

# The Medium is the Romance

Virtual and face-to-face relations: example of “romantic” relation in the context of online dating

## Abstract

In this paper we evaluate the role that online dating plays in establishing successful and sustainable romantic relationships. We reject radically optimistic accounts (online dating enables creation of particularly successful relationships) and radically pessimistic accounts (online dating is destructive for relationships). In our argumentation in favor of a moderated liberal position we rely upon the conceptual framework of American pragmatism (James and Rorty) and in particular upon their analyses of “experience”. Rorty’s account enables us to speak of interpersonal experience that does not involve physical contact and relies uniquely on the language. In such cases the language stops being a medium and becomes the experience itself. This is our main tool to speak of experience in the context of interpersonal relations fully mediated by internet. Building upon American pragmatism, we use the concept of an “extra-layer” of experience that covers internet-mediated interpersonal relations. We claim that the extra-layer fully integrates with other layers of human experience, and enables us to speak of “mixed reality”. We conclude that internet-mediated interactions - ubiquitous nowadays for a non negligible part of the society - shall be treated as an inevitable extensions of physical face-to-face experience. As such they become a natural part of our lives and as such cannot be proclaimed simply good or simply bad. In consequence, there is no one possible way in which online dating can be evaluated uniformly as a separate phenomenon.

Keywords:

#online dating #media theory #social media #mixed reality #experience #American pragmatism

## Introduction

Online dating received quite a lot of criticism coming from academically minded researchers and scholars in human sciences. In particular, from those humanistically minded people who cherish

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<sup>1</sup> The authors are listed in the alphabetic order as their intellectual input is equal.

traditional values, and who believe that internet-mediated relationships do not form bonds that can endure. The arguments in defense of online dating are usually based on pure enthusiasm for new media and their creative power. Therefore, it is not surprising that most of them get easily rejected. In our paper we propose to evaluate online dating in a very traditional conceptual framework of classical philosophers. In this way we hope opening a more equilibrated discussion on its value and the role that it plays in the society.

We start Section 1 with a controversial dilemma: are scientifically motivated methods used for matching render online matchmaking superior to matchmaking initiated with a physical encounter? Academics claim that “scientificity” proclaimed by online dating service providers (aiming primarily at fostering their marketing strategies), suffers from multiple methodological issues. Several of these problems can even decrease online dating efficiency, comparing to face-to-face initiated relations. One proposed solution consists in critical evaluation of scientific tools used in online dating (Finkel et al. 2012). We will argue more: every relation, independently of its starting point, in order to sustain needs to develop in the whole variety of ways accessible to the given society, including, for contemporary Western societies, online communication. The amount of each of various types of contact necessary for particular individuals might, obviously, vary.

In Section 2 we put online dating in a broader perspective of the influence that the new media have on interpersonal relations and the society. We present an overview of a continuum of opinions starting from the most catastrophic conception of their influence on human interactions and cognitive structure (Virilio), through moderate liberal viewpoint where pros and cons are put on weight and balanced (Turkle), to the most optimistic one, perceiving the development of the new media as the ultimate possibility for the emancipation of the humankind (Mitchell). Following our hypothesis we explore the possibility that the “liberal” middle way is the optimal one.

In Section 3 we formulate conceptual toolkit that will enable us to formulate arguments supporting our hypothesis. The concepts of “virtual layer” of reality, “mixed reality” and “shift in networking” (Krieger and Belliger), non-human actors from “actor-network-theory” (Latour), “experience” (James, Rorty) allow us to conceptualise a possibility that an online-based contact forms an additional - and not “a worse” or “a better” - extra-layer of possible interactions.

Finally, in Section 4 we construct the core of our argument. We build upon the conception of Kantian “Copernican Turn” in epistemology and American pragmatism: radical empiricism (James) and neo-pragmatism (Rorty), in particular its queries into the conceptual structure of the concept of experience, and the fluctuations of its understanding. Starting from William James’ idea that embodiment and corporeality are necessary for experience of another person, we move towards the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty for whom experience is most importantly an exchange of vocabularies (conceptual frameworks that people use for describing their worlds), therefore language becomes not a mere medium of experience, but an experience itself. In this context we appeal to the multilayer “mixed reality”, where all the kinds of experience are complementary. Every romantic relation shall rely on all the layers of experience available in a given society.

We conclude by saying that online dating provides us with systematised access to one of the layers of experience, which can be beneficial or can be destructive for a relationship. In the case of internet all relationships are mediated by code (language, pixelized images, digitalised sound etc.), but this code becomes a relationship itself. Paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan, we claim that the medium is even more than the message, it is the romance.

## 1. The science of online dating

One of the most common lines of advertising used by providers of online dating services consists in highlighting and justifying “scientificity” of the methods their company relies on. Most frequently that means pinpointing underlying mathematical scrutiny or results from scientific

experimental psychology, less often, hence still rather frequently, observations of anthropologists or even genetic compatibility. It relates both: the way of constructing the client's data-base (data gathering, profile formation and profile updating), and the structure of the matching algorithm itself (Finkel et al. 2012).

How exactly work these various models of - as is broadcasted - successful and sustainable matching procedures is usually the subject of patents securing services from the danger of losing an advantage over competitors and hence it is never fully disclosed<sup>2</sup>. Some leaks about the general principles used for matching comes to press in different occasions, most probably often foreseen as an indirect way of promoting the offered services. Most famously, in 2013 Christian Rudder, Harvard math alumni and cofounder of OKCupid, released a TED-ed lecture "Inside OKCupid: The math of online dating" where he explained in general lines the matching algorithm structure (e.g., double (personal and expectations from partner) data-base, structure of wages associated to different variables). (see also Rudder 2014).

Similarly, a service called Chemistry.com, launched in 2005, advertises its efficiency by highlighting that its personal profiler (criteria used for composing the client's personal profile and the matching strategy) is based on the most recent anthropological and psychological investigations of biological anthropologist, a researcher at Kinsey Institute and an affiliated researcher at Rutgers University, Helen E. Fisher. Fisher publicizes her results in a popular science bestseller "Anatomy of Love" (1992/2017) and a series of TED talks, where she presents a variety of data regarding human romantic relations: from scientific reports of brain-scanning experiments showing neurological reactions in the situation of romantic love, rejection in love, and long-term love; through "the biology of personality", the ethology and sociology of flirting, adultery, psychology of love or sexual addiction and the theory on the development of morality, to the theory of "slow love". On the basis of these investigations Fisher, together with

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<sup>2</sup>For instance, as reported by The Economist, Jan 1, 2011 (<http://www.economist.com/node/17797424>), "Prominent sites have been reluctant to submit their matching algorithms to an independent inspection that would determine their efficacy. Gian Gonzaga of eHarmony, which loves to boast about its patented 'Compatibility Matching System', says the firm won't take such a step because it would reveal the site's "secret sauce" to competitors." (Finkel et al. 2012, 19).

Chemistry.com, conceived the optimal questionnaire prevailing manifestations of the activity of hormones and neurotransmitters.

There exist also services that base matches upon genetic or immunological compatibility between potential partners (Frazzetto 2010). For instance, GenePartner (“GenePartner: DNA matching, love is no coincidence”), a Swiss company launched in 2008, “markets its genetic testing as a supplementary matching tool for online dating sites, matchmakers, or even couples themselves who, for \$99, can order a kit and mail in a saliva sample to find out their score on biological compatibility” (McGrane 2009, 47; see also Finkel et al. 2012: 11, 23). Another example is ScientificMatch, launched in 2007<sup>3</sup>, that claims to be a “full-fledged Internet matching system that combines genetic and immunological compatibility matching with personality and values matching and users’ personal preferences, charging \$2,000 for a lifetime membership”. (Finkel et al. 2012, 11).

The “scientific approach” allows dating sites providers to “emphasize that their services are *unique* to dating through the Internet” and also that science makes them *superior* to dating offline (Finkel et al. 2012, 4). Both claims - the uniqueness and the superiority - have two facets. There should be no doubt as to their purely academic motivation and a strong believe that scientific results can help humans understanding psychology, biology or neuropsychology of love. Researchers serving as consultants for online dating sites (as Gian Gonzaga from eHarmony or Helen E. Fisher from Chemistry.com) are working within a scientific rigour of academic standards and their results are exposed to peer reviewing. However, the marketing aspect of the online dating business economics has a non-negligible impact on the efforts put on convincing the public about superiority of the objective science over intuitions of individuals.

(Finkel et al., 2012) - one of the most inclusive scientific studies published on online dating - provides an overview of methodological mistakes hidden by “scientific” assertions of dating sites (e.g., outcome dependency, placebo effect, or confirmation bias, Finkel et al. 2012, 26-27). All

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<sup>3</sup> Closed after the site CEO, Eric Holzle, passed away in 2012.

along their paper the authors comment extensively about the marketing aspect of the online dating business. These analyses bring them to conclude that online dating sites - contrary to what these services providers claim - cannot guarantee relationship success more than any other method of matching.

Furthermore, Finkel et al. claim that the intrinsic structure of online dating services prevents relations from stabilising. It concerns each of the services' elements:

- (i) *access* to potential romantic partners,
- (ii) *communication* with potential romantic partners,
- (iii) *matching* with compatible romantic partners.

Let's take example of the *access* to potential partners. Firstly, highlighting the number of clients aims at manipulating information and suggesting that there is more potential partners than actually is and awakes ungrounded hopes. Secondly, selection based on carefully edited descriptions and selected photos can be misleading. Thirdly, details of the description might be overwhelming and create unfulfillable expectations. Fourthly, the selection process happens simultaneously for many potential partners and this might lower attention for individuals. All these lead to "overweight features of potential partners that are easy to evaluate via profiles but might be largely irrelevant once a relationship starts to develop". Moreover "[s]ide-by-side browsing is also likely to induce an assessment mindset, causing users to commoditize potential partners." Finally, access to too many potential partners might provoke tiredness and lower client's decisiveness. (Finkel et al. 2012, 49).

When it comes to *communication*, Finkel et al. claim that the variety and speed of communication methods is only apparently helpful and can easily turn against users of online dating services. When it comes to *matching* algorithm the placebo effect (the impression that you are doing the best you can for finding a fulfilling relationship and stop taking initiative outside online context) and other effects that we already mentioned above, play against successful matching. The authors also observe something that we might call - following (Ritzer 1993) -

“McDonaldization of relationships” based upon the business structure of the online dating sites: keeping users single is an important aim of these services, although “(...) they presumably also have an incentive for at least some of their users to develop romantic relationships, to foster positive word-of-mouth”. (Finkel et al. 2012, 49).

In this paper we provide arguments in support of Finkel et al.’s thesis that despite its apparent and proclaimed superiority online dating does not guarantee a more successful choice of a partner than traditional offline matching. In particular, we agree with the criticism of “scientifically proven efficiency” of matching algorithms. We claim that what increases chances of finding a partner is “going out there” and “trying out” to find a match. Even if none of the online or offline ways of looking for a romantic match can guarantee success, multiplication of layers of possible communication and use of different channels - including cyberspace - increases the chance. Similarly, we claim that even if in the dynamic of contemporary life the possibility of using new media for temporarily maintaining a relationship might be beneficial, the virtual layer of communication does not guarantee sustainability. Nor - we add - does any other traditional offline interpersonal form of developing a relationship. We claim that any relationship, independently of how it started, in order to develop needs to construct upon a variety of stimuli accessible in the given cultural context. This is similarly true for online initiated and face-to-face initiated relationships. Both can develop or not.

Before we offer details of our argumentation in which we will introduce some handful concepts originating in contemporary philosophy and cultural studies, we provide an overview of different opinions regarding benefits and dangers of internet.

## 2. Is virtuality dangerous for relations?

A hidden premise behind various versions of the claim that online services are the best way of finding a partner is the idea that there exists one unique way leading to a successful relationship. If it would be possible to determine what is needed for such a relationship to develop, it would be possible to help ourselves - and other people - to always move in the right direction. This is

what online dating services claim is possible. Paradoxically, the same premise is hidden behind radical rejection of the possibility of initiating and developing a romantic relation through internet. Similarly, all traditional matchmaking plans and family arranged marriages also subscribe to the idea that there is one single way, which increases chances for the success of marriage (or rather, what is perceived as a successful match by the given society).

The opposite of these conservative positions opts for a variety of possible incomparable romantic scenarios. As expressed by Arthur Miller in his play “The Ride Down Mount Morgan” (1991): “I love her too, but our neuroses just don't match” (and followed by a series of popular internet mems) in the world of love the importance consists in finding a compatible neurosis. According to this liberal interpretation of how relationships create and endure there is no one love recipe, but a multitude of options. This opposite view is our departure point for the further investigations.

But, can internet be counted to areas of human experience where a love story can start and develop in a fulfilling long-term relationship? The scope of opinions extends from radically pessimistic such as expressed by highly influential French postmodern thinker Paul Virilio to highly optimistic futurist visions of enthusiasts of relationships with robots. In this section we summarise most representative positions from this continuum.

Virilio's ultimate purpose consists in reshaping our understanding of contemporary science and technology. According to him, the very aim of techno-science - modern-science concentrated rather on perfecting its instruments than on search for truth - is to incite war, e.g., tools it provides allow to organize violence that becomes “hyperviolence”. Virilio's criticism of cyberspace and virtual reality inscribes in this broader context, because - as he says - even such “innocent” inventions as cinema and computers can convey images and information that become conflict provoking techno-scientific tools (Michelson 2013, 24-26).



The central category enabling Virilio to account for changes that techno-science made in the world structure is “speed”. This is exactly the acceleration in such domains as transport, communication or transmission that forces researchers to focus their attention on achievements or recognition, and draw their endeavour away from search for truth. Since humans are not quick enough to adjust to the changes, the old order gets distorted and clear distinctions get confused: the mix of global and local factors destabilized our understanding of geography, confusion of what is “personal” with what is “public” led to political conflicts, etc. (Virilio 2005).

In the world of relationships “speed” provokes “the gap between the wedding and the divorce” (Virilio 1995, 117). Cybersexuality - sexuality mediated by technology - induces separation already at the beginning, reducing sexual relations to a “remote-control masturbation” (Virilio 1995, 104) and as such is a source of disintegration, objectification and a ultimate disappearance of shared intimacy. It also presents a danger for the natural human reproduction and leads to “nuclear families of the single-parents”, which causes social disintegration. In consequence, there is no time and no space, no intimacy, no need, and finally - the worst - no willingness to create sustainable relations. Users of virtual reality display characteristics of addiction: “Since virtual reality has the capacity to dominate the human sensory field, it essentially amputates our need to perceive reality” (Virilio 1995, 40).

Instead of concentrating on what is real, people use technologies to create new forms of “quasi-presence”, “disembodied presence”, “tele-presence” (i.e., presence at a distance) that amount to radical changes in human perception, which, in consequence, lead to new experiences of “reaching at a distance”, “feeling at a distance”, “having tele-contact” (Virilio 1995). “Telepresence” as a basis for a romantic relation is unacceptable from Virilio’s traditionalist, reductionist and neophobic perspective.

In far less dramatic terms, the conservative view is expressed by Sherry Turkle, professor of the Social Studies of Sciences and Technology at MIT, anthropologist studying how new media and technology reshape our structures of thinking. Her work consists in performing qualitative

ethno-sociological studies, embracing both, computer science professionals and ordinary people exposed to the digitalised culture. Since the eighties Turkle interviewed internet users in an experimental setup and also in the privacy of their households (she calls her method “clinical interviewing style”: she does not ask people about their opinions on computation, but she discloses their feelings and thoughts that manifest through their actions, Turkle 1984/2005, 305).

In “The Second Self” (1984/2005) Turkle describes these changes in comparison to how “psychoanalytic culture” penetrated structures of the social and political life in France (1978).

“Psychoanalytic language spread into the rhetoric of political parties, into training programs for schoolteachers, into advice-to-the-lovelorn columns. I became fascinated with how people were picking up and trying on this new language for thinking about the self. I had gone to France to study the psychoanalytic community and how it had ‘reinvented’ Freud for the French taste, but I was there at a time when it was possible to watch a small psychoanalytic community grow into a larger psychoanalytic culture.” (Turkle 1978).

She speaks in similar terms about her study of digitalising society:

“My experience at MIT impressed me with the fact that something analogous to the development of a psychoanalytic culture was going on in the worlds around computation. At MIT I heard computational metaphors used to think about politics, education, social process, and, most central to the analogy with psychoanalysis, about the self.”

Turkle sees in it “a first step in the cultural assimilation of a new way of thinking”. “The essential question in such work is how ideas developed in the world of “high science” are “appropriated” by the culture at large”. (Turkle 1984/2005, 304 - 305).

The deep resemblance between these two cases studies is that they center attention on the model of mind that is adapted by the society and that “influence[s] how people think about their frustrations and disappointments, their relationships with their families and with their work”, that changes how they perceive *human* thought, memory, and understanding. In the case of

digitalisation "the idea of 'mind is a program' enters into people's sense of who is the actor when they act" (Turkle 1984/2005, 305).

Spreading conceptual terminology facilitates projecting emotions on artificial objects, such as computer interfaces, or robots. Its further consequences consist in changing our approach to other humans that we first meet online. This is the topic of the second part of "Alone Together" (2011) Turkle worries that really deep and complex human emotions might get softened and distributed in constant projection on digital objects and digital reality. This pessimistic scenario is unavoidable if our society keeps replacing human contact by digital placeholders. This is unavoidable, because human nature forces us to react to human-like or emotion-like stimuli even if these stimuli are synthetic or syntactic. These atavistic reactions influence, according to Turkle, relations we have with each other. It is like in the army, she says, young soldiers are first trained to kill virtual enemies and then more smoothly introduced to the real situations.

The opposite camp of new media enthusiasts similarly, has radical and mild representatives. Probably the most optimistic perspective on the role of new technologies in dating habits comprises visionaries who predict future of love and sex in relationships with robots. Some of them see that as an inevitable negative consequence. Henrik I. Christensen, today professor of robotics at UCSD, engaged in ethical discussions relating robots, claims that people are going to be having sex with robots even if initially these robots will be pretty basic ("[p]eople are willing to have sex with inflatable dolls, so initially anything that moves will be an improvement").<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the rapidity with which grows and diversifies the market for sex-robots confirms that, to at least some extent and in some communities, his predictions came true. Some others are very enthusiastic, as David Levy in his book "Love and Sex with Robots" (2008) who highlights multiple benefits that the humanity can reach thanks to opening up to a possibility of getting emotionally involved with robots.

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<sup>4</sup> The Economist. June 2006. <http://www.economist.com/node/7001829> (March 20, 2017).

The possibility to project our emotions on robots, computer interfaces, or on interpersonal interactions mediated by technological support, is addressed in a more moderate manner by W. J. T. Mitchell, a professor of literature and media theory at the University of Chicago. In “Me++. Cyborg Self and Networked City” (2003) Mitchell glorifies the dynamic structure of interpersonal relations that gets enriched thanks to the hyper-connectivity: “Me” gets extended beyond the skin limits, “++” signifies digital extension of the self. The fact, that subject becomes a part of the network, interconnected with many other active subjects and factors, changes the very concepts of “being close” and “belonging”.

This extension generates new forms of “out-of-body” - or in other words “disembodied” experience - setting us free from the restraints of corporeality. This limitless extension is a form of cyborgization offering multiple possibilities of contacting each other, being in touch despite the spatial distances. In Mitchell’s vision we simultaneously construct and are constructed in the mutual processes of data exchange. Levy and Mitchell approaches line up with post-humanist idea that cyborgs are natural extension of our ecology.

In this paper we stand at a liberal position somewhere between Turkle and Mitchell. We reject such extreme reductions as the one of Virilio who - carefully read - claims that only embodied human love and physical human sex are “love” and “sex”. Nor we adhere to Levy’s claim that humans are perfectly able of projecting their emotions on robots and interfaces. We will show a consistency of our position by recalling terminology forged for other reason by pragmatists and neo-pragmatists.

### 3. Real life vs virtual life

In the previous section we accounted for the panopticon of perspectives on meaning and value of internet mediated relations. In this section we determine which concepts enable explanation of the structure of these relations. Our toolkit consists of the following:

- the new “virtual layer” of communication called “cyberspace”;

- the “shift in communication” caused by appearance of new forms of communication in cyberspace;
- the “shift in networking” caused by appearance of new forms of establishing interpersonal relations; appears in consequence of the shift in communication;
- an “actor” in “actor-network-theory”, a form of agency that can refer to humans and also to non-human entities,
- “mixed reality”, a dynamic structure that appears in consequence of constant overlapping of virtual and real;
- the “extra-layer of experience” - in mixed reality internet becomes more than a layer of communication, it becomes an “extra-layer” of experience.

Digitalisation radically influenced the direction of the world changes. In terms proposed by Krieger and Belliger (2014) internet added one more layer to the structure of communication: cyberspace. Since cyberspace is shared by increasingly more people (over half of humankind has today access to internet<sup>5</sup>), it necessarily influences the dynamic of the social structure. However - as we claim in this paper - it does not change its stratification: rich remains rich, poor remains poor, shy remains shy, revolutionary remains revolutionary, etc. Different groups use internet in different ways depending on cultural context in which they live, on level of their political involvement, on their level of education or on their social skills. In consequence, freedom and liberty, and whatever values one associates with expansion of internet, are not equal for all its users. In consequence, internet reflects the pre-existing stratification of the social structure. The same “glass wall”, or rather “glass walls” keep existing.

What changes is the way in which richness, poverty, introversion or revolutionary personalities get realised. Access to communication in both, its quality and quantity, enables the rich to get richer, it disables the poor, it makes the shy to withdraw from the world in an even more spectacular way, and it gives revolutionary spirits a way to foster their ideas. Following Krieger and Belliger, this great change can be described as shift in communication (its type, quantity

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<sup>5</sup> Data on 2016 from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> (March 1, 2017).

etc.). Cyberspace enriches communication and offers new possibilities of action. For instance it can become an engine of political empowerment for individuals or political entities<sup>6</sup>.

In consequence, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between what belongs to the human and what belongs to the interface. We propose - following Krieger and Belliger - to revoke the “actor-network-theory” (Latour 2005) and the idea that “actors” enabled with agency are not necessarily human. For instance, an internet mediated relation can involve four actors: two humans and two interfaces. This network of actors can be extended by adding more channels of communication. In context of mediated agency we can no longer maintain the difference between “real” and “virtual”, because the virtual layer gets integrated and assimilated with other layers of communication. A new category is necessary in order to understand not only the shift in networking (shift in ways of creating relations), but also the “ontological” shift in the account for extension of our reality. We will follow on it Krieger and Belliger:

“Reinterpreting reason and rationality as networking has consequences to our understanding of reality. Ontologically, this leads to a definition of the real as ‘mixed reality’ in which being is a mixture of physical as well as so-called ‘virtual’ reality. Physical space-time and cyber space-time are functionally equivalent and practically interdependent. Indeed, one could speak of cyber-physical equivalence. The world of meaning constructed by the social operating system is a ‘mixed reality’ in which the physical restraints of space and time are no longer privileged ontological parameters of knowing and acting, but are mixed with so-called 'virtual' reality in hybrid, heterogeneous actor-networks”. (Krieger & Belliger 2014, 17).

The idea of “mixed reality” leaves space for both: virtual and embodied aspects of communication and of experience. It conceptualises “ontological” shift. Such terms as “hybridization” or “cyborgization” - relating to features of mixed reality - got already to the

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<sup>6</sup> In the most recent history we can find examples of such an empowerment where activities started online influenced all layers of reality (e.g., protests at Tahrir Square which started the revolutionary Arab Spring in 2011 were initiated online by people using social media).

language of culture theory (Haraway 1991), and are making their way to the everyday language. A “cyborg” means in this context a person equipped with a variety of electronic devices that enable her to reach beyond her normal human limitations (Turkle 2014). A cyborg has a privileged access to communication mediated by electronic devices being in her possession and extending her cognitive faculties.

Internet - understood as a virtual layer of communication - changed our approach to the world and became a crucial tool to navigate in mixed reality. In many cases it would be hard to distinguish which decisions or actions that we perform are founded upon “real” facts and which are based on “virtual” data. When we drive the car following Google Maps instructions, both kinds of reality function together in an inseparable manner (Mitchell 2005). Emotional, romantic and intimate relations created online and our romantic actions have an analogous structure.

We claim that the shift in communication - caused by appearance of cyberspace and the consequent supervenience of mixed reality - is followed by the shift in experience. In order to account for ramification of the adequate status of internet we forge the concept of “extra-layer of experience”. We can now say that internet is the extra-layer of experience and that as such provoked shift in experience.

## 4. Experience

“Experience” is the central philosophical category that we use in argumentation and this section is devoted to analysing how its meaning changed and adapted to the new “mixed reality”.

Kant was the first who highlighted that every experience is a reciprocal exchange between the experiencing subject and the object of experience. All the new knowledge that the subject obtains from the experience gets organised by the categories every human *a priori* possess. In an

interpersonal relation these categories provide a common space in which to develop a shared experience. If internet constitutes an extra-layer of experience, how does this layer differ from other, sensual, layers? Does data exchange satisfy conditions that are put on “experience”, or rather does the concept of experience needs a redefinition? Or maybe we should get a new term that would cover both pure (based upon sensual cognition) and mediated (based on visual input), therefore extended, experience?

The most extensive study of experience in the contemporary philosophy was conducted by American pragmatism. We can observe influence of this tradition in empirically informed standpoints of Mitchell and Turkle. For William James, there is no other way of understanding an experience than having it personally, by living it through. This anti-essentialist approach is expressed in the idea of unstructured and uncategorised “stream of consciousness” that leaves no space for mediation between the experiencing subject and the object of its experience. In particular, the language doesn’t enable us to capture reality. According to James, experience of the other person has to be founded upon the reciprocal perception of each other’s corporeality. As he puts it:

“To me decisive reason in favor of our minds meeting in *some* objects at least is that, unless I make that supposition, I have no motive for assuming that your mind exists at all. Why do I postulate your mind? Because I see your body acting in a certain way. Its gestures, facial movements, words and conduct generally, are 'expressive', so I deem it actuated as my own is, by an inner life like mine. This argument from analogy is my *reason*, whether an instinctive belief runs before it or not. But what is 'your body' here but a percept in *my* field? It is only as animating *that* object, *my* object, that I have any occasion to think of you at all. If the body that you actuate be not the very body of your own that I see there, but some duplicate body of your own with which that has nothing to



do, we belong to different universes, you and I, and for me to speak of you is folly. Myriads of such universes even now may coexist, irrelevant to one another; my concern is solely with the universe with which my own life is connected". (James 1912/1996, 77).

Corporeality itself is not sufficient for experiencing another person, but it lays in the background of every such experience. Without a personal physically embodied meeting we are only able to create an abstract theory of the other, subordinating the experience to different unfounded ideas. Therefore for James, linguistic communication cannot be an equivalent source of experience of another person, language is just a medium, not an additional constitutive layer of experience.

What is surprising - and what enables neo-pragmatism to build upon - according to James, the very concept of the reality should be extended: "Everything real must be experienceable somewhere, and every kind of the thing experienced must somewhere be real". (James 1912/1996, 160). Neo-pragmatism develops a theory of language as a foundation of experience.

Most famously Richard Rorty in "Contingency, Irony, Solidarity" (1989) claims that the experience created by the act of meeting the other is possible thanks to an openness to verbal contact and creation of the common vocabulary of exchange. Language becomes for Rorty more than a medium of communication, the act of merging vocabularies of the two subjects has a strong creative power, and as such is an important part of the experience itself. In one of his last texts - "Afterword: Intellectual Historians and Pragmatism" (2000) - Rorty writes:

"the suggestions that language is something other than one more piece of reality, and that linguistic behavior is somehow less 'hard' than what is 'given in experience' need only to be stated to be dismissed". (Rorty 2000, 210).

Similarly to James's "stream of consciousness" implicating the chaotic nature of experience, Rorty highlights that our vocabularies are not founded upon any previous "intuitions" or "knowledge". Vocabularies, as well as based on them experiences, are for him contingent, never built "on purpose" or according to some pre-established plan. Therefore the experience of the other is most importantly constructed through the language. All experience of the other emerges from the reciprocal exchange of vocabularies. Martin Jay describes Rorty's theory as the "abolition of experience in favor of language". (Jay 2005, 308).

If we accept the extension of the concept of experience from physically embodied to linguistically embodied, as proposed by Rorty, then the extra-layer formed by internet (cyberspace) is a paradigmatic example of linguistically embodied experience. In consequence, in mixed reality the extra-layer has to be considered as equiponderant quota in formation of experience.

## Conclusions

In this paper we reject radical opinions regarding efficiency of online dating for forming sustainable romantic relationships of both sides: service providers of online dating and enthusiasts of virtuality, and traditionally minded critics of internet-mediated interpersonal relations. We formulate our argumentation from a liberal middle position, which embraces the idea that more than just one course of action leads to a sustainable fulfilling romantic relationship. We defend online dating as one of the possible layers of experience, not a better one, but also not a worst, as an extension to physically embodied romantic lives, nothing more, but also nothing less.

Further we claim that even if there is no particular starting point guaranteeing a successful relationship, and if the development of romance does not need to follow one prescribed path, it is crucial that at one point or another all other layers important for a given society get activated, at least to some extent. A relationship based purely on internet is as much exposed to damage as a relationship based purely on physical (sexual) contact. Which amount of these layers are necessary for a given relationship to be sustained depends on personal preferences and societal framework of involved agents. We speculate that if meeting a partner is today a challenge it is not caused by the structure of online dating.

Finkel et al. (2014, 10) highlights that for a contemporary marriage to succeed, much more expectations than it was traditionally need to be met. People need to converge at a variety of different layers, which layers exactly depends on individual differences, and it is not possible to predict what will become most important. Therefore all layers of experience: romantic, social, economical, environmental, educational, organisational, etc. - and most importantly for us internet based - need to be given equal attention.

In consequence, we claim that what traditionalist philosophers (Turkle or Virilio) are addressing as a distracting medium is truly a romance itself as is a romantic conversation over a glass of the finest French wine or a cigarette after a sexual intercourse in an old movie. As Marshall McLuhan famously stated: “the medium is the message” to say in his “Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man” (1964) that the choice of the medium is extremely important, because the medium not only influences the message’s form (written or verbal, pictorial or linguistic, haptic or visual etc.), but its content as well. Hence, the medium is also the romance, because it has power to determine the shape of the romantic relation. We can observe differences in the reception of messages depending on the ways of transmission: not every issue can be understood in every channel. Internet offered us new ways of connecting each other, so using this medium to communicate our emotions, to meet people and finally, to find a romantic partner, is just an adjustment to the current changes in the world. We claim that this broadening of our possibilities, broadens also a perspective by providing extra-layer of experience. The medium is

the romance - as face-to-face relation, romantic love, conversation - internet based interaction can become a fundament for a relationship as well.

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