**Self-presentation in the Portuguese Online Dating Scene: Does Gender Matter?**

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*Man is least himself when he talks in his own person.*

*Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.*

Oscar Wilde

**Introduction**

Two decades ago, *Time* magazine, in an issue entitled "The strange new world of the Internet", pointed out why the Internet would never go mainstream: "It was not designed for doing commerce, and it does not gracefully accommodate new arrivals."[[1]](#footnote-1) The prediction could not have been more wrong. As argued by numerous authors, the reality shows that not only the Internet became very popular but it also represents a tremendous change in society. It could be argued that the Internet has brought about societal implications to the magnitude of the industrial revolution or the printing press.[[2]](#footnote-2) Not only does the Internet pursue organizational and commercial purposes, but its sociability and communication features - “the *relational* Internet”: practices in which people engage to interact and share information and meaning[[3]](#footnote-3) - are high and will likely increase.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) through email, audio and video, has become a commonplace tool in the industrialized countries, allowing for the contact between more people, more often and through increasingly diversified channels, giving rise to a new form of social organization: the *network society*.[[5]](#footnote-5) "A network of relationships, weak ties or intimate that occurs in [different] environments (...) the constant interaction between online and offline spaces".[[6]](#footnote-6) Among these, online dating sites claim a prominent role in the social and love life of millions of individuals in many different countries.

Over the past few years, networking sites and particularly cyberdating, “the process of getting to know someone online via the Internet before transferring the relationship to offline or face-to-face interaction”,[[7]](#footnote-7) have been a growing area of research. Scholars from a variety of academic disciplines such as communication studies, psychology and sociology, making use of distinct approaches, models and theories, have shown interest for the analysis of a myriad of issues linked with: self-presentation strategies and mate preferences; online communication and attraction; sincerity and deception; trust and privacy; self-disclosure; identity; sexuality; infidelity; and gender differences in online dating.[[8]](#footnote-8) Previous studies have mainly dealt with the textual parts of online dating Profiles and only recently researchers started to use images and photographs as a data source.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This paper opens with a general account of the role of the Internet as a matchmaker, discussing primarily the strategies employed by users when constructing their online dating Profiles. It then focuses on social representations of gender, sex roles stereotypes, and in the differences between male and female dating advertisements. The goal of the paper is to explain the gender dynamics characterizing the process of online dating self-presentation, particularly in the cultural context of Portugal. The main research question which guided the study was: to what extent do Portuguese men and women adhere to established traditional gender roles in the composition of their online dating Profiles? To gain new knowledge about the subject, sub-questions emerged: to what extent do users self-disclose and what kind of information do they show in their presentation messages? Which options do male and female daters choose for self-characterization regarding physical appearance, personality traits and socioeconomic status and social capital? What do portraits and images uploaded reveal? The paper concludes with the idea of the persistence versus change of gender stereotypes and lastly presents considerations for a future research agenda.

**Cupid Lurking Online**

Millions of people across the globe know, by personal experience, something that the literature confirms: the Internet is a valid mean of initiating intimate, romantic and personally fulfilling relationships.[[10]](#footnote-10) In fact, online dating, more particularly in the U.S. but in the future, possibly, in the rest of the Western world as well, is becoming one of the most common ways of meeting potential love partners. The Internet has been gaining ground on more traditional forms of meeting romantic partners such as friends, family, school or neighborhood. Rosenfeld and Thomas, have found that “for heterosexual couples who met in 2009, the Internet was the third most likely way of meeting.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Also in the U.S. context, the study of Cacioppo et al.[[12]](#footnote-12), using a representative sample of 19,131 respondents, married between the years 2005 and 2012, concluded that more than one third of North American marriages start now online.

Virtual spaces where individuals can meet include, but are not limited to, online dating sites; internet classifieds; chat rooms; instant messaging; online games; and social networking websites. Forms of finding romantic or sexual partners, beyond the traditional ways, namely, the use of matrimonial advertisements, date back to the end of the 17th century. “By the early eighteen century, matrimonial advertising was booming, along with the expansion of print and the proliferation of newspapers, pamphlets and periodicals.”[[13]](#footnote-13) And around the 19th century there are records of the phenomenon of mail-order brides and matchmaker services among certain religious groups in the Northwest of the U.S.[[14]](#footnote-14)

It may be said that love has no price. However, it can - and it was - transformed and developed into a highly profitable business: dating sites are a million dollar industry. The number of unmarried people has been increasing for the last decades in the Western society, but the social pressure for a conjugal life persists. Thus, although differently from the way partners met through matrimonial ads posted in newspapers and magazines in old times, the internet became from the outset a way for people to browse hundreds of databases with millions of users, filtering them by age, location, physical attractiveness, income, etc. They did it in the search for “Mr. or Ms. Right”.[[15]](#footnote-15) Then, in the beginning of the 21st century, with the advent of more sophisticated computer software, began the age of the algorithm, allowing partners to find more compatible matches. The popularity of online dating sites seems to represent an unexpected and truly magical instrument to open up new venues in the world of date and romance. Nowadays, according to a recent article from Forbes Magazine:

The pool has deepened such that around half of all single people use online dating services at some point, and the algorithms that power them have gotten about as smart as they’re going to get for the time being. What users want isn’t more or better matches on the screen (…). What they want is an easier and faster way to meet them IRL - in real life. “The big thing now is offline”[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Possible selves: managing online presentations**

Over the years, personal presentations on the Internet have been changing significantly. In its early days, the Internet was seen as a space where, thanks to anonymity, individuals were able to create and recreate their identities, composing fictional characters and playing roles of people different from their own self. Gender switching practices were common in chat rooms, online games, forums and other virtual spaces.

Currently, the Internet evolved in the creation of personalized environments where users build realistic presentations of themselves.[[17]](#footnote-17) The aim is to achieve inter-personal objectives: bond with the family and real friends, establish new friendships, create virtual communities of mutual interests, find sexual and romantic partners or set (future) professional contacts. On the contrary of their predecessors, nowadays, self-presentations tend to be carefully constructed in order to allow personal agendas in the offline environment. Thus, self-presentation on dating sites, according to literature, follows rational choices about what to write on Profiles and what images to show.[[18]](#footnote-18) Self-presentation strategies, and the way individuals (re)create their online identities, are important in relationship initiation and self-disclosure plays an important role. For this reason, as it occurs in circumstances others than online dating,[[19]](#footnote-19) daters feel the need to please and attract others. They seek to create a good impression on others by stressing and bringing out the attributes and personal characteristics deemed most valuable.

Occasionally, in order to attract others, daters lie about themselves. Those lies, usually, are not perceived as factual lies. More than having to do with intrinsic personal features, they have to do with external ones (e.g. age, height – normally men lie more about this item then women –, weight – women tend to lie more about this characteristic -, smoking habits, or number of children). Hence, deviations tend “to be ubiquitous but small in magnitude”.[[20]](#footnote-20) As Ellison et al. argue “the notion that people frequently, explicitly, and intentionally ‘lie’ online is simplistic and inaccurate”.[[21]](#footnote-21) Self-presentation and the construction of an online Profile can be a complex process mixing different domains: “Real-I”, “Social-I” and “Ideal-I”.[[22]](#footnote-22) That is not necessarily bad, since “possible selves”[[23]](#footnote-23) may act as an important element of one’s self-knowledge.

Giddens (1990) argues that one important aspect of identity in modernity is the ability to self-narrate (….). Those who actively engage in the ‘reflexive project of the self’ (…) that is, rewriting the personal narrative as identity construction, can presumably function well in the modern world, and as a corollary through online spheres that cater for these narrative constructions of self.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Social Representations of Gender and Stereotypes**

Social representations can be understood as a way of interpreting and thinking about everyday reality, a form of social knowledge that, in opposition to the scientific knowledge, is entitled as common sense. Bearing in mind the central purpose of this paper and to the extent that sexual belonging is related to specific ways in which one learns to be, feel, think, act and see the world, gender is a conceptual category that deserves to be explored. The same for gender stereotypes that are socially constructed around it - that is, broadly accepted judgments about men and women regarding personality traits, physical appearance, behaviors, occupations, and so on.

To understand the processes involved in the construction of gender, it is worth noting that being a man or a woman is to act accordingly to what people in society evaluate as masculine and feminine. This has little or nothing to do with the biological nature and physiology of each body. Nonetheless, it is on that body, with a biologically defined sex, that gender attributes are fixed. Attributes or traits are socially constructed and internalized, and may vary greatly in time and from one culture to the next. They are often perceived as part of the nature of the individuals. Gender roles and stereotypes are not natural, yet they are naturalized.

In recent decades, in most Western countries and Portugal is no exception, profound changes occurred in the ways men and women construct their gender identity and maintain interpersonal relationships. At this level we found a gradual abandonment of the traditional gender roles, considered complementary and asymmetric: women taking the expressive, emotionally supportive role of maintaining a balanced family structure and devoted to the household management, and men occupied with the work outside the home, carrying the instrumental and practical role of family subsistence, authority and leadership.[[25]](#footnote-25)

We have been witnessing a growing sentimentalisation, privatisation, secularisation and individualisation of families that transformed people’s family lives into more plural and diverse combinations, particularly when compared with much more homogeneous models from the past. Nowadays, in family context, there’s a greater importance given to gender equality but also to the sentimental aspect of relationships, in so far it carries the sense of greater accomplishment and personal well-being.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Multiple Portuguese sociological studies, mainly in the field of family research, show that these gradual changes stimulated and incremented new normative guidance on forms of experiencing dating, romance, and partnership, intimacy and family life. The Carnation Revolution, in 1974, liberalized the Portuguese nation, and changed it into a democratic, fairer, and egalitarian society. This political and social transformation led and contributed to changes, also, in moral values and privacy practices supported, in their turn, by adjustments and innovations in the law occurring in terms of rights then conquered. Gender inequalities gradually fade; the perspective of an active woman, equal to man in rights and duties was progressively implemented; male domination loses legal legitimacy and the traditional and patriarchal order that ruled family life and intimate relationships shifts. Regarding the romantic, emotional and intimate biographies of Portuguese recent generations it is possible to detect an evolution in the gender based double standard, which suggests a gradual harmonization between the experiences of women and men. They seem to adhere to more egalitarian discourses showing a less distinctive pattern of female and male standards.

However, as Kimmel[[27]](#footnote-27) argues, gender still remains an organizing principle around which individuals build their identities and social representations of gender role relationships. That is, partly, what explains why the accelerated transition to the dominant model of the dual earner, in which both spouses pursue careers, did not erase the traces of inequality between men and women in most Western societies, and especially in the Portuguese one. At the turn of the century, Portugal, a nation still with a conservative dimension, was regarded as one of the countries where gender stereotypes were more accentuated.[[28]](#footnote-28) Traditionalist patterns of male dominance over women, especially regarding the division of housework and child care, are still felt in Portugal. Those patterns influence men’s and women’s behavior. Women, in particular, activate "dispositions they have been inculcated with" and continue to respond to the "traditionalist expectations for the performance of roles in our society."[[29]](#footnote-29)

It is, thus, noticeable the maintenance of gender representations that lead to the (re)production of stereotypes and gender roles. Gender stereotypes transmitted by the family, at the school and in the media, continue to follow traditional clichés. Men are perceived as strong, courageous, assertive, domineering, aggressive and depicted as uninhibited, rational, independent, resistant, ambitious, confident and geared for action; while female occur more frequently in the conciliatory role – the peacemaker that does not foster conflict – and they are also portrayed as good-looking; soft, delicate, calm, dependent, caring, loving, emotional, affable and sensitive.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Notwithstanding the transformations in Portuguese society that have occurred, there are two main social indicators that point to a stability in, at least, two dimensions of the feminine stereotype, namely: the sexualization and the role played in the family. In the first case it is notorious that images of sexualized women are still common in advertising and marketing material[[31]](#footnote-31), in the second case, numerous studies show the persistence of a very traditional division of labor in the Portuguese families, compared with other countries.[[32]](#footnote-32)

As Bourdieu suggests, the fact that male domination is no longer imposed in all contexts is far from meaning, with obvious evidence, its eradication. For the author, the principles of the dominant view - those of male domination - remain active even if they are embedded "in the form of schemes of perception and appreciation hardly accessible to consciousness.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Still, along with the reproduction of gender stereotypes the issue of the equalization of gender also emerges. Tradition and modernity coexist. To state it in a simplified way, in this matter of gender, change does not occur as it is expected, change, as Bourdieu explains, occurs in the permanence.

**Gender Differences in Dating Advertisements**

Online or offline, it is important to remember that all subjects construct their identity and try to convey a certain image of themselves. Literature concerning personal advertisements, primarily in newspapers and magazines, and more recently also on the Internet, namely in dating sites, indicates that gender stereotypes influence the way men and women describe the ideal partner and also the way they define themselves in order to attract potential partners. Gender does influence self-presentation characteristics: men’s personal Profiles are more likely to offer instrumental traits (education, career, financial status, socioeconomic position), and to request expressive qualities in women; whereas women offer physical attractiveness, personality characteristics, and expressive features more often while seeking status in the form of occupation and requesting for instrumental traits in males.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Though a vast majority of the literature indicates that men and women ads complement each other, there are studies challenging this assumption with some puzzling results. Men may also be looking for financially independent, successful and ambitious women[[35]](#footnote-35); and women, on their hand, relative to the opposite sex, are starting to emphasize commitment, communication and the ability to express feelings. Also they appear to be looking in male Profiles for “characteristics like warmth and kindness, and attractiveness”.[[36]](#footnote-36) In sum, research may be pointing to a “gender-specific decline in mate value”.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The construction of online dating Profiles tries to fit with what is considered socially acceptable in the dominant culture. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that Portuguese online self-presentations may generate significant and important materials that contribute to address concerns with the theoretical interpretation of continuity and social and cultural change (innovation and tradition) in what gender roles are concerned in the Portuguese context.

**Self-presentation on the Internet: the Portuguese Case**

In Portugal, printed dating ads have been studied, namely from a major daily Portuguese newspaper,[[38]](#footnote-38) but online dating is severely lacking academic research. In 2002, Cardoso showed that, in the context of Portuguese Internet mediated communication (IMC) users, it was possible to see “the formation of stable environments of intimate ties, prolonging themselves outside the environment of IMC towards the offline spaces”.[[39]](#footnote-39) These intimate ties, concerned, among others, friendship (30,2%) and friendship and love (2,3%), and in a recent report that explores the relation of Portuguese people with the internet, the same author mentions that 78,7% of internet users adhere to social networking in order to meet new people.[[40]](#footnote-40) Who are these users, what motivates them to meet new people, who do they meet and what kind of relationships are established, that is still unknown.

Digital literacy in Portugal grew exponentially from the late 1990’s to the end of the last decade and the Internet gradually emerged as a “community of chronic communicators.”[[41]](#footnote-41) By the end of the 1990’s the use of the Internet as a ‘social technology’ for communication among individuals was still the object of some apprehension[[42]](#footnote-42) but in 2009, Portugal was already the European country with the third highest number of users accessing social networking sites – after the UK and Spain.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Scattered studies, in Portugal, have looked at the construction of identities through CMC;[[44]](#footnote-44) at the dichotomy of online/offline environments contributing to the debate on the connections between these two worlds;[[45]](#footnote-45) at the subject of cybersex;[[46]](#footnote-46) and at the presentation of self in Facebook.[[47]](#footnote-47) However, apart from this very few studies, the review of the literature reveals no research so far on the potential of the Internet, particularly of dating sites, to foster romantic relationships.

**Falling in Line with Traditional Gender Representations?**

Prior international studies have documented that dating sites are important venues to find romantic partners, and that female and male users pursue distinct self-presentation strategies to attract others online. In recent years, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of Internet users in Portugal but, as previously mentioned, there is a gap in the scientific literature on how the Portuguese use cyberspace, and specifically dating sites, to initiate romantic relationships.

In this research, the main goal was to understand if Portuguese men and women adhere to established traditional gender roles in the composition of their online dating Profiles. To gain new insight on the subject, sub-questions emerged: what does the content of the presentation messages reveal? Which options do male and female daters choose for self-characterization regarding physical appearance, personality traits and socioeconomic status and social capital? What do portraits and images uploaded reveal?

The final sample for this study included 200 Profiles - 100 men and 100 women - and 1006 photographs - 485 of men and 521 of women -, all gathered from one particular Internet dating site (Meetic.pt), during 2011. Meetic was chosen for three reasons: firstly, it is the top dating site in Europe; secondly, it was the first dating site to appear in Portugal (in 2005); and, thirdly, it is relatively widespread, recording the most registered users.

The user’s Profiles were selected according to 5 criteria: firstly, there was a photograph and a self-presentation ad; secondly, they were between 25 and 60 years old; thirdly, they lived in Portugal; fourth, they lived in Lisbon; and finally, they lived within a 30km radius of Lisbon.[[48]](#footnote-48) For the rest (e.g. education, income, profession physical appearance, marital status, etc.) the random effect was maintained. The sample was limited to heterosexuals (women seeking men and men seeking women). The 200 Profiles were proportionally selected among these age groups with most registered users in the site, according to the above- mentioned criteria (men: 17 aged 25–30 years; 39 aged 31-40 years; 30 aged 41-50 years; 14 aged 51-60 / women: 13 aged 25–30 years; 30 aged 31-40 years; 36 aged 41-50 years; 21 aged 51-60).

The Profiles in the dating site Meetic.pt include several items: a space to upload images; a space where users are encouraged to write a self-presentation message; a closed-ended questionnaire about personal data, traits and tastes; habits, religion, income, eye-color; type of preferred food; partner-preferences, and a set of other characteristics (to be answered with a drop-down menu); and also a questionnaire with pre-defined yes/no questions to be selected by the users, who can choose to post it in their Profiles so that visitors may respond.

The first step in this study was to select and save the Profiles to individual files in the computer and then analyze all the items with the exception of the fourth - the questionnaire with pre-defined yes/no questions. Regarding the third item, only some specific elements of the self-questionnaire with pre-defined questions were studied: physical attributes (“aspect”, “silhouette” and “the most attractive in me”); socioeconomic traits (“qualifications”, “profession” and “income”); and personality/psychological characteristics.

Self-presentation messages and the selected items of the self-questionnaire with pre-defined questions were analyzed using a thematic and summative content analysis methodology[[49]](#footnote-49) and employing techniques of the grounded theory that Larossa defines as a “valuable set of procedures for thinking about theoretically textual materials”.[[50]](#footnote-50) A semi-inductive approach, qualitative and interpretative, was followed in the search for unexpected data that would contribute substantially to the construction of hypotheses in a dialectical relationship between theoretical reflection and reality.[[51]](#footnote-51) From an analysis of the 200 presentation messages of both males and females, "thematic files" or "category files"[[52]](#footnote-52) were created for both sexes. In each of these files, excerpts of the user’s most significant descriptions were labeled and the words most often used counted. The content analysis of the messages was guided by the main research question and required an observation grid containing some possible male and female stereotypes. The grid was built based on a set of studies mainly centered in the Portuguese culture that in recent years have been discussing the topic of stereotypes and presenting lists of traits and attributes commonly considered typically masculine or feminine.

For the study of Profile photographs Bell’s methodology - content analysis of visual images - was followed: “an empirical (observational) and objective procedure for quantifying recorded ‘audio-visual’ (…) representation using reliable, explicitly defined categories”.[[53]](#footnote-53) Bearing in mind the research questions, the first goal was to discover the categories, common themes and subthemes emerging across the male and female Profile photos, and also to note the different or unique pictures appearing in the Profiles. In the content analysis of visual images “the researcher is usually interested in whether, say, women are depicted more or less frequently than men in relation to some variable or quality”.[[54]](#footnote-54) Thus, each Profile was coded for the number of photos uploaded, number of photos with face shots, and number of photos showing things other than the user (for instance, animals, places, cities, and objects) and the circumstances in which they appear. The number of photos where users exhibited parts of their body (what parts, in which positions), and the clothing they were wearing (clothing, for example, was coded on the dimensions of color and kind of clothing – sportswear, formal wear, casual wear, etc.) were also taken into account. A close reading of the images, in-depth scrutiny and “treating the visual as problematic”[[55]](#footnote-55) was the next step.

**Are Men from Mars and Women from Venus?**

The idea that men and women belong to “distinct planets” and that the differences between them are a consequence of inner psychological differences between the genders has long been widespread. There is a belief that each gender can be understood in terms of distinct ways of being, feeling, and thinking, as if there were gender specific worldviews. In fact, there are gender differences, but what sociological research, and this study in particular, show is that gender specific frameworks are largely, if not entirely, social constructions reproduced over time.

Discourses are conceptualized as instances of continuous production of gender. This means that it is recognized that individual discourses are structured largely by relatively stable symbolic systems that give (asymmetric) meanings to the categories of femininity and masculinity (...). Discourses on gender do not merely reflect a pre-existing differentiation, they actively contribute to the construction of this differentiation and, thus, they "do gender".[[56]](#footnote-56)

In this context, what does the analysis of the Profile ads reveal? Focus will be placed firstly on the presentation messages and the self-characterization online daters create. Secondly, the analysis will focus on the photographs uploaded by the female and male users. Taking into consideration the amount of data gathered and analyzed, only the aspects considered most relevant to answer the research questions will be highlighted.

Data obtained in previous studies indicates that online daters follow rational choices when presenting themselves to potential romantic partners.[[57]](#footnote-57) Although more research should be carried to broadly and firmly sustain this claim, in this study it was possible to confirm that this seems true, also, for Portuguese online daters. Men and women try to present themselves as acceptable people to others. Both want to please and attract, and they underline and show up the attributes or characteristics considered most valuable for themselves and/or possibly for others. From the analysis of the presentation messages and the items previously mentioned, five aspects of the users Profiles stand out: physical attributes; socioeconomic capital; life styles and preferred activities; psychological, relational and behavioral traits; and, finally, age preferences of the potencial partner.

**Physical Attributes**

Comparing to men, women fill out more the physical traits of the closed-ended questionnaire that characterizes users. By physical traits, it is meant: “aspect”, “silhouette” and what is considered “the most attractive in me”. But the difference is not astonishing: 69% of the 100 men fill out these items against a little bit more of women: 74%. What is more notable is that 47% of women, when filling the item “aspect”, by choosing options like “not bad”, “attractive”, “very attractive” and “an authentic model” stress much more than men (only 26% choosing these elements), their presumable beautiful and charming look. The least filled in of all items of the questionnaire, included in this major item of the “Physical attributes”, is “the most attractive in me” - perhaps because it is the third on the list of all the items to be filled in by the users when completing their online profile. It is curious, though, that regarding the “silhouette” item, the second one, there are 18% of women choosing the option “with graceful curves” and only two percent of men choosing this option.

Women have managed to free themselves from the stereotype of woman and wife. However, despite all the battle, what these results may indicate is that Portuguese women still have internalized the stereotypes from 50 years ago, but now also carrying the “heightened sexuality, one of the burdens of the post sexual revolution society that freed the chains that bound the women’s desires, but brought to the spotlight the female body in advertising and on the media in general”[[58]](#footnote-58), thus contributing for the reproduction of the female stereotype as a sex symbol.

**Socioeconomic Capital**

The most salient result that emerges when analyzing the data relating the socioeconomic capital of the individuals that compose the sample of this research is that neither men nor women seem to feel very comfortable with the filling of these aspects. The percentage of users that do not fill in the items of “qualifications”, “profession” and “income” are high, particularly when compared to other elements of the closed-ended questionnaire. Nonetheless, there are a few more men (67%) than women (51%) doing it. Furthermore, it can be stressed that, although the numbers are not high, still, 19% of men disclose information about their “income” whereas only six percent of women fill in this element.

Although the recent literature on the European family lives, notably, the gender order within the family context, suggests that the old breadwinner model, at least concerning attitudes, is outdated[[59]](#footnote-59), such detail may suggest a certain persistence of the notion of this man breadwinner model in the Portuguese society. If not in attitudes, at least, as an ideal model, particularly if we take into account that the distribution of male users that indicate this bit of information goes from men with 26 years old to men with 56 years old.

**Life Styles and Preferred Activities**

This is perhaps the aspect, of all those who are referred by users, in which gender does not seem to influence the responses. It is relatively accepted and widespread that both women and men appreciate traveling; going for a walk; going to the cinema; listening to music; going to concerts; enjoying the beach; watching the sea; appreciating the sunset, the moon, the stars, the countryside, or the nature; being with the family; reading; writing; laughing; having a drink; cooking; being with friends; practicing sports; dancing; shopping and breaking out of routines. Yet, the analysis of the relational and behavioral traits reveals that gender stereotypes have not been vanished. On the contrary, they are part of the scenario of how male and female online daters present themselves to others on the context of finding romantic partners in the Internet. We shall see it in the next point to be discussed.

**Psychological, Relational and Behavioral Traits**

The personality traits of male and female users, gathered from their written self-presentation messages and from the personality/psychological characteristics selected by them in the closed-ended questionnaire, were analyzed accordingly to the grid of male and female stereotypes previously mentioned. The main results demonstrate that women gender role stereotypes are the ones extensively more (re)produced by female online daters (see Figure 1.).

**Figure 1. Female stereotypes**

**Insert image:**

**<C\_Casimiro\_image1\_Female\_Stereotypes.tiff>**

As figure 1 show, it is quite significant the number of women choosing words such as: affable, instinctive, caring, sensitive, dreamy, conciliatory, and generous for their self-presentations. Also, it can be underlined that some words are exclusively used by women: feminine, maternal, selfless and soft. As for the male stereotypes they do not appear so markedly, but still, it is interesting to note that in contrast to women, there are more men emphasizing traits such as: adventurous, active, hard-worker, independent, self-confident and, above all, courteous (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Male stereotypes**

**Insert image:**

**<C\_Casimiro\_image2\_Male\_Stereotypes.tiff>**

The traditional courtesies that have served to differentiate gentlemen from ladies, such as men opening doors for women (…), may also serve to communicate and perpetuate the expectation that men are stronger than, dominant over, and more powerful than women (…). Thus, an act of common courtesy may be viewed by some as a political statement designed to perpetuate traditional views of masculinity and femininity (…) and may sometimes serve as ‘a way of preserving the inequities between the sexes’ (…).[[60]](#footnote-60)

Also, it is possible to detect words solely employed by men, such as: perseverant, prudent, responsible, ambitious, rational and mature.

Four basic aspects can, thusly, be highlighted. Firstly, Portuguese online daters tend to choose personal attributes and psychological characteristics that fit the still prevailing and traditionally feminine and masculine stereotypes in the Portuguese cultural context. Women give much more weight to emotional, affective, and romantic attributes, whereas, on their turn, men bring out characteristics related to work, self-determination, rationality, and the practical side of life.

Secondly, despite a relatively marked division among men and women options for, correspondingly, masculine and feminine stereotypes, there are also some men stressing their sensitive, caring, instinctive, and especially, their affable side, and a few women mentioning their active, independent and self-confident facets.

Thirdly, there is a rather broad set of users that although reproducing gender stereotypes, simultaneously use gender-neutral attributes in their self-presentations like: honest, genuine, simple, cheerful and optimistic.

Finally, and to avoid too simplistic and linear explanations about the (re)production of gender role stereotypes, by Portuguese men and women, it must be taken into consideration the context where these stereotypes are being (re)produced: the online dating scene. Men and women are describing themselves accordingly to what they imagine to be the attributes and features others might be looking in a potential romantic partner. In the scenario of dating sites, when individuals use certain traits and categories they might be trying to meet what they consider to be the most desired, respected or advantageous position in that given context. Self-presentations can, thus, be interpreted as male and female performances of certain masculinities and femininities.

For example, in the context of financial business or management and administration, namely in Portugal, it is known that women employ specific strategies that enable them to be accepted as leaders and integrate teams.[[61]](#footnote-61) It is highly probable that if they had to fill out a profile for an application to integrate a big company they would rather opt to use self-descriptive words like “active”, “perseverant”, “independent”, “responsible” and “mature”. Similarly, in the particular situation of online dating, recent American literature has shown that in the beginning of the 21st century, contrary to prior researches, there are women already describing themselves as financially independent, successful and ambitious. Curiously, these female online advertisements produce higher response rates comparing to those where women describe themselves as lovely, very attractive and slim.[[62]](#footnote-62)

**Age Preferences of the Potential Partner**

Love without social constraint is a myth. The Sociology of the family, have shown, for decades, that couples tend to be homogamous, “that is, individuals are attracted to persons who are similar on one or more characteristics”.[[63]](#footnote-63) Homogamy is a social proximity that may be based on culture, class, religion, economic status or age: the so-called age homogamy. On the Internet the possibilities of meeting someone that otherwise would never be met are high. This means that the chances of getting to know someone from a geographically distinct zone, with different socioeconomic and cultural capitals, religion or age are immense. This is why some literature suggests that on the Internet partners are chosen with greatest differences in age or level of education though, apparently, with more similar interests and values.[[64]](#footnote-64)

In this research, results point in the direction that the age preferences of the potential partner go along the tendency that occurs between Portuguese couples who met, and got married, in the offline world. The criteria used for marital choice concerning the age of the partner in the offline world is also visible in the choices male and female online daters make when they indicate, in their profiles, the preferred age of the partner they are looking for. Hence, what this study reveals is that there is an age hypergamy (see Figures 3. and 4.). In Portugal, six in ten marital unions imply an age difference favoring men and, in most cases, the man is two to five years older than the woman.[[65]](#footnote-65)

**Figure 3. Distribution of the preferred age of the partner - Men**

**Insert image:**

**< C\_Casimiro\_image3\_Age\_of\_the\_partner\_MEN.tiff>**

**Figure 4. Distribution of the preferred age of the partner - Women**

**Insert image:**

**< C\_Casimiro\_image4\_Age\_of\_the\_partner\_WOMEN.tiff>**

Over the decades, in Western countries, including Portugal, the age difference between marriage partners has been decreasing. Among older age groups, however, and depending of the marital status of individuals, hypergamy persists and works differently depending on the gender (men marry much younger women, and women marry not only much older man but also much younger men). In this sense, it is important to note that yes, gender does matter - not only in the strategies followed by men and women in their self-presentations, but also in the choices they make about the preferred age of the partner.

The results of this research indicate that age preferences, likewise in the offline environment, shift with age (and presumably – like in the Portuguese context happens - with the marital status). But these preferences are not random: gender does in fact matter. As they age, men prefer younger women, whereas women’s partners’ preferred age becomes more diverse.

**And What about the Portraits?**

The literature on online dating reveals that posting pictures increases several times more the chances of matching. Meetic.pt encourages users to do so. Of those who comply, many explicitly mention the importance of a photograph in the Profile:

“*Profiles with no photographs are like books without a cover*”

[woman, single, 39 years]

“*Profiles without photos, no thanks: if you go fishing you've got to get wet*”

[man, separated, 41 years]

"*Please, those of you that don’t show their image do not contact me. Although ‘what is* essential *is invisible to the eye’ I’m not interested in those who haven’t got the courage to show up! I will respect them but I will not answer. Thank you.*”

[woman, divorced, 39 years]

Although the sample in this study was composed of Profiles with ads and pictures (100 men from the 2,686 found in the dating site, and 100 women, gathered from the 959 that had an advertisement and photographs), it should be mentioned that according to the criteria previously mentioned there are much more users just with self-presentation messages and without photos than users with both (8,793 men and 3,736 women without photo). Among those who upload photographs, there are only 6% of women doing it, comparing with 17% of men. However, in the sample used (N=200), the number of photographs uploaded by women (521) surpassed the number uploaded by men (485). Moreover, more women than men uploaded between just 1 and 5 photos (19 men uploaded just one photo, whereas 34 women did so). On the other hand, there are a few more women than men uploading more than 15 photos (the maximum number uploaded by a man was 23, whereas, by a woman, it was 25 – the maximum allowed). This suggests that, although there are more female Profiles without photos, when women decide to post them, they seem to upload more than men.

Three categories emerged from the content analysis of the uploaded users photographs. They focus on different aspects: the physical - photos relating to the body (body fit, body look, body presentation); the symbolic - images that suggest or represent ideas, qualities, tastes, emotions and states of mind or spirit; and the material - photos showing or pointing to physical objects, money or possessions (the material world). In these distinct categories, it is possible to find similarities and differences in the photos uploaded by the two genders.

Regarding similarities, almost one third of the total sample of photographs is composed of face shots, a number equally distributed over both genders. Regarding the physical category, men and women portray themselves in various poses and behaviors, showing physically fit bodies or parts of them - strong arms, pectoral muscles, flat bellies - on the beach, in the pool or at home, and in glamour photographs taken at marriages, baptisms or other special/party events. These photos show them from flattering angles wearing fancy, sometimes expensive clothes, accessories, and make up. Both the men and the women post symbolic photographs, or photos of non-personal identity nature trying to represent something or express intentions or feeling: sunsets, beautiful landscapes, restaurants, pets, or fine art photography.

The most notable gender effect found in the photographs in the physical category relates to the fact that women not only appear in 96.5% of the photographs, contrasting with the 85% of photographs where men portray themselves, but also reveal far more physical details than men do. Women show particular parts of their body: lips, legs, tongue and navel piercings, feet, and tattoos – on the shoulder, wrist, and nape of the neck, chest, lower back, hip, and ankles. It is interesting to consider this result in the light of the studies being made about how the media produces gender stereotypes that, on their turn, are then internalized by social actors and, again, thus, continuously reproduced. Tuna and Freitas, in a research that undertook the analysis of perfume magazine ads concluded that:

There seems to be an emphasis on themes such as sports and business/professions in men’s perfume ads, whereas women’s fragrances tend to be advertised through motifs such as love, eroticism, glamour and fashion. (…) The depiction of women models is still more frequent, and that nudity and the erotic depiction of women participants prevail, when compared to similar proportion of men depicted in more business-like poses.[[66]](#footnote-66)

In relation to the symbolic category of photos, it is very interesting to observe that there is not even one photograph posted by a woman representing her workplace or some scenario that could indicate her professional occupation. By contrast, eleven photos of men, though a residual number in the 485 uploaded by them, were nonetheless classified as “workplace” in the thematic files created when analyzing photographs. Those pictures show men working as architects at a drawing table, as civil engineers inspecting works, with a helmet on, as aircraft pilots, policemen or firemen, in uniform, or at the office, sitting at the computer, amid papers and files. This result is consistent with what Neto and Pinto found when analyzing gender stereotypes in Portuguese television advertisements a few years ago: “significant differences, with proportionally more females (35%) being portrayed in the home than males (12.7%) and more males being portrayed in occupational settings (37.7%) than females (22.0%).”[[67]](#footnote-67)

Still, one of the more significant and explicit gender difference, if not the most, was found in the material category. In this case, men upload far more photographs (23) than women (5). They post photos of their cars (e.g. convertibles), motorbikes, and boats, and images showing indoor spaces (e.g., presumably, their houses or parts of them – the pool, the fireplace, the library, old furniture, china). Images of capital cities visited, paradisiacal beaches, desert landscapes, and ski resorts – an indirect way of showing a certain economic or financial status – are also much more commonly uploaded by men (28) than women (9). These results show that the users are pursuing strategies in their self-presentations online not only when they write their self-presentation messages, but also when they select the photographs that are going to portray them and potentially attract dating partners.

**Conclusion**

Daters do not present themselves randomly or carelessly. On the contrary, there is a notable attempt to please potential partners. These findings extend those of other researches confirming that by a “selective self-presentation”[[68]](#footnote-68), Portuguese men and women registered in the dating site Meetic.pt try to manage impressions and promote the relationships desired.

Women and men pursue distinct self-presentation strategies to attract others online. There are important gender differences in the self-presentation procedure and gender role stereotypes tend to be (re)produced. Men seem more inclined to underline their rational and practical attributes as well as their socioeconomic status, whereas women activating ancient dispositions that have been inculcated with, value their emotional, and affective facets, and their inclination to dream. Women also emphasize their physical attributes more than men. The findings of the current study are consistent with others who found that “when selling the self, men market their financial and occupational resources, whereas women offer physical attractiveness and appealing body shape”.[[69]](#footnote-69)

On one hand, it is possible to detect certain clues pointing toward modern gender roles. Men describe their emotional and relationship skills, their generosity and sensitivity, which reveals their “orientation towards a sense of belonging and intimacy”[[70]](#footnote-70). Some women refer to their active and independent facets allied to some traits of self-confidence mentioning, for instances, the importance of the hard work. On the other hand, men and women tend to offer complementary gender-based characteristics. Gender stereotypes perdure when male daters reinforce the instrumental role and female daters accentuate the expressive role. It seems, thus, that “rather than *being* modern, the Portuguese like the *idea* of being modern.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

It also possible to conclude that the positive attributes men and women project fall into social norms around what is considered feminine and masculine and are consistent with the contemporary gender roles in the Portuguese society. Online self-presentations reflect shared cultural values about gender and they contribute to the predominance of online stereotypical gender identities. The association of women to the world of reproduction and of men to the world of production has not been completely fractured, and important traits of conventional gender relations still persist today.[[72]](#footnote-72) Or, at least, “traditionalist expectations for the performance of roles in our society”[[73]](#footnote-73) seem to be still present.

It is clear that gender stereotypes persist along with social changes in the relationships among men and women and the way they conceive masculinity and femininity. Stereotypes may be internalized in individuals, however, that does not mean that men are from Mars and women from Venus. Sociological research reveals that differences between countries with regard to values ​​and issues of family, work and gender roles are higher than the differences characterizing males and females from those countries. There also studies about online self-presentations that show that differences may be higher between countries than between genders.[[74]](#footnote-74) Kisilevich and Last,[[75]](#footnote-75) for instance, demonstrated that cultural and national differences impact the characteristics of user Profiles even for people of the same gender across countries.

Finally, one more point needs to be made. The conclusions of this research seem to be valid though they must be viewed not as definitive answers but as research proposals that deserve further investigation.

Online spaces where people can create their self-presentations, producing, or not, different profiles, differ. Therefore, as some authors have stressed, people may act differently when paying a fee for an inscription on a dating site or for, example, to be included in a discussion forum about ecological and environmental problems affecting their community. Taking into consideration the exponential and quick expansion of dating sites, there can also be significant differences between them: specific sites for speed dating, for people who just want to find a sexual partner (one night stand), for individuals who look for their future husband or wife, people looking for homosexual relationships, and so on. Therefore, when studying online dating self-presentation, researches should take into account the specificity of the site being studied since that apparently simple fact may have important implications on the results obtained. It would be interesting to study the self-descriptions impact on dating success. Also, a better understanding of how these self-presentations reflect social and cultural continuities and changes in gender roles over the recent past is needed. Additionally, more qualitative research should be carried out to give a voice to online daters, with the aim of gathering empirical knowledge about online dating practices and the process of finding love online. The influence of demographic variables such as age, educational level, socio-economic status, and marital status, on the construction of online dating Profiles, should also be studied in depth. Finally, more attention must be given to photographs and to the role of visual impression management, since it is known that Profile owners do not self-expose themselves arbitrarily. Research on images and photographs, namely self-portraits, is equally important since as Walker explains:

The computer screen represents the connection between the self and society (…). At the same time as we connect with society, we do the reflective work we used to do only in mirrors, in private. (…) Perhaps our fascination with self-portraits in mirrors is an expression of our collective coming into being as digital subjects. We are subjects. I am a self. This is the first step in learning how to express ourselves with digital technology, and the first step in choosing to express *ourselves* rather than simply allowing ourselves to be described by others.[[76]](#footnote-76)

**Acknowledgments**

This paper presents research results of a postdoctoral investigation funded by a grant from the Foundation for Science and Technology - FCT (SFRH/BPD/64644/2009).

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