, depending on what interested him at the time. He seemed very comfortable with this concept, and strongly resistant to being "pigeonholed" into one particular sexual orientation category. Val (45) considered herself bi-curious, something that had developed directly because of her involvement with online dating, as she found she enjoyed sexual play with other couples and another female. Initially she joined two adult orientated online dating sites as she was just looking for sexual encounters, however recently she had also joined what she described as a legitimate online dating site to look for a more committed relationship as

she would like some companionship as well as sex, stating: *“and I want a bit of companionship too...I want someone that I can have a drink with...a meal...an outing...and then a great shag!! Then he can feck off back to his house!! And I can go home to my house!!”*

Occasionally some of Susan's (37) sexual partners would meet each other through her instigating a *“get together”*, usually resulting in a group sexual encounter, as she explains: *“there are more men than women [present] but the number of women is increasing rapidly...thanks to women like myself, I have had a lot of first time women approach me and I coach them into exploring themselves...they don't look back mostly and society as a whole [is] encouraging women to be more sexual.”* She had noticed that it was mainly married women over 30 years old that contacted her, with *“most [being] encouraged by their partners...I think its the whole lesbian fantasy thing with guys...and as women are becoming more bold guys are getting in on the act.”* She has also noticed that the bisexual or bi-curious men she has had sexual encounters with have not been able to share their bisexuality with their respective wives or partners, explaining: *“they still feel ashamed at revealing an attraction to men...it's just not as acceptable...again it's the whole society conditioning scenario...[however] it is changing and has come along way...hence the men that are meeting with men [online] but it still has along way to go...It's a lot more out there than back in the 50's and 60's.”*

Samuel (50) was bi-curious and was aware of other married men who used online dating sites for organising casual sexual encounters outside their marriages. He recalled one particular incidence when he and a girlfriend were involved in a threesome with a married man who was bisexual. The man's wife apparently knew about his bisexuality but did not want to know anything about that side of his sex life, although accepting that he occasionally needed to see men sexually. This particular man, however, did not inform his wife that there was also another woman involved in these sexual encounters and Samuel hypothesises that it could have caused problems for the husband if he had mentioned this fact. Of

the 50 people Samuel had met face-to-face during his six years of online dating, five of them were men, and approximately 15 people were married, including all of the men. However his experience of same-sex sexual encounters had been limited to group sexual encounters involving occasional sexual experimentation with a same-sex participant, but with most of the sexual attention being given to the female participant/s.

### **Increased sexual experimentation**

Increasing numbers of people worldwide are turning to the Internet for online sexual encounters (cybersex) and to organise to meet offline for sex. In trying to understand this phenomenon, Mileham states that “anonymity carries with it an inherent element of ‘freedom’ to express oneself while remaining unexposed and even to experiment with facets of the self that ordinarily remain hidden” (2004, p. 16). New experiences can be accessed online, Mileham (2004) explains, that may not have happened without access to the Internet, providing opportunities to stray or experiment sexually with unpredictable outcomes for both online and offline relationships. Berger’s (1963) cosmopolitan motif fits well under this theme as a number of interviewees had discovered online dating allowed them to explore outside a previously held parochial or narrow-minded perspective to embrace a new paradigm to do with their sexual identities or behaviours. In some cases this had led to an awakening of an interviewee’s sexual nature or being introduced to a completely different sexual reality such as bdsm or group sex.

A significant number of interviewees mentioned that other family members and friends were also using online dating, and in some families multi-generational online dating was taking place. This could indicate that online dating was becoming more ‘mainstream’ within New Zealand society, following overseas trends. In addition, some interviewees found that by sharing their more adventurous online dating experiences with their friends, they became more accepting of the interviewee’s particular sexual predilection, and in some cases even considered it a timely warning to take more care of their own relationships. In this way, sharing of online

dating experiences provided a forum for some interviewees to share potentially sensitive information in a way that other people could accept, at the same time assisting in the normalisation of previously considered unacceptable behaviour and furthering the general acceptance of online dating as a legitimate way to meet potential partners. Online dating in New Zealand has been attracting growing public interest with feature documentaries on *Campbell Live* (14/2/06) and the *Sunday* programme (6/5/07), and further research currently being undertaken with a University of Auckland doctoral thesis – all indicators of prevalence and salience.

Although Muriel (52) had removed her profile from the online dating site while seeing what happens with her husband, she was seriously thinking about going back online as during her time online, she found a renewed appreciation of her sexuality which gave her a sense of freedom, as she explains: *“I have never been unfaithful in 25 years of marriage and now I don't know if I want to recommit or not...[M] has shown me another way of life...I'm pretty straight...didn't know I even had a fetish or two until I met [M]...Would you believe phone sex...as well as full on sex [with] enthusiasm...I don't know what the definition of a fetish is - I had never been into an adult shop let alone owned a vibrator [before]...Damn good tool too.”* Andy (51) identified with having a sexual ‘difference’ in that he had tried and enjoyed some less conventional sexual interests such as bdsm, threesomes and group sex. He revealed his particular sexual ‘difference’ in his profiles targeting a short term relationship, but omitted his less conventional sexual interests in his profiles targeting a long term relationship.

Mary (25) had dabbled in cybersex but found it rather boring, as she explains: *“it's boring to have cybersex so I don't think I would do it again...someone telling you what he is doing while imagining you are there...like, I'm taking your bra off etc, its boring. You would have to be very inventive for it to be fun...the best sex I have had is with a person in real life...typing and masturbating is not easy to do.”* In her “perfect world” she would like to have a three-way long term relationship with her partner

and another woman where they could all live together in an open relationship, but she cannot see that happening anytime soon as she considered New Zealand very conservative and doubted that many single women would want to share their partner with another woman. During the time Anne (59) was utilizing online dating, she had two online relationships with men who lived in other countries. The second relationship was a casual relationship that remained in the confines of the Internet and phone sex, as she explains: *“I had a great online relationship with a guy who lived in...he was a British guy, he lived in Spain...and this was kind of online sex and cybersex...it was great...(laughter)...we just had a super time and kind of, how can I put it, we indulged each others fantasies and umm...it was fun (laughter)...it was completely without strings and just a lot of fun. He was a real sweetie...he was...it’s not great sex, it’s not great sex but it is a lot of fun...it is fun, but there is only so far you can go with that...and for me the best sex I have ever had has been with [my current partner] and it is because it is in the context of a trusting relationship...I trust him totally and that to me has been very sexually liberating.”*

Previous to her online dating journey, Denise (27) had not been involved with the bdsm scene at all, although she had done various things in the past that were bdsm in nature, however she had no idea there was a bdsm community until she was approached through the online dating site. For Denise, wearing corsets is a form of self-bondage, as she explains: *“I adore corsets...bondage...ummmm how filthy can I get here? ? lol!!! I’m pretty fetishistic about cum<sup>43</sup> to be honest. It’s my biggest fantasy. But that, and corsetry, I guess aren’t TRUE fetishes, in that I don’t NEED them to achieve orgasm. I think I’ve heard them referred to as paraphiliacs. Does that sound right?”* With the bondage, corsets and ‘cum’, she felt she experienced aspects of *“humiliation, degradation, and objectification”* – all

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<sup>43</sup> Jargon for “semen: the thick white fluid containing spermatozoa that is ejaculated by the male genital tract” ([wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn)).

aspects she really enjoyed, although in her words, “*not very ‘pc’*”.

### **Online infidelity**

With the allure of anonymity and easy accessibility of the Internet, many people who are married or in committed long term relationships are turning to the Internet for online intimate relationships that often migrate to offline sexual encounters. Online affairs have become an increasing cause for marriage dissolution, with one-third of divorce litigation in America attributed to them, based on 2002 figures (Mileham, 2004). In their paper on digital dating and virtual relating, Merkle and Richardson (2000) differentiate between face-to-face relationship infidelity and online infidelity by stressing that online infidelity usually involves considerable geographic distance, making it harder for sexual intercourse to physically take place between the online couple and thereby limiting the potential for sexual betrayal<sup>44</sup>. However, they propose that because of the greater disclosure that occurs online, *emotional* infidelity may negatively impact on the primary relationship, which suggests that “infidelity within cyberspace is better accounted by emotional betrayal than sexual involvement” (Merkle & Richardson, 2000, p. 190). Of the 32 interviewees, four were married or in a *de facto* relationship when initially involved with online dating, two of whom were married or in a *de facto* relationship, five interviewees were approached by married men, and one interviewee used online dating to trap her husband who was cheating online.

Val (45) was married when she initially used online dating to look for extra-marital sexual encounters. At the time she did ask her husband’s permission to go online dating, which he agreed to initially, however he did not like it once she had started, so she told him she would stop, but she did not. Val herself decided to leave her husband fairly soon after starting

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<sup>44</sup> This is assuming infidelity is about actual sexual contact and with sexual betrayal defined purely in terms of sexual intercourse or general physical sexual contact.

online dating because she did not want to continue cheating on him as she considered him a nice person. She did have a regular sexual partner at the time of the interview; however they were both trying to draw back as they were developing feelings that neither wanted because he was still married, as she explains: *“I don’t want to be responsible for breaking up his marriage...don’t want him to [leave his marriage]...but...yes...he got busted...and he did consider leaving his marriage...I told him not to...that the grass is not always greener...so he is hanging in there for now and still playing around...hopefully he will be more careful and not get caught...this is fun.. but it can get lonely too...at least he has a wife at the end of the day...even if she doesn’t want to have sex with him as much as he wants to.”* When Val was asked whether she thought the lack of sex in a long established marriage was the main cause for men to cheat, she replied: *“yes...or vanilla sex...it was the reason I played around...vanilla sex...missionary...all over in 5 mins.”* She had a few friends that knew she was on adult online dating sites and after hearing about her various sexual escapades with married men, one of her married friends stated that it: *“opened her eyes and she realises she needs to put in more effort in her own marriage!! Doesn’t want her man to end up with us!! lol.”* Although Val found that most of the married men were keen to chat online for a while first and in fact are very good at flirting, when she met them for a coffee she knew that some of them would not actually cheat on their wife despite liking the idea. She usually left those ones alone and advised them to go back home and try and make it work with their wife. However she sometimes saw them back online later and some even approached her again to ask to meet her, but then could not be pinned down for a time or date.

Sally (38) included a warning for married people when concluding her interview, saying: *“I warn all the married people that if their partners spend lots of time online at night, they’re probably online dating and getting into mischief! I did it to my husband...[but] I left him, he probably knew... I didn’t leave him for anyone off the net, just because it wasn’t working, the*

*net provided me with a dream and it was enough for me to make a move...I think it enabled me to see what I was missing out on a lot quicker than I would have otherwise...but it wasn't the cause of our break-up, people too often blame the net when it's about a marriage that isn't working...you don't want to spend hours online with others if you're happy in your relationship."*

Although Elaine (29) had been in a nine year de facto relationship with her partner, for the last three months she had been looking for extramarital sexual encounters through online dating as she and her partner had mismatched sex drives. Her partner was aware of her outside relationships, as she explains: *"been with my partner 9 years, he is kind of aware of my outside relationships – he knows he can't meet my sexual needs and that I have to look outside our relationship for it but he doesn't want to loose me, nor does he want details."* Ideally, Elaine preferred one married man to have sexual encounters with on a regular basis, so they could get to know what the other liked, and invest time in developing the extramarital relationship to be more mutually satisfying, explaining: *"Sex is something that I enjoy as a recreational activity. I am more like a man in my thinking of it; there is very little emotional attachment. I do it because I have needs and it meets them."*

Samuel (50) was married at the time of the interview and belonged to three different online dating sites. He was always a free member (non-subscribed) because he could still get some contacts without paying and some paying methods seemed too risky for getting found out. However, being a free member could limit how he approached people online at times. As he only did online dating at work, time and inclinations also dictated how he might go about approaching others online and, in addition, if he was already seeing someone, he might not want to approach anyone else online. His extramarital relationships usually ended due to changed circumstances such as work times or other family issues. However, he had had one relationship last for two years, two last for one year and others last for six months. He stated that he had not told any

family members that he had been online dating, as he explains: *“because I lead a double life...[but] I like both of my lives...[my online life enables me] to meet new people, to enjoy the moment and to share some feelings...[my offline life gives me] a stable home life, enjoyment with the kids, fun family activities...[my marriage gives me] some good times...[my sexual encounters] give me a chance to do things I can't do in the marriage [as in my marriage] in bed we have just one sexual position.”*

Anne, Kerrie, Fiona, Natalie and Michel all had been approached online by married men looking for sexual encounters. For Anne (59), often these married men said they were happily married but they just wanted to chat or they just wanted casual sex. The three most common excuses married men gave her for doing online dating was that their wife did not understand them, they did not get enough sex from their wife, and they just wanted someone to talk to. Kerrie (47) got upset about the number of married men online looking for extramarital sexual encounters, although she acknowledged that at least they were honest to a point by stating that they were married and they were out looking for just sexual encounters. Fiona (35) found that there were a lot of married men cheating online, as approximately 25-30 percent of her messages were from married men admitting openly they were married but wanting sexual liaisons. Natalie (34) found the most common lie told online to her was to do with relationship status – either by not mentioning anything in their profile or saying they were single when they were either married, living with someone or had a girlfriend, and if she discovered that her date was still involved with someone else, she usually said: *“I think you are still involved in some way with your ex and you need to sort it out’ - they were grateful for this!!! usually they would give me a hug...and we would part amicably lol...grateful that I didn't tell them off...oh yes [I would then] usually [see them back online that] same evening...lol...personally I think that people have good intentions, don't get me wrong I'm sure there are ratbags in there, but they want to find that 'euphoric' feeling they had when they first met someone new - that's how I identified it for me anyway.”*

When asked whether he had ever been approached by married men online, Michel (29) replied: *“hahaha many MANY times...You have no idea how many men out there are married with kids and all; then go online or to public parks and pick up other guys...I have noticed that it was a lot more the case in NZ than in [my own country].”* Michel reasons that they found a compromise by acquiring a wife and having children in the hope that they would become *“normal”* and adjust at some point, with some men choosing to ‘come out’ fully and accepting themselves as gay and some choosing to stay married, but meeting men on the side through websites and phone lines. Although he loved to help them accept themselves, he conceded that it was not easy for these married men to reconcile their conflicted sexual orientation, as he explained: *“Most of them have trouble with the label: Gay or queer is still a vigorous insult...My gut feeling would be...Once you've tasted it, no matter how much you try to repress it, sooner or later you will have to face the facts...or commit suicide (that happens quite a lot actually)...And THIS is very sad.”* He had met a few men in New Zealand whose wives knew about their sexual encounters with other men. One wife still loved her husband and wanted to keep him, so she accepted *“pretty much anything”*, although he wondered whether she may have been less jealous since her husband was not cheating on her with another woman. Michel estimated that 40 percent of the men that approached him online in his own country were classified as ‘straight’, compared to at least 50 percent in New Zealand.

Lana’s (48) second time using online dating was for the purpose of catching her partner cheating, which she undertook by setting up many bogus profiles. Lana suspected her partner was cheating, as she explains: *“my partner was still chatting to other women online...I didn’t like it but he convinced me it was platonic and I was being jealous! he told me there was no way he could ever meet these women because they were so far away...I wondered ‘would he meet them if they weren’t far away!’ so with the help of a work colleague I set up a bogus profile on the dating site*

*I knew he used...I caught him out alright! He even had arranged to meet this 'fantasy' woman...he promised he would never do it again etc etc... I was very upset! But we were planning on moving back to NZ and we just put our energies into that...but things happened again once we arrived back in NZ...he discovered [NZ based online dating site]...and I discovered a profile he had set up on [it]...it was very explicit...he was wanting discrete day time sex...we ended up at counselling and discovered that he actually suffers from SLARs...(sex/love & relationship addiction).”* Lana thought that the internet just made it easier for people with this affliction, but through counselling, self-reflection, and understanding what he had already lost in his life and what he could still lose, she felt he was managing to overcome SLARS. Nevertheless she acknowledged that she had no way of really knowing whether he was back online or not, but rather than being constantly hyper-vigilant, she set clear boundaries that he agreed to adhere to.

#### ***Theme Four: 'Difference'***

##### **Negotiating 'difference' online**

'Difference' in the context of this research includes any physical, mental or emotional impairment, belonging to an ethnic minority, having a sexual 'difference' such as having a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, having a fetish or being involved in bdsm, threesomes or group sex – in fact, any 'difference' that might impact adversely on a person's experience of online dating. Although most interviewees who identified with having a particular 'difference' did not appear to have a problem with being categorized in this way, some interviewees did express disagreement with the term 'difference' as they perceived themselves as normal and everyone else as different. This phenomenon has been outlined in the work of Goffman (1963), Berger (1963) and Berger and Luckmann (1966), as referred to in the Theoretical Framework chapter of this thesis. Most of the interviewees who identified themselves as having a 'difference' did point out that they had to negotiate their 'difference' in specific ways with the people they met online. Some chose to be totally honest and clearly

state their particular 'difference' in their profile, while others chose to wait until they knew a person further in order to establish a level of trust before revealing their particular 'difference' to them – an example of Goffman's (1963) 'disclosure etiquette'.

Berger (1963) suggests that if enough people join in with an alternative way of thinking, a counter culture or sub-world evolves that contains its own discourse and rules and is "carefully shielded from the effect of both the physical and the ideological controls of the larger society" (1963, p. 153). This can result, Berger argues, in a previously considered deviant behaviour becoming 'routinized' within society, illustrated in part by how being gay or lesbian is increasingly considered a legitimate part of mainstream society and no longer considered as a psychological illness. As the following interviews indicate, bdsm and other sexual predilections are possibly becoming 'routinized', although the potential skew in data should be taken into account when considering this possibility.

Mary (25) was bisexual and her partner, who was heterosexual, was very supportive of this aspect of her sexual orientation and encouraged her to find women to have sex with, while he watched. Mary had a pain fetish<sup>45</sup> and was a 'sub'<sup>46</sup> in the bdsm sense with her partner, who was a 'dom'<sup>47</sup>. This aspect of their sexual lives had developed over a period of time during their relationship. While they did not live the total master<sup>48</sup>/'sub' lifestyle, they did have a written contract between them (similar to a marriage contract) that defined the relationship in terms of what was acceptable or not. When asked if she would respond online to other

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<sup>45</sup> A pain fetish is where a person enjoys pain during the sexual act.

<sup>46</sup> 'Sub' is the shortened term for someone in the submissive role in the bdsm sense, where a person gives in to the demands of others.

<sup>47</sup> 'Dom' is the shortened term for someone in the dominant role in the bdsm sense, where a person is in control of others.

<sup>48</sup> Master/mistress is a person who takes on the dominant role in a bdsm relationship.

people with a 'difference', she replied: *"most people I talk to have a difference! As I am looking for a bisexual female...I am interested in knowing more about them, either as a friend or something more. It's the straight 'normal' people I have to be wary of lol...the straight people may not understand me, may be judgemental, and they don't fit my criteria's anyway. The people with a difference are the kind of people I am looking for."* By limiting herself to approaching only those people with a 'difference', Mary may be experiencing what Goffman (1963) describes as a propensity for a stigmatized person to protect themselves by searching out other stigmatised people and in this way forming an alternative self-concept whereby they begin to consider themselves 'normal' and others without stigma as 'different'.

In a similar sense, when Denise (27) was asked whether she considered herself as having any physical, mental, ethnic or sexual 'difference', she replied that she did not consider herself as having any 'difference' as she had never met any two people alike, as she explained: *"I don't see it as being different. Sorry. I think those WITHOUT fetishes etc are a little bit weird though....although perhaps more dishonest...But I see myself as pretty normal."* Denise was particular about who she would approach online or whether she would reply to online approaches. If the approaches were *"inane, badly spelt, disrespectful or unoriginal"*, she would not bother to reply, however if the profile intrigued her or they had a good opening line, then she would be happy to share contact. High levels of literacy were important to her, as she explains: *"The games I'm interested in are mind games. I'm an intelligent person, and words are very important to me. To become sexually aroused I need to have someone who fires my mind. If they can't spell, I tend to write them off pretty quickly. Also, for a player within the bdsm scene to be safe, they have to have a LOT of knowledge - of health, anatomy, etc etc. Unless you have an AWESOME mentor, you have to read A LOT to get all that info. I find if people are crappy spellers, they don't tend to be readers...which spells danger for me."*

Susan (37) revealed in her profiles that she was bisexual and that she was somewhat dominant sexually, although she did not live the full bdsm lifestyle. The only negative responses she received about this online was from other 'doms', as she explains: *"Often I will be approached by a Dom who perhaps lives the bdsm lifestyle to the max, not just in the bedroom, and this can sometimes lead for interesting events...usually they will meet with me and its game on...one of us gives...I admit it is usually me lol...[game on] means we go to 'war' for want of a better word in the bedroom and see who switches to sub first...Dom's that are always in their respective roll get the respect, whereas Dom's like myself that keep it as a scene for sex often are challenged to see if we break...to see if I can give as good as I say."* If Susan saw that someone had an issue of 'difference' when perusing online profiles, she was very likely to approach them, especially if they revealed a sexual 'difference', as she liked to push her sexual boundaries, her own mind and other people's rather than keep in the "vanilla lane"<sup>49</sup>.

Richard (36) acknowledged that he and his wife had a sexual 'difference' in that they enjoyed Japanese rope bondage, although they were fairly new to this and did not share this activity with their other sexual partners at this stage. If they were approached by someone who revealed they had an issue of 'difference', they generally chatted to them to see if they were compatible; however it depended on what type of 'difference' they had. They would also approach someone who revealed in their profile an issue of 'difference'; but again, it would depend on what type of 'difference' a person had.

Natalie (34) had been wheelchair bound all her life due to a

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<sup>49</sup> Vanilla lane is a term commonly used to denote boring and unadventurous sexual activity.

neuromuscular condition, which had made it difficult for her to meet potential partners. She initially used to meet men in an online chat room, and then she joined three online dating sites, which is how she met her husband. However, when she first started online dating, she was not completely open about her physical impairment, as she explains: *“Initially when I registered with these [online] dating agencies - I never let on that I had a disability and then it became apparent that I needed too...because it would come up in conversation...because people would ask 'do you go to the gym' lol. When I didn't include my disability in my profile I got flooded with messages...then I changed it and there were very few.”* Although she continued to approach people online, the responses became variable, with some men being *“fine and happy to meet up”*, while others did not reply to her online messages. Natalie had received occasional offensive remarks from people online about her physical impairment and usually would retaliate with some sarcastic remarks and then block<sup>50</sup> them from contacting her again. However she would soon recover, as she explains: *“well it was sometimes sad for me, but usually i would pick myself up pretty quickly and keep going - there was one stage i went off line for about a month - removed my profile but then I got over it.”*

Michel (29) had belonged to at least 15 different online dating sites during his time online dating, with nine based in his homeland and the rest in New Zealand, although some were international sites, stating: *“I actively (some would say even aggressively) approach others...I have acquired a great capacity to browse profiles quickly...I sometimes repeat the same patterns and messages (copy and paste) just to create contact...then, the dialog (if there is one) becomes more personal... [and] it is quite hard to label people, I mean I approach guys, regardless of their sexual orientation. The reality is there can be differences between the way one*

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<sup>50</sup> A block applied at an online dating site prevents the blocked person's communications from being delivered.

*defines or sees oneself and the way the rest of the world categorizes you. I would say I approach guys who express their interest in men, not the ones that express their interest in women, unless they specify it. For me sexual orientation doesn't really exist, of course, one can be attracted to one or the other but a lot of people will go both ways if they can keep it private.*" He considered this a world-wide phenomenon as he felt the internet had helped a lot of people "come out"<sup>51</sup> (at least to themselves) and not feel isolated. In an exploratory study into identity re-creation in online dating profiles undertaken by Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan and McCabe (2005), gay and lesbian informants found anonymity an important aspect of online dating as it allowed them to explore their sexual orientation status before fully 'coming out'. Although Michel (29) revealed in his profiles that he was openly gay, he had never received any online abuse or negativity. However, when he approached men online who were not openly gay, *"they respond either really nicely or as real jerks, depending on their character"*. In these circumstances, he would either pursue dialogue if they were nice, or just *"drop it"* if they were *"nasty"*. If he was approached by someone who had a 'difference', he tried to keep an open mind and endeavoured to communicate with them normally.

During Wendy's (48) time with online dating, she received a number of unwanted sexual comments and pictures online, mainly from men, as she explains: *"guys usually...stupid pics...and this destiny church guy emailed once...don't know why...he said I was evil and should repent and gays were going to hell lol...I ignored him...a bit sad but guess that's what I expect...had it all my life...such is life."* Wendy did not consider herself as having any particular issue of 'difference', however within the context of this research and how 'difference' was defined by the interviewer, she acknowledged her sexual 'difference' as being lesbian. She had received mostly positive responses online from revealing in her profile that she was

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<sup>51</sup> 'Coming out' is a term used for someone who openly reveals that they are homosexual.

a lesbian, with any negative responses being ignored. Although she was hesitant to approach others with a 'difference' online, she was happy to talk with them normally if they approached her.

Colin (28) stated that 50 years ago he would have possibly been institutionalised; now however, he felt that people like himself were on the way back into the community but remained relatively isolated from it, and definitely not accepted as close to equals yet in many instances. He considered online dating as going some way towards fostering integration into society for people with a 'difference' as it allowed people to see "*outside the face of what first presents*". However, after reaching past the first presentation, he believed people still had similar stipulations, seeking a person who was of a similar "*value*" to themselves, as he explains: "*I assume that we each want people that will work for us, I have a different mind set (through illness) than the norm and a different than norm financial situation, each by itself imposes that people may question if its what they want.*" Generally though, his online dating experiences had been good and he was glad to have met some of the people he had online, as he did not have much social interaction in his day-to-day life. Colin stated in his profile that he had schizophrenia and although he did not usually receive negative responses online, when he used the online dating forums<sup>52</sup>, he did get "*bad mouthed*" sometimes. He talked about the usual response he got when someone asked him about his illness: "*most people don't contact me about it...if they ask about my illness and get an answer they tend not to contact me again, like if they hear about it that's enough and they don't want to hear anymore...[this is because] look at the media coverage of the past 'lunatics' 'crazy people' 'split personality'. They*

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<sup>52</sup> Online forums are the message-boards where online dating participants can chat to each other about current events, social issues or any subject that interests them at the time subject to topic definitions / constraints specified for the forum.

*haven't seen that it can actually be an advantage...You read the media, you read about the illness, little information has said to date 'it has good elements'...instead there has been more emphasis on it being a problem...I am very used to people not understanding it hardly at all or incorrectly now, I usually don't bother to correct them very often I probably should teach them a bit more about it...It's only been 50 years or so since it was partly recognised as treatable, and now it's only partly starting to be recognised as an asset.”* Colin mentioned that he possessed only one research article that said he could be of value to society, and probably hundreds to thousands of articles that said he was a “*problem*” to society, although he hoped that in the future this attitude might change.

Fiona (35) identified with having a sexual ‘difference’ due to being bisexual, although she felt that being a bisexual female did not seem that different these days. In addition, she also identified with a mental ‘difference’ as she was suffering from post traumatic stress disorder. She did not mention either of these ‘differences’ in her profiles however, and would only reveal them if she was in a relationship with a person. Peter (43) chose not to mention in his online dating profile that he suffered from depression, however he did tell his new partner about being on medication for depression before he commenced living with her.

### ***Theme Five: Online dating as a tool for self-discovery***

Online dating as a tool for self-discovery has been touched on in Underwood’s (2005) research when she mentions that a process of ‘uncovering the self’ leads to greater intimacy between online dating participants. However, because of my own experience with online dating, I was interested in whether the interviewees had learnt anything about themselves, others or society by reflecting on their own online dating experiences. From a sociological perspective, I consider some of the most profound insights of this research project were revealed in their answers to these three questions.

## **What the participants learnt about themselves**

Thirty of the 32 interviewees experienced insights about themselves as a direct result of their involvement with online dating. 23 interviewees experienced general insights, while seven interviewees had more specific insights relating to a situation they were currently experiencing in their lives. The general insights covered areas such as rediscovering a sense of self-worth, trusting 'gut instinct', developing an understanding of the opposite sex, being authentic, and that they were still desired by the opposite sex, which proved surprising for some interviewees. The specific insights addressed issues such as infidelity; relationship breakdown; sexual experimentation and mental illness.

The most common general insights were in the area of self-esteem, self-worth and self-empowerment, with seven of the 23 interviewees mentioning these. Kerrie (47) states that: *"yes, I have learnt that I am allowed to say no! and that I can ask for what I want and hold on for what is the very best"*, while Muriel (52) says that: *"I like me now - and that I have got something to offer the right person and that I enjoy going out on dates... its my call... my life and I like to think I am now in control of that."* Andy (51) had his self-worth validated by feedback he had received from people he had met through online dating, as he describes: *"I have had reaffirmed that I'm a good person... that in the human food chain(?) I'm swimming near the top."* Henrietta (57) and Peter's (43) self-esteem had been positively affected by their online dating experiences, with Henrietta exclaiming: *"well, that I can still catch a man...at my age!"* and Peter saying: *"I must be more attractive than I thought I was. Or at least some of the women think so."* However, Paula (49) wondered whether online dating had done anything for her self-esteem, as she explains: *"not sure it has done anything great for my self esteem really...well it has its ups and downs...There are times when things are going well and I feel great and looking back I have met so many really neat people, some I still keep in touch with and some have fallen by the way ....It does really...It takes a dive when I meet someone I like and then I don't hear from them at all."*

Learning to take risks was mentioned by two interviewees as being something they had learnt from their online dating experiences, with Natalie (34) saying: *“that I’m a risk taker...I never imagined me to be that way”* and Cindy (24): *“I have learnt that I value the intellectual aspect of a relationship, just as much, if not more than any other part...I have learnt that I can take ‘risks’ too...which has been good.”* While Richard (36) had learnt to be more confident, Jane (20) had come to realise: *“that I’m not as confident as what I think I am. As in I’m unsure if I want to meet someone offline after talking to them. And that I am more safe about people now...I guess I’m good at picking who I trust just over the computer. I have been offered to meet a lot of guys but the 4 I picked I trusted.”* Sally (38) said that during her time using online dating she learnt to trust her intuition *“because its just about always right”*, and Fiona (35) had also learnt to be more discerning about people she met online, as she explains: *“I am learning lots on the dating journey in general and its hard to differentiate what I have specifically learnt from the online portion of dating. But I have learnt that I am cautious to the point of almost being paranoid...and I have learnt to be more discerning about people.”* Ruby (43) learnt a variety of things during her time with online dating, such as: *“To develop a thick skin!! To not be so upfront I guess although I always...although I mostly am. And I have learnt what I really want from a man, what’s most important to me.”*

Wendy (48) learnt not to judge people by their looks and to build trust during her time with online dating, and Lana (48) had learnt that most people online were normal, as she explains: *“probably that most people are basically genuine. There is the odd one that isn’t...but most are friendly and ‘normal’... it seems it is becoming more and more a legitimate way of meeting people in this day and age.”* Tina (44) found that being authentic online was important, saying: *“Honesty is still definitely the best policy even though you may connect with someone who YOU think would be best suited for you in the long run it was better to meet a lot of frogs and then end up with a prince finally! JUST BE YOURSELF IS THE BEST*

*LESSON LEARNT.” Keith (61) also found that authenticity online was important, stating he had learnt: “All sorts of things. AND IT RELATES TO HOW I WOULD LIKE TO FUNCTION AND also how it is so important to be just natural. We all like to praise ourselves when we want to impress someone. Well that can be a wrong thing to do, also. Just being natural is the most important thing. Also when you meet someone it is important to spruce yourself up too. Not over the top though.”*

Learning about men was mentioned by three interviewees, with Gloria (46) explaining: *“I learned a lot about men...my background was to marry at 19 to my first boyfriend who I met at 16. I grew up with three sisters and really had very little contact with men. I learned they love to have a shoulder to cry on and they also like to be mothered, especially the lonely ones.”* Sandra (46) also mentioned tolerance and patience: *“I’ve learnt a lot of tolerance and patience, and the many and varied differences in men”,* while Michel (29) felt that he had learnt: *“what type of men and relationships I was looking for...It also taught me patience ☺.”*

Finally, Anne (59) concluded with her insights that she had acquired during her online dating experiences: *“I finally did I suppose learn the lessons that I had to learn...umm...In the early days I learnt that you can be deceived really easily online, that people are not how they seem, not because they wittingly deceive you but because the medium is deceptive. Well, I think the medium umm...creates a false intimacy...I actually took a transcript which I am not sure I still have, but I took a transcript of my first conversation with the American guy and as I read back over it, you leap really quickly to an intimate level...there is something about the medium that allows you to do that, but it is a false intimacy because it is not based on any kind of discussion of shared beliefs or values or history or culture or anything...so, I think the medium creates a false sense of intimacy which ultimately can be shattered and often is shattered and I think this is why so many people end up going overseas because they think they have got this deep intimate connection with a person and the truth is, they*

*haven't...and that is why the second time around I was really quick to meet up with the person, you should get that bit out of the road and you can move on from there...I mean, real life I think is about a physical person standing in front of you, it is not about a computer screen."*

Samuel, Val, Susan and Elaine were all in, or had been in, established relationships while using online dating to organise sexual encounters. Their relationship statuses were different in nature with Samuel currently married, Val initially married, Susan in an open relationship and Elaine in a *de facto* relationship. Samuel (50) and Val (45) had learnt different lessons to Susan (37) and Elaine (29), as Val explains: *"I learnt that the grass is not always greener on the other side!! and that my impulsive personality is not always a good thing"*, while Samuel learnt: *"I have found that the dating experience is not always so great, and not totally fulfilling as how I used to find my marriage. I have met some really wonderful people though along the way, some that I would love to spend a very long time with."* Elaine and Susan had learnt that they enjoyed sex, as Elaine explains: *"Sex is something that I enjoy as a recreational activity. I am more like a man in my thinking of it; there is very little emotional attachment. I do it because I have needs and it meets them. It has made me appreciate my relationship more"*, while Susan said she has learnt: *"If anything that I am a very sexual sensuous woman with a very non-judgemental open mind that makes a very intelligent and good friend, something I didn't believe of myself say 8 years ago...I've surprised myself getting to know me lol...and I couldn't have done this without online dating."*

Denise (27) had also learnt through her online dating experiences that she enjoyed her sexual predilections, as she explains: *"[I have learnt that] I'm a pervert and I can be who I want to be, that it's acceptable. That I'm pretty snobby and unfriendly to those less educated than me. And that I don't suffer fools gladly."* For Ruth (40), her experiences with online dating had left her feeling angry and hurt, vowing to never get involved again with an online relationship, stating: *"that I shouldn't do it... that's it in a nut*

*shell.*” Finally, Colin (28) had some interesting insights into what value he might have within society as a man with schizophrenia, as he explains: *“People will not like me unless I have more to offer...If you are poor and mentally ill in society, the normal society will not think of you as an equal or treat you like one...This applies to dating, work, maybe otherwise as well.”*

### **What they learnt about others**

When asked what they had learnt about others during their time with using online dating, many of the interviewees had a mixture of both positive and negative opinions to offer, as illustrated by Kerrie (47): *“that people all want someone to walk alongside them, that some people are desperate, others lonely, some are completely screwed up but generally most people are pretty honest.”* Andy (51) also had a mixture of insights: *“BIGGEST thing re online specifically is that it’s the BEST way to met people who are more likely to be compatible than any other means. ALSO that while the stereotypes (most negative ones I mean) about men are generally true, an amazing number of women possess exactly the same (negative) attitudes!!!! Users (sex, money, fun, players etc) and even marriage for residency!! Went out with a Brazilian for a few weeks in that situation...Marriage= residency > separate = \$\$\$.”* Fiona (35) had found that: *“there are some very strange people out there, that the anonymity on being online can bring out the ugly in people, and that lots of married men are cheating lol I get many messages from them admitting openly to being married but wanting sexual liaisons...many many...about 25-30% of the messages I get”,* and Elaine (29) mentioned: *“Men don’t necessarily have the same emotional detachment and feel it important to justify why they are cheating.”* Val (45) commented that: *“I have learnt that there are some nice normal people out there... and there are some lying bastards!! Lol”,* and Sally (38) also felt like this, explaining: *“they lie lol the internet is full of people in fantasyland...but occasionally there is the odd gem among them.”*

A more negative response was received from Ruby, Sandra, Wendy, Ruth

and Mary, with Ruby (43) stating she had learnt: *“Not to believe what they say, take it with a pinch of salt”* and Sandra (46) found: *“that they have not a lot of time for idle chit chat, a lot are rude. Could say a real eye opener”* while Wendy (48) found: *“that they can be deceptive if they want something”* and Ruth (40) felt that others were: *“deceitful...liars and predators.”* In addition, Mary (25) found that: *“there are a lot of losers out there... timewasters, fakers, picture collectors, liars... people with no sense of humour...finding the nice people is harder than I expected.”*

Peter (43) was a little more optimistic, stating: *“People are out there trying to meet someone. Most people are very genuine and friendly... Technology can be fun. Sadly there are a lot of broken relationships. But by and large people pick themselves up and get on with their lives.”* Cindy (24) was also positive, stating: *“I have learnt that there are some amazing people out there hiding behind their computer monitors! I would say thanks for letting me get to know them. I know I have learnt something from everyone I have met and though my life is moving in a different direction, I value all of the interactions and communications I have been lucky to have with them over the years”* while Jane (20) learnt that: *“everyone is different...and that there are normal people on the dating lines and not just all weirdo desperates!!!!”* Gloria (46) and Patrick (50) expressed what they had learnt about others during their time with online dating, with Gloria stating: *“it is not all bad stuff on line, we made a lot of friends on line, often people in broken relationships looking for someone to talk to that they will never have to face, so they can say what they really feel with no come back. But there is always the other side with the perverts so you have to be careful”,* and Patrick stating: *“some people just like to have fun and fill in lonely nights, turn off from the real world. You can ask people questions and learn things too.”* Lana (48) was also positive, stating: *“that we are all social people who want to connect with others... the computer is a fairly ‘safe’ way to do this”,* and Tina (44) felt connecting with people important too, as she explains: *“There are a lot of lonely people seeking the same thing, everyone is looking for companionship...also it is important to read between the lines with some*

*people and others you just naturally can take them at face value (only a small handful though!)"*

Donna (28) found writing to strangers better than she had expected, stating: *"There are people who will just write to anyone and hope for the best even though they don't fit the requirements. Overall though I was surprised at how normal everyone seemed and it was much more pleasant writing to strangers than I imagined it would be."* Keith (61) stated that: *"There is a mixed amount of opinion concerning what I have learnt from others. However there has been an element of satisfaction derived from using the web sites. It is great to learn that people can obtain that right from the comfort of their own homes... well it is important for people to have the same amount of opportunities in life as others. Utilising this medium of communication is effective in allowing this."* Denise (27) commented: *"That honesty is pretty rare, although I'm not sure if they're being deliberately dishonest, or just don't know themselves very well. And that decent people ARE out there."* Through his involvement with online dating, Colin (28) had come to realise that: *"Like I am out for myself they are out for themselves as well. They are not better than me and I am no better than them"*, while Michel (29) considered that: *"I've learnt that everyone's got their own agendas and pace and one needs to respect that."*

Muriel (52) had realised that: *"there are a lot of others like me out there... and that I'm not alone in where I am at...and that it is possible to meet others (men) even at my time in life...men alone, scared, needing company."* Garth (44) found: *"That everyone is different beyond that which most people can describe...Yet most people want the same thing...Freedom to live without the curse of expectation"*, while Henrietta (57) discovered: *"well, there are a lot of lonely people out there."* Similar to the others, Natalie (34) found that: *"we humans are all the same no matter what (sex, disability etc) we want the same thing – love... whether it be short term [or] long term."* In the context of Samuel's (50) interview where he discussed his own and others online infidelity, he had found that:

*“some see it as a recreational sex activity only, while others see it as exotic and erotic and very thrilling and hope to meet the right guy.”* Conversely, Susan (37) felt that: *“most people are hiding a deviant side and most people if society would allow it would be totally different.”*

### **What they learnt about society**

31 of the 32 interviewees had formed a variety of thoughts about New Zealand society during their time with using online dating, with Ruby (43) stating that: *“The dating society seems to accept online dating as a viable way of meeting someone for whatever reason you want”* and Garth (44) adding: *“That society adapts to whatever medium it operates through and the same Meta rules will always surface in terms of honesty, friendship and integrity being valued.”* Val (45) was of the opinion that: *“there are a lot of people looking for a quick shag... also a lot of guys are cheating on their wives. The Internet has changed society in an amazing way...and more changes to come I would think.”* Tina (44) felt that: *“Kiwi's are adaptable and always ready to try something new... Recap that.... in 2000 I felt like that... now I view it as a bit risky and some people abuse genuine people looking for genuine relationships”,* while Gloria (46) considered society was: *“always changing but not in some ways, just the way we meet,”* with Patrick (50) considering society: *“Sometimes sad, but that is not because of the net. However the net gives another way to socialise and meet. It is sad that some people are living a lie on line.”* Elaine (29) said: *“There are a lot of dishonest people out there – and they don't need to be”* while Kerrie (47) stated: *“that there are far more sexual deviants out there than I ever thought! lol.”*

When asked about what she had learnt about New Zealand society during her time online dating, Fiona (35) found: *“that people are very judgmental, and feel free to express this online...and that society is very divided on many issues... race, sex, internet dating, looks.... etc etc... internet dating is very different from dating in the real world...suddenly there are way more frogs to kiss before you find that prince.”* Richard (36) mentioned: *“it has changed to use the internet to meet people, instead of going out you*

*can do it from home now... [changed for the] better [as] its easier and safer... you can get to know people a little and so you know what expect when you meet them."* However, Cindy (24) had found that: *"society is slow to catch up with the 'online world'...i have also learnt that much of society seems to be scared of new things and that so many people are quick to say that the new 'bad man' is the one lurking behind the computer screen. It's just not true, society needs to become more open minded."* Paula (49) commented: *"hmmm...that the online community is very small and that can be very interesting. Also people are more open about relationships online or offline than they used to be."*

Andy (51) found that: *"Here [in NZ] it's a bit of a village - rarely I see someone online I recognise - supposedly some people's worst fear! USA is soooo big that it is probably more anonymous. "* Jane (20) found: *"that I'm not the only one here with issues and that people are going through a lot worse issues than myself. The world is also so small. Well [NZ is] a small place and its surprising how many people on here I already know hehe...[and I feel] that most people should be given a fair chance. People shouldn't judge by looks or size and that by internet dating you are getting to know the person by what they are saying and not what they look like."* Sandra (46) mentions: *"I feel men need to pull there heads in a lot more as far as the physical and employment goes. Men can be so shallow, and cruel, there's no way I would be so blatantly horrible about their physical looks etc, there's more to a person than that. Maybe they need to learn from us. It's a vulnerable time when looking for a maybe partner."*

Keith (61) discovered that as a society: *"If we want something that adds holistic and therapeutic value to our lives we will just go for it. It's also about companionship also. It also relates to being part of the community."* Lana (48) was of the opinion that as a society: *"that we want to meet people, form friendships or relationships...connecting with likeminded people (or different people!)...from the relative safety of your own home... its non threatening and fun! I don't think it means that we will all end up*

*conducting all social contact via the computer....but its an excellent icebreaker,” while Muriel (52) considered: “that the internet has enabled people who would otherwise remain lonely to make some contact...in a way that wasn’t possible 10 yrs ago.” Henrietta (57) also found the internet changing the way people were forming relationships, stating: “I would say that we have never been so much in contact with each other...yet...so alone! I would say that [online dating] is much better than any other means...as people can get to know each other before having sex...like in the times of writing letters to one another...if couples just go for the sex...they never really learn to know one another and love each other first...to me...it is much better to create desire.” Mary (25) said she had “learnt a lot more about how accepting people can be, there is a whole community out there that is just like me, normal is different online... there are communities of people into bdsm and swinging, [X city] is full of people that are alternative you just have to know where to look” and Wendy (48) considered people within society to be all different, stating: “people need to be more tolerant of others who may appear different and to get to know people before you form an attachment. It’s easy to be somebody you aren’t online and you need to [be] aware of them. It’s anonymous and I think it’s a great way to meet people if you are shy or don’t get the chance to get out much. I’ve watched the internet rule some people’s lives and would hate that for myself.”*

Sally (38) said that: *“well I thought the internet would be a haven of eligible men....I’ve learnt that even offline, there aren’t that many people we are compatible with...so we shouldn’t think that’s going to change because there is a whole bunch of names on a web page to choose from.”* Natalie (34) found that: *“women are more shallow than men when it comes to accepting peoples differences...that people like me still face the same prejudices that we did 30 years ago...in terms of being sexual beings and being able to contribute to a relationship”* and Susan (37) found: *“that although we have evolved our thinking and accepting of the diverse in NZ we still have a long way to go...however we are getting there and the pace is appearing to be picking up... because people are starting to realise that*

*you have one life to live and if you spend it conforming to what is expected of you..you die alone...especially people that are prepared to take a chance... people that are prepared to take their 'what if's' into reality... I suppose a desperation at trying to fill a void that they mature into realising that it's not necessarily love, marriage or the usual things we are conditioned to believe we want or need but something else... that 'something else' would all depend on the individuals needs... its different for any one person.” Michel (29) commented that: “NZ is an open society in appearance (civil union...) but the reality is different:...men do not know how to express themselves and bottle their feelings inside...also people still very uptight about sexuality... you can 'practice it' but nor speak about it.” Colin (28) stated that: “In terms of what we do, in terms of what we have may be different...Society is the macro application of oneself, and when you have more units than micro resources, micros are expendable on a macro scale...When you are just one unit, you can't afford to write yourself off, however when you're around a lot of units, you can and may well be expendable...I am expendable.”*

Denise (27) felt that: “[society is] pretty fluid. And that society isn't necessarily what people think. 'Society' is made up of many smaller 'societies', none more or less important than the others. That society isn't just middle class white paunchy men and their starched wives. It's all sorts of people, who operate within their own social structure. As long as all obey the laws of he land and are respectful to each other, it's fine. The problem comes when one groups tries to force their reality on another.” Anne (59) stated that: “Oh I think society has changed in, over the years, in terms of you know, how it works and how it transacts these kind of particularly relationship development opportunities you might say... but ahh, I don't think there is anything kind of bad or good about it...it is just a change...it is just the way it has developed and logically really, when you think about how computers have changed our lives in other ways, it is logical that they should change our social interactions umm, I suppose personally that is probably quite good, umm, because otherwise what else

*do you do...you know, as a woman in her 40s or in my case 50s, how do you meet another person?"*

The above findings demonstrate the diversity not only of the interviewees, but also of their experiences with online dating in New Zealand. The following chapter brings together the threads of these experiences, together with literature and theory associated with online dating in a discussion of these findings.



## Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusions

Online dating has introduced a wide range of options for people who are seeking to meet other people to form relationships ranging from committed long-term relationships to serial short-term sexual encounters. The intention of this thesis was to see if New Zealanders were following overseas trends in relation to online dating activities, or developing others that were unique to New Zealand society. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, it was not possible to conduct a planned online questionnaire seeking information on general trends in New Zealand, due to various technical problems. However, I was able to conduct 32 in-depth interviews with a diverse range of people from a variety of geographic areas, and these provided considerable insight into their equally diverse online dating experiences. It is these experiences that I have used to assess whether New Zealand online dating activities are following overseas trends.

Based on the research presented in this thesis, it appears that New Zealand online dating activities are following overseas trends, although there are indications that some behaviour may be more specific to New Zealand society. Hollander's (2004) observation that there is increased self-marketing evident within profiles, reflecting the competitive environment of online dating, is evident in comments made by Garth, who mentions the increased competition between men online and how men now feel under pressure to look attractive as they are "*just another photo on the web,*" and judged on their appearance. High levels of self-disclosure in online communication, as reported by Joinson (2001), was also noted by Henrietta who states that mutual self-disclosure facilitated her falling in love with her long-distance partner. Anderson's (2005) finding that rapport is rapidly established online was also supported by a number of interviewees, with Anne finding that online rapport did not necessarily

translate into offline rapport when meeting that person face-to-face for the first time, with Goffman's (1959) theory of 'front' and 'backstage' personas and the difficulties that arise when these do not correspond offering insights into this. Suler (2004) found that there are participants portraying a false identity online as a way of 'acting out'; Lana's experience with her partner with SLARS suggests deception may be happening in New Zealand to some extent. Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel and Fox's (2002) finding that greater control over interpersonal interactions is experienced online compared to face-to-face interaction was reflected in comments made by Jane, who stated that she can choose whom she meets offline, when she is ready, and only when she feels she can trust them. Tommasi (2004) found that there were significant differences between how men and women portray themselves in their profiles, and although I did not undertake a profile analysis as originally intended, gender differences were revealed when the interviewees were asked about the importance of a potential dating candidate's appearance. The female interviewees were more inclined to approach someone who described themselves as 'average' or 'ordinary' in appearance and were less reliant on a profile photo, whereas the male interviewees were more inclined to approach someone who described themselves as very attractive, and most required a photo before considering an approach. Finally, McCabe (2005) found some evidence that men using online dating sites were seeking sex, while women were seeking intimacy and commitment, and this view was certainly expressed by a number of female interviewees. Paradoxically, however, more female than male interviewees were using online dating to look for casual sexual encounters exclusively, suggesting that among these participants at least, perceptions do not always reflect reality.

There were a variety of successful relationship situations identified by the interviewees using online dating: three married the person they

met online, three are currently engaged, six are living in a *de facto* situation with their partner (including one same-sex relationship), one is in a committed relationship but resides in her own home, and one is involved in an open relationship. Of the remaining single interviewees, only one interviewee expressed a wish to formalize a future relationship, while some expressed a wish *not* to do so, stating that although they would like a long-term committed relationship, they did not particularly want marriage. This phenomenon may be explained by the changing pattern of relationship formation where more people are choosing to live in less formal relationship arrangements (Statistics New Zealand, 1999).

The online dating sites in New Zealand include diverse categories of relationship style that online dating subscribers might be currently interested in seeking. In this way, the various sites are acting as a filtering mechanism that makes it possible for people with access to the Internet to search for specific types of relationships and specific individual requirements. The saying “different strokes for different folks” is certainly relevant to New Zealand online dating sites, where a broader range of relationship styles are now catered for - including conventional forms of relationship, bisexual, bi-curious, gay, lesbian, threesomes, foursomes, group sex and bdsm – all reflecting overseas trends. Weiser (2001) suggests that online anonymity encourages people to explore a variety of identities and roles online more than would be otherwise feasible, and the findings of this thesis indicate that this is also happening on New Zealand online dating sites. Interestingly, what the findings reveal are gender differences in relation to bisexuality, in that bisexual females were open with their male partners about that aspect of their sexuality and often encouraged by them to explore it, whereas bisexual males tend to hide that aspect of their sexuality from their partners, preferring to pursue it in a more clandestine manner. It is unclear whether this is a phenomenon that is specific to New Zealand men online, or a world-wide phenomenon that might warrant further cross-cultural research.

In addition, Michel mentioned the higher numbers of New Zealand men (as compared to his experience with men in his own country), that met him for sexual encounters who were either married or 'straight' according to their online dating profiles. An explanation as to how these men may psychologically rationalize this behaviour is offered by Berger, who suggests that a segregation of consciousness takes place in situations where "socially disapproved sexual acts or morally questionable acts of any kind" transpire (1963, p. 126). The inability or unwillingness of some New Zealand men to be open about their sexual preferences could suggest that New Zealanders continue to disapprove of same-sex relationships, despite the introduction of anti-discrimination laws and the Civil Union Bill, or equally it could mean that New Zealand men continue to expect stigmatisation and sanctions, an example of cultural lag. Wendy's comment about receiving an abusive email from a fundamentalist Christian and having to put up with harassment all her life about being lesbian suggests that social disapproval affects both gays and lesbians. A cross-country comparative study could be useful to determine whether New Zealanders have more parochial views in this regard. Despite such sentiments, the findings of this study clearly show a willingness to explore sexual boundaries, and this could indicate a subtle shift of consciousness in New Zealand with regard to sexual issues that might eventually flow onto the general population. As Berger suggests, a behaviour previously considered deviant becomes 'routinized' within society as individuals succeed in "capturing enough of a following to make their deviant interpretations of the world stick" (1963, p. 146).

In support of Berger's theory, a number of interviewees who have been involved with online dating since its inception in New Zealand have observed the recent shift toward online dating sites including relationship options that would have been considered deviant seven

years earlier. By so doing, online dating sites may be contributing to a transformation in thought within wider society by establishing counter-definitions of what is considered 'normal', and as Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggest, this could result in formerly deviant groups initiating their own socialization rituals. The emergence of online initiation processes is evident in Susan's comments in which she herself acknowledges coaching women she meets online to explore their sexual boundaries, and in Denise's revelation that she was approached online by a bdsm mentor who taught her about bdsm and helped her connect with others in the bdsm scene.

A significant number of interviewees found that involvement with online dating expanded their sexual boundaries and redefined the type of relationship they were seeking, with Val now considering herself bi-curious, Muriel discovering a renewed enjoyment of sexual intercourse, and Garth satisfying his curiosity about same-sex encounters. Other interviewees described how they are experimenting with their sexual identities, with Andy explaining his 70/20/10 ratio split between heterosexual, bi-curious and bisexual orientations, and Samuel acknowledging his bi-curious status. The interviewees, through their involvement with online dating, report becoming more able to experiment with different identities and connect with other like-minded people. In this way, online dating has exposed them to alternative ways of thinking about sexuality and relationship formation, more so than would be possible through conventional social interaction.

The lack of appropriate social agencies within society where one might meet others with a view to forming a relationship was mentioned by several interviewees as being the reason why they turned to online dating to find a partner. Online dating is proving a useful edition to the social landscape by increasing the opportunities for people to meet a potential partner. In addition, a number of female interviewees noted there is no longer anywhere to meet

potential partners other than the internet, as they either do not drink alcohol, consider themselves too old to socialize in a conventional social setting such as a bar or club, or are concerned about their physical safety. So for these interviewees, online dating sites have become their primary social networking device.

A few interviewees did encounter problems with online communication, especially Sandra who encountered more offensive remarks than the rest of the interviewees, both online and offline. Ben-Ze'ev (2004) highlights the role of online anonymity in facilitating such offensiveness, since it affords invisibility to the offender, while Suler (2004a) is of the opinion that dissociation was created as anonymity online reduces personal accountability. However, these explanations do not explain why some of the men that Sandra met were also rude to her in person. It is possible that this is a behavioural response particular to New Zealand men; however it would require further research to establish whether this is so.

The various New Zealand online dating sites provide anonymity to their subscribers by providing a messaging facility for as long as they wish or until the participant decides to meet, phone or exchange emails with a potential dating prospect. Online anonymity has been shown by the literature and the data to create opportunities for people to explore identities, but it also enables deceit in that people can portray themselves in any way they wish. A number of interviewees experienced finding out that the person they met online was in fact married or in an established relationship, and when confronted with this fact their dates were initially apologetic, but often seen back online within a short time looking for someone else. The evidence given by the interviewees suggest that there are a significant number of married people using online dating to organize extra-marital affairs, following overseas trends outlined by Mileham (2004) where increasing numbers of people are citing online affairs

as the cause of their marriage dissolution. Indeed, four of the 32 interviewees admitted to using online dating to organize extra-marital affairs, with Samuel sustaining some long-term sexual arrangements while in his marriage. A number of interviewees mention the lack of sex or lack of sexual variety with their partner as being the reason they look for sexual encounters online, however the female interviewees tend to be open with their partner about pursuing sexual encounters online (and in Val's case asked permission before going online), while Samuel has kept this online activity secret. Samuel's propensity to compartmentalize his online and offline lives offers an example of Berger's (1963) theory of identity segregation.

The issue of 'difference' as it relates to online dating has been largely neglected by overseas researchers and it was with this in mind that 'difference' was extensively included in this research. The strategies undertaken by those interviewees with a 'difference' did resonate with Goffman's (1963) research into stigmatization and his theory of 'disclosure etiquette', along with Berger's account of the fluidity involved in the construction of 'self', sexual identity and counter cultures. Within the data set, there appears to be a clear split between those interviewees whose 'difference' impacted positively on their online dating experience, and those whose 'difference' impacted negatively. Those interviewees who acknowledged a sexual 'difference' (such as belonging to a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, having an interest in bdsm, threesomes, foursomes, or group sex) tended to find their particular sexual 'difference' an advantage and therefore saw it as impacting positively on their online dating experience. Conversely, those interviewees who identified with a 'difference' other than sexual tended to find their particular 'difference' a hindrance that impacted negatively on their online dating experience. For Colin in particular, although his involvement with online dating increased his social interaction, he still felt separate from others as once past the initial contact he found that people tend to revert to the usual response and ignore him. A

possible explanation for this dichotomy is that New Zealand online dating sites cater for diverse sexual 'differences' by including a variety of relationship categories in their selection process, but do not provide options for other forms of 'difference'; unlike some overseas online dating sites such as DateAble and LoveByrd, two American online dating sites that cater for people with physical and mental impairments.

Conducting research on people with 'difference' has brought new knowledge and insight that may be useful for other researchers, especially relating to the construction of social categories in order to place people into specific categories for the sake of research expediency. One area that is not sufficiently addressed in my own research, due to a lack of suitable interviewees, is how people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds experience online dating in New Zealand. A cross-cultural examination of this issue would be a valuable addition to the findings presented here. If I was undertaking this study again, I would be more sensitive towards people with 'difference', include ethnicity in my demographic questions, and prior to starting the project make sure that all the university technical assistance was actually in place. As a result of this study I have come to understand the importance of modern technology within our society, and recognise just how many people are using it as a social agency tool. Although it might seem that I have focused on the negative aspects of online dating, several interviewees did mention that falling in love was definitely possible through online dating and several of the interviewees have either married, become engaged to or are now living with the person they initially met online.

Online dating looks set to establish itself as a significant part of the New Zealand social landscape, as it has in other parts of the world; therefore it is important to understand the nature and social impact that computer-mediated communication might have on relationship

formation within New Zealand society. This thesis has brought to light some specific findings based on 32 in-depth interviews in relation to New Zealand attitudes and use of online dating, and has posed some questions that will benefit from further research. Overseas research has already highlighted online infidelity as being a significant social impact and my research has confirmed this development locally. However, it has also raised the issue of 'difference' and how 'difference' is negotiated online. As New Zealand society becomes more cognizant with computer-mediated communication, I hope this thesis will contribute to an understanding of how people can form meaningful relationships online.



# Appendices

## *Appendix 1*

### **Email invitation**

Thank you so much for your email... I have been inundated with emails since the other night and have been amazed at how many stories there are out there! I am looking for participants to take part in an online survey that I will be conducting in about a month or so in order to gain a breadth of understanding about the NZ situation in relation to online dating. My thesis is titled: Love on the Line: An exploration into the social dynamics involved with online dating, focusing on how the use of technology has altered the dating ritual and facilitated reconstruction of identity. The data collected from the survey will inform my interview schedule for some in-depth interviews I will be conducting later on in the year. I am happy to make a summary of findings available for those people who take part when all the data is collated. The online survey will be totally anonymous and the identities of the people interviewed will be protected.

At present I am waiting on ethical approval (all research to do with people have to go through the Human Ethics Committee) and am still putting my online survey and research proposal together, so will send you the link to the online survey when it becomes available, if you would like to take part. Also, if you know of anyone else who has used online dating sites, could you please forward the link to the online survey to them if they are also willing to take part? This will help facilitate access to as wide a cross-section of the community as possible.

Once again, thanks for your email and your interest. Cheers, Marama.

**LOVE ON THE LINE: “Researching the social dynamics involved with people meeting other people using New Zealand online dating sites.”**

**Researcher:** Marama Marsh (email: [mmm18@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:mmm18@waikato.ac.nz))

**Supervisors:** Dr Carolyn Michelle (07) 838 4847

Assoc. Prof. David Swain: (07) 856 2889

Department of Societies and Cultures

University of Waikato

Private Bag 3105

Hamilton

**FASS Human Research Ethics Committee:** Associate Professor Mary Griffiths ([maryg@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:maryg@waikato.ac.nz) – up to June 2006), thereafter Dr Jo Barnes ([jobar@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:jobar@waikato.ac.nz)).

**Consent Form – In-Depth Interview**

1. I am undertaking a research project as part of a Masters in Social Science. The aim of the project is to gain an understanding of the dynamics involved in online dating, with a particular focus on New Zealand trends.
2. I would like you to contribute by taking part in an in-depth interview, either by MSN or face-to-face.
3. The interview will take approximately one hour.
4. If you choose a face-to-face interview, I would like to tape record the interview for transcription. I will produce a verbatim (word for word) transcript of the interview. My supervisors will have access to the edited transcript, but no one else will see it. For those that choose MSN, a print

out of the interview will be kept in a designated file on my computer. No one else has access to my computer.

5. When I am not using them for writing my research report, the tape recordings and transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at my premises. You may choose to have your tape recording and interview transcript given to you after the report has been finished and assessed. Otherwise, it will be destroyed six months later. Likewise, the MSN data will be deleted from my computer six months after the completion of the research project.

6. If material from the report is published in an academic article, you will have the opportunity to read and approve any extracts relating to information you have provided before publication, if you wish to do so.

7. If you agree to take part in this research project you have the following rights:

a) To refuse to answer any particular question, and to terminate your involvement and ask that your information be removed up to a month after your interview.

b) To ask any further questions about the interview or research project that may occur to you, either during the research project or at any other time.

c) To provide information on the understanding that it is confidential to the interviewer (Marama Marsh) and the supervisors.

d) You are entitled to read and add to the transcript of the interview, and to indicate any part of it that you do not wish to be used. You may withdraw your consent, and be given all material relating to you, at any time up until you have approved your transcript.

e) To discuss further the conditions of your consent at any stage.

f) To receive a summary of the final research report.

h) To take any enquiries or complaints you have about the interview or the research project to the FASS Human Research Ethics Committee.

“I consent to an in-depth interview on the above conditions” (delete what is not applicable):

Acknowledged by Participant Yes / No Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I do/do not wish to read and approve relevant materials prior to their publication

“I agree to abide by the above conditions”:

Signed: *Interviewer* \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Information letter

Hi \_\_\_\_\_

I am wondering whether you are still keen to take part in an in-depth interview with me about your experiences with online dating. I have been busy getting the online questionnaire ready to go 'live' and while I am waiting for the IT experts at the university to finalise things, thought I might as well organize the interviews.

I am happy to come to you and interview you face-to-face, recording the interview and transcribing it later, or we could do the interview using MSN's chat function and saving the conversation to a folder on my computer... whatever you are more comfortable with. Doing the in-depth interview using MSN is a new approach in New Zealand; however I am keen to compare the two methods to further add to the discussion on research methods.

There is probably no need to remind you that your identity will be protected, and any identifying features (such as location etc) will be changed.

If you have any questions regarding the in-depth interview, or the research in general, please feel free to contact me. My contact details are below.

I will also need your contact details, so that we can arrange the interview at a time convenient to you.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Marama Marsh

Ph: (07) 849-2051

Email: mmm18@waikato.ac.nz



## ***Appendix 2: Second Email Invitation***

Hello everyone,

I have decided to contact everyone that initially emailed me after the interview on Campbell Live in February in connection to my research on online dating in New Zealand.

Doing research can be an interesting process, and my particular research journey is proving more interesting than I would have anticipated. The online questionnaire (which should have been widely circulated by now) has had to be put on hold because of technical difficulties that are out of my control. I now need to rely solely on my MSN in-depth interviews that some of you have already taken part in.

This letter is by way of an open invitation to anyone who has, or is currently, using online dating to have an interview with me using MSN chat. I am sending this invitation out to you as you may be interested yourself (if I haven't already interviewed you), and/or you may know of someone else who may be interested.

If you have any questions, I will be happy to answer them and I thank you for your interest in this research so far.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thanking you, Marama Marsh.



### ***Appendix 3: In-depth Interview schedule***

1. How long have you been involved with online dating?
2. What was your motivation for using online dating?
3. What type of relationship are (or were) you looking for online?
4. How many online dating sites have you belonged to?
5. Do you actively approach others online or wait to be approached?
6. Have you received online any unwanted sexual comments, advances or images?
7. How do you respond to these?
8. Do these come mainly from men, women or both?
9. Is the description of yourself on your profile accurate?
10. In your profile, did you include a viewable photo of yourself?
11. When you read other online profiles, are you more or less likely to approach those individuals if they include a photo?
12. When you read other online profiles, are you more or less likely to contact someone if they describe themselves as very attractive?
13. What about if they describe themselves as ordinary looking?

14. How many people have you met offline (having first met online) in the last year?

15. After the initial online contact, how soon would you generally meet offline?

16. At those initial meetings, have you ever met anyone who looked nothing like their profile photo, or was nothing like their profile?

17. Who was rude to you, or scared you?

18. Who was nicer than expected or who brought you a gift?

19. Who left as soon as you arrived, or who did not turn up at all?

20. After an offline relationship ended, originally started online, how soon would you generally go back online to meet someone else?

21. Have you told any of your family members that you are (or have been) online dating?

22. Have you told any of your friends that you are (or have been) online dating?

23. What gender are you?

24. What is your sexual orientation?

25. What is your current relationship status?

26. What is your age?

27. What geographic area do you live in?

28. What type of community do you live in?

Explanation of 'difference': This next section explores 'difference' and how having a 'difference' may impact on a person's experience of online dating. 'Difference' can include any physical, mental, or emotional impairment, belonging to an ethnic minority, or having a sexual 'difference' such as belonging to a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, or having a fetish etc.

29. Do you consider yourself as having a physical, mental, emotional, ethnic or sexual 'difference'?

\*30. If yes, which category of 'difference' do you have?

\*31. Do you reveal your particular 'difference' in your profile?

\*32. Have you ever received any negative responses online when you have revealed your particular 'difference'?

\*33. How do you respond to these?

\*34. If you see that someone has an issue of 'difference', are you likely to approach them?

\*35. If you are approached by someone who reveals they have an issue of 'difference', do you respond to them?

\*\*36. If you see that someone has an issue of 'difference', are you likely to approach them online?

\*\*37. If you are approached by someone who reveals they have an issue of 'difference', do you respond to them?

\*\*38. How do you respond to them?

39. What have you learnt about yourself during your online dating journey?

40. What have you learnt about others during your online dating journey?

41. What have you learnt about society during your online dating journey?

#### ***Appendix 4: Excerpt from the end of Ruth's interview***

**Marama says:**

okay... I gtg... thank you for being so willing to share your story with me...

**Marama says:**

I wonder if doing this interview has stirred things up for you and if you need any extra support at the moment?

**Ruth says:**

i will be alright..

**Ruth says:**

dont worrii bout me

**Marama says:**

okay... but if you need someone to chat to, you can always catch me online on msn...

**Marama says:**

which part of ---- are you recuperating in?

**Marama says:**

I am moving to ----- myself in a few weeks (hopefully)

**Ruth says:**

oh im in -----

**Ruth says:**

with my sister... and my aunt

**Ruth says:**

im just chilling... its good

**Ruth says:**

i cry from time to time

**Ruth says:**

but i know i will get over it..eventually

**Ruth says:**

i just wish i knew why

**Marama says:**

yes, and that's the 'closure' bit that he did not allow you to have... which is a pity...

**Marama says:**

that is why it is sometimes useful to chat to a professional to get another perspective on it...

**Ruth says:**

no

**Ruth says:**

i will be okay



## ***Appendix 5: Introduction to interviewees***

**Andy** is a 51 year old man who prefers his sexual orientation to be classified as a 70/20/10 percent mixture of heterosexual/bi-curious/bisexual. Having been involved in online dating for five years after the break-up of his 14 year marriage, he is currently “half heartedly” in a long term relationship with a woman he met online.

**Anne** is a 59 year old heterosexual woman who is currently in a committed relationship with the man she met through online dating four and a half years ago. She has had previous experience with personal advertisements in the newspaper in her search for a partner, but she joined online dating when it came to New Zealand in 1989.

**Cindy** is a 24 year old heterosexual woman who has been involved with five or six online dating sites for six years and is currently engaged to a man living in the United States whom she initially met online.

**Colin** is a 28 year old heterosexual single man diagnosed with schizophrenia since the age of 17. He turned to online dating seven years ago as he found it easier to meet people online due to his difficulty in understanding or interpreting body language. Colin has averaged 1.7 relationships per year since starting online dating and calculates that each relationship has averaged 18 days in length.

**Denise** is a 27 year old bi-curious woman who currently lives in a de facto relationship with her male partner, whom she met through online dating seven months ago. She has been involved with online dating for a year after she had broken up with a long term boyfriend.

**Donna** is a 28 year old heterosexual woman who has had a very straightforward experience with online dating. She only joined one online dating site, chatted to five or six men online over a period of a few months, however only ever met one man offline whom she is now living with and currently engaged to be married.

**Elaine** is a 29 year old heterosexual woman who has been in a nine year de facto relationship with her partner. For the last three months she has

been looking for extramarital sexual encounters through online dating as she and her partner have mismatched sex drives.

**Fiona** is a single 35 year old bisexual woman who has been using online dating sporadically for the last two years as she does not meet many single men due to working from home and socialising in a small circle of couples. Initially she was looking for a long term committed relationship, however now she is mostly online for the “fun of it”.

**Garth** is a 44 year old man who has been online dating for six years and he states his sexual orientation as bisexual with a strong leaning towards heterosexual. He has belonged to between five and ten online dating sites although he is more active on some more than others now and has met 30 – 40 people during this time.

**Gloria** (46) and **Patrick** (50) are a married heterosexual couple, who met in a chat-room on the internet and have been together for the last two years. They were both just looking for friends online initially and although chat-rooms are not strictly online dating sites, many people have met their partner’s through this form of computer-mediated communication.

**Henrietta** is a 57 year old heterosexual woman who originally lived in another country but is now living in New Zealand in a de facto relationship. She met her current partner online three years ago and chatted to him for five months before coming to New Zealand to meet him face-to-face. Initially she was online dating in her own country from 1998 to 2003, primarily just to try it, and then found online dating to be flexible and accessible because she did not have to go anywhere physically to find a partner.

**Jane** is a single 20 year old heterosexual woman who has been online dating for the last month. She was motivated by her flatmate, who was already online dating, so she thought she would “give it a go and see if anything happened”. Initially it was just for “a bit of fun”, and then she started to look more seriously for ‘Mr Right’ with a view to forming a relationship.

**Keith** is a 61 year old widower who has used online dating for the last four years as he thought it would be a great way to meet someone for friendship and a possible relationship if that were to develop.

**Kerrie** is a 47 year old heterosexual single woman who has been using online dating sporadically for about six years as she was bored. Initially she was not sure what type of relationship she was wanting and at one stage was just looking for sexual encounters, however, over time she started to look for a long term relationship.

**Lana** is a 48 year old heterosexual woman who met her current de facto partner through online dating four years ago. She has utilized online dating twice, the first time when she met her partner and the second time to catch her partner cheating online.

**Mary** is a 25 year old engaged woman who is involved in a long term de facto relationship and who, together with her partner, has used online dating for the last nine months to look for other people to join them for sexual encounters, bdsm, threesomes and foursomes.

**Michel** is a 29 year old gay man who has lived in New Zealand for the last four years. He initially became involved with online dating in 2000 while living in his country of origin, seeking to meet men for sexual encounters.

**Muriel** is a single 52 year old heterosexual woman who has been online dating since November 2005 after the break up of her marriage. As she does not drink or go to bars, Muriel could not think of any other way to meet men at her age other than on the internet.

**Natalie** is a 34 year old heterosexual woman who is currently “happily married” to the man she met through online dating. She has been wheelchair bound all her life due to a neuromuscular condition, which had made it difficult for her to meet potential partners.

**Paula** is a 49 year old single heterosexual woman who has been using online dating for over five years, as she wanted to meet other people with a view to developing a relationship. She has belonged to four different types of online dating sites, two of which were more conservative in nature and two more ‘adult’.

**Peter** is a 43 year old heterosexual man drawn to online dating because he was lonely following a separation, and wanting to meet someone to

preferably form a long term relationship. He is currently living with his partner whom he met nine months ago through online dating after using online dating for less than two months, meeting her face-to-face after two weeks of chatting online.

**Richard** is a 36 year old heterosexual married man who, together with his wife, is actively looking for other couples to join them for sexual encounters. They have a couple's online profile, and have been online dating for one year.

**Ruby** is a divorced heterosexual 43 year old woman who is currently single and looking for a long term relationship. She has been online dating for two to three years as she does not frequent bars and clubs, so thought online dating would be the easiest way to meet people.

**Ruth** is a single 40 year old heterosexual woman who is in the process of recovering from a broken long-distance online relationship that she was involved in for over two years. When Ruth first started online dating three years ago, she was using it to take time out from her university studies and to "kill time".

**Sally** is a 38 year old single heterosexual woman and she has been infrequently dating online for the last six years, originally attracted to online dating because of the ease of using it. She is happily involved with a casual sexual partner whom she met online, as she is presently too busy for a more committed relationship.

**Sandra** is a 46 year old heterosexual divorcee, currently single. She has been using online dating sporadically for approximately three years to look for a long term relationship.

**Samuel** is a 50 year old married man who is bi-curious and resides in another country but travels frequently to New Zealand. He has used online dating for the last six years to organise discreet, sexual encounters preferably with married women both here in New Zealand and in other parts of the world.

**Susan** is a 37 year old bisexual woman currently living in an open relationship with her male partner and has been utilizing online dating for the last seven years. Initially she was looking for women like herself who

wanted to have an affair because she was in the process of wanting to leave her marriage. Currently she is looking for friendship and sex with both women and men within the parameters of her open relationship.

**Tina** is a 44 year old heterosexual woman who is currently living in a committed de facto relationship with her partner whom she met through online dating four and a half years ago. She was using online dating spasmodically for just over two years and met between 30-40 people in that time, however, since meeting her current partner, she no longer uses the system.

**Val** is a 45 year old woman and when she first went online just over a year ago she was married. Due to a lack of sexual intercourse with her husband, she decided to look for casual but regular extramarital sex with one other person, but not a relationship.

**Wendy** is a 48 year old lesbian woman who met her present live-in partner through online dating. Although no longer online dating, she was involved with it for approximately five years and found it useful as the pressure of work and home life meant she had little spare time to socialise and meet other gay people.



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