Computer-Mediated Relationships: The Pursuit of Love in the Internet Dating Website, Match.com

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ABSTRACT
This article presents the case study that aims to explore and analyse the worldwide dating website phenomena, Match.com that offers consumers a convenient and affordable alternative to traditional methods of dating. The computer mechanism, the company's service and marketing strategy, and the restriction on consumers' use of the site will be examined. Furthermore, the study will add more insight to the practical understanding of aspects of consumer characteristics and expectations, as well as raising some concerns about the social responsibility of Match.com. Participant observation was used by registering for the site to gain consumers' experiences. Furthermore, this study will primarily use online research to analyse the contents, features and affordability of the Match.com site, supplemented by discourse analysis of relevant theoretical texts, books, journals, newspapers and magazines.

ABSTRACT
Dating is the process of ritualistically courting a partner with a perceived aspect of romantic potential. As such, this set of rituals can be seen as a component of consumer behaviour that is currently in a transition stage. The search for new dates is one of the most popular and widespread uses of the Internet. The web is used as an opportunity to “flirt” or, simply, to look for companionship. Indeed. The Internet promises to be a real alternative to find friends, or romantic relationships. It offers a new form of personal relationship that emerges and can be maintained exclusively online.

For many users, the Internet offers a practical, fruitful, instantaneous, convenient and inexpensive system for developing interpersonal relationships that hides our identity if we so desire. It is a system where our dreams can become true at a low price and at low personal risks; a system that responds to the current needs of our hectic daily lives and the compartmentalisation of our social interaction. Núñez (cited by Ardevol 2005) argues that playing and dreaming allow for the re-enactment of social events in which we may be players without the risks of suffering the consequences. In that sense, anonymous virtual interaction, unlike a real relationship with other people, allows users to interact with others and at the same time control the degree to which they are involved in the relationship. Similarly, users can experiment with their otherness, playing with the heterogeneity of ethnic, social, geographical and gender backgrounds from an aseptic standpoint, without the risks and commitments these relationships entail when being held face to face.

Interpersonal communication through this system appears to offer a mode of relationship that fits into a lifestyle in which individuals consume technology and are curious to meet new people outside the closed circle of the usual family, educational, and professional relationships. Poster (2001), has stated that online dating websites are hybrid forms that owe their success to both the cultural currency and notoriety of print-based personal columns and traditional offline dating services and this burgeoning harmony between humans and machines. Thus, it may be understood as the beginning of an adventure without leaving home, or it may be used as a way to establish new relationships for those whose needs were not properly being met under the traditional matchmaking methods. As Scharlott and Christ
(1995) acknowledged, "It seems likely that in the future, computer based, singles-oriented services will become a viable relationship-initiation alternative for significant numbers of people, especially those facing special relationship-initiation barriers" (p. 203).

In 2001, there were more than 5 million regular users of dating or singles websites (Stone, et al. 2001). Revenue from these dating sites is expected to rise more than 100 percent in the next five years – from US $313 million in 2002 to $642 million in 2007 (Higgins 2003). However, the revenue growth has slowed in recent years, but the industry continues to maintain a robust base of users, many of them willing to pay premium fees for access to specialized services (eMarketer February 14, 2006). All the while, online dating has also been solidifying its image offline, not only through features in movies, television, and advertising outlets, but also through the influence of daters' personal success stories, which have percolated through family, friends, and coworkers, and have contributed to the momentum and social acceptance of the practice.

Match.com is a pioneer international company dealing with personal relationships over the Internet and connected to instant message services that claims to have more than 15 million subscribers worldwide (M2Presswire 2006) and is credited with more marriages than any other site (Ardevol 2005). Nielsen/NetRatings, independent Internet audience measurement firm, has today named Match.com as the leading online dating provider in both the European market and the UKmarket (M2 Presswire 2006b). It is the number one across North America and Europe that operates leading subscription-based online dating sites in 32 countries, in 18 languages and spanning six continents.

Throughout its 12-year history, Match.com is the world's biggest online dating and personals property, according to ComScore Media Metrix in the December 2005 global ranking of the personals category by industry-leading independent measurement firm (http://www.comscore.com/metrix/). The site has drawn patrons from all financial, economic and social backgrounds. Match.com powers online dating on MSN across Europe, Asia, the United States, Australia (NineMSN) and Latin America and for companies such as T-Online, RTL, Wanadoo, Telia and Tiscali in Europe. Match.com is an operating business of IAC/InterActiveCorp. In the first nine months of 2002, Match.com was the USA's fastest-growing interactive segment, with US$ 33.4 million in revenue. That compares with US$ 12.5 million over the same period in 2001 (Graham 2003).

Although it is conceived as a business, it claims itself as a public service available 24 hours a day (see Terms of Use Agreement, http://www.Match.com). Since the whole concept of online dating is the community of single prospects available to consumers whenever they require, at not only irregular hours, but also any amount of time (Detter 2006). Match.com combines a free-of-charge and subscription mode (see http://www.Match.com). Consumers freely consume the service at anytime and can register free of charge to create an online "profile" of themselves, but to communicate with another consumer, they will have to pay a monthly fee. The system allows a free of charge possibility of contact: the consumer, subscriber or not, may send a wink to any other user and receive one from any other user. This wink shows an initial interest in making contact. Nevertheless, to do so, the user must be a subscriber. This means that the free-of-charge service consumers are, essentially, passive users: although they may send and receive winks, they cannot go "beyond" that if they have not subscribed to the pay services. The site also offers another participation mode called wink at me free, by which consumers pay a little more so that any others may reply to them at no cost. The free-of-charge mode invites new consumers to a system trial. This mode may give some partial satisfactory results, as for example, to find some virtual kisses in the mailbox. However, in such a way that consumers desire to answer the invitation or select who they will be contacting, it is necessary to subscribe. The free-of-charge options lead consumers into dead ends where, in order to be able to follow "the game" and achieve a maximum level of involvement, a subscription agreement with the company is needed (Subscription, http://www.Match.com). In this condition, consumers may consider their consumption not only in terms of pursuing love relationships/partners, but also estimate in terms of productivity, benefits and values.

The Computer Mechanism: Constructing the Profile for Consumers' Self-Representation

The computer configuration of Match.com is structured around the personal "profile" which is written and submitted by each one of the consumers and can be viewed by the other members of the site. These profiles function as 'self-representation' to present or advertise information about individual consumers. The profiles are the central mechanism which shapes the consumers' consumption. The consumers can present themselves by answering a series of multiple-choice questions that Match.com provides on the site. These include various demographic, socioeconomic, and physical characteristics, such as consumers' age, gender, education level, height, weight, eye and hair color, and income. The consumers also answer a question on why they joined the service, for example to find a partner for a long-term relationship, or, alternatively, a partner for a casual relationship.

The consumers' profiles differ from the print equivalent in the sense that, due to the comparative economics of the Internet, electronic profiles can be a great deal more expansive and descriptive in their content. Unlike most magazines and newspapers, there exists no per-line-charge on the site and, in fact, becoming a member of the site and posting a profile
incurs no charge at all. This increase in space is accompanied by a proliferation of categories under which consumers are asked to list specific attributes and interests. These categories include aspects of physical appearance, such as ‘body type’ and ‘eye colour’, in addition to ethnic background, nationality, religion, occupation, education level and political persuasion. The responses to these criteria are limited to a pre-selected list (such as, in the case of body type, ‘slender’, ‘about average’, ‘athletic-toned’, ‘a few extra pounds’ or ‘heavyset’) while the categories listed under interests (e.g. music, reading, movies, sport) allow for a more extensive, authored response. Additionally, Match.com allows consumers to specify how important each attribute is. Each matching attribute is assigned a different weight depending on how important it is to the consumer. This information does its best to connect consumers with people who fit their criteria and, with its two-way matching, whose criteria they fit. Further information about matching system will be provided in the next section.

At the bottom of the e-page, another pre-selected format exists for the attributes sought in the ‘ideal partner’. In addition to the pre-selected categories, the profile allows for a longer passage of further self-description to be posted. This may be the toughest part of setting up the profile, but Match.com helps its consumers by suggesting topics and offering general writing advice.

Self-representation, however, is not solely limited to the written word online. While posting a photograph is optional on Match.com, the consumers are instructed that profiles with photos elicit eight times more responses (see Goins 2002). More than any other aspect of the profile, the photograph signifies the relationship between virtual identities and real space identities. While the photograph, as representation, cannot provide transparent access to its generative source, or an ‘authentic’ self, it does work to merely fix the physical signifiers and anchor them to the identity manufactured in the written profile. Moreover, not only does the photo work to fix the consumer’s physical signifiers, it also centres physical attractiveness as one of the primary determinants of desirability. Many of those who use the site can select to only browse profiles with photographs posted, or specify in their profiles that they wish to be contacted only by members with photographs posted.

The Process of Consumption and Its Crucial Consideration

Making contact with another consumer on Match.com necessitates, can begin with, a process of selection. This process can occur in three ways. The first is through a self-initiated search, and the second is through the matching software on the site itself known as ‘Venus’. The self-initiated search requires that the consumer specify the gender, age and geographical location of the person sought. The consumer then browses profiles until something suitable is found. In contrast, the Venus software sends a selection of profiles three times a week or daily to a nominated email address which correspond with the ‘ideal partner’ specifications. Once one or more profiles are chosen, through either avenue, the consumer can then either send a ‘wink’, a non-committal message with no content, or email the individual. The wink sends an automated email notification to inform the consumer that another member is interested and would like to hear from him or her. If both parties are agreeable, an email message will follow. The third means of making contact is through selecting from and responding to emails and winks sent by other consumers. The time spent in email correspondence can vary in length from only one or two emails, to a number of months or longer. Frequently a phone conversation will precede the event of meeting in person. It is not uncommon for consumers to decide against continuing the relationship at any stage in the process. Furthermore, Match.com plans to send consumers profiles of potential mates, unsolicited, in the same way that Amazon.com recommends books (Chaffin 2006).

Anonymity is often a central factor in this exchange (McKenna and Bergh 2000). Profiles must include an online name and these are almost always made up of pseudonyms. In the interest of protecting oneself from unwanted attention or advances, untraceable pseudonyms, in a way that differs greatly from real space interactions, allow consumers in a correspondence to withdraw from that process at anytime. As Graham (2003) noted, anonymity almost guarantees that the identity of the real space embodied consumer remains unverifiable for the purposes of contacting them beyond the site. In addition to anonymous emailing services, Match.com offers anonymous voicemail and telephone calls before deciding whether one wants to meet or not.

A crucial consideration when engaged in this process with another consumer is the assumed immediacy of reply. While some exchanges consist of an email per week, it is more often the case that a daily correspondence will ensue (Morris 1999). In one instance, after not responding to an email over the course of three days, one consumer was told that the correspondence would not continue and the other party was intending to re-post his profile on the site (after having removed it) in the hope of entering into a correspondence with someone else (see Help/FAQ, http://www.Match.com).

The immediacy of interaction requires not only daily access to the computer but also, as the intention to meet is equally immediate, a shared geographical location. While it is possible to use the site to meet others in different cities and countries, Match.com is more concerned with particular ways of producing the ‘local’. In order to browse profiles a consumer must select a geographical location, both a state and
a region within the state. The acceleration of communication brought with the Internet has been largely understood in relation to modes of globalisation (Smail 2004). As Massey (1994) noted, theories of the global must be able to account for a sense of ‘place’ and local specificity. The consumptions of Match.com demonstrate this need. The site cannot be imagined through the nowhere-somewhere, borderless world that has prevailed in understandings of cyberspace. In this respect, Match.com realises an altered and specific manifestation of space.

The Reworking in Targeting Consumers

The dating industries market is demographically very diverse; however, it seems to be a particular group of people who use Internet dating services. This diversity is apparent in age, religion, nationality, interests, location, and many other factors, define their preferences in selecting partners. Although this varies according to the particular site, compared to internet users in general, online daters are more likely to be male, single, divorced, employed in the paid labour force and urban (Arvidsson 2006).

Match.com estimates its subscriber list is mostly male, college educated, professionals and residents of a large city and its suburbs (Davies 2003; M2 Presswire 2005). It seems that internet dating users in general, and Match.com members in particular, belong disproportionately to the urban, college-educated symbol analysts that make up the upper echelons of the new working class of the information economy. Interestingly, in the MSN survey, most users claimed that their motivations for using dating sites had to do with the very particular working conditions that this class faces. Increased career and time pressures and higher rates of geographical mobility combine to decrease the opportunities available to meet partners offline, or to have a social life in general (Arvidsson 2006; Morris 1999). In addition to the rising divorce rate and postponed marriage of young people, an increasingly disciplined workplace environment (through the implementation of sexual harassment policies) makes it more difficult to find a partner at work, which used to be a traditional venue (Detter 2006). In short, Match.com caters to a symbol analytical labour which lacks both the time and freedom to pursue its basic reproductive and intimate needs.

When Match.com was born in 1995, the audience’s site was assumed largely to be young singles and interested in arranging casual hook-ups (e.g. Davies 2003; Evans 2003; Graham 2003; Tanaka 2002). However, after years of losing subscribers to racier rivals, Match.com has been reaching out to singles over 50 and divorcees, pitching itself as a destination for mainstream daters who want serious relationships. The article from the Wall Street Journal reported that Mr. Jim Safka, Chief executive of Match.com, had studied subscriber data, combed through financials, and interviewed staffers. Match.com’s data showed him that older daters were more likely to pay to subscribe than the younger daters were (Silver 2007). Fascinated by that realisation, Mr. Safka asked his staff to check the behaviour of older daters on the site and to pinpoint their difficulties in using it. The site now features a free magazine with articles on single parenthood and the love life of Baby Boomers. Its TV ads feature a 71-year-old woman with the user name DanishBeauty22.

Seniors are the fastest growing group of online users, according to Nielsen/NetRatings, an Internet research firm. Nielsen says computer users of 55 and older account for 16.7 percent of all traffic to online personal sites -- the equivalent of 4.2 million unique visitors (http://www.nielsen-netratings.com). At Match.com, those singles of over 50, who are often divorced and looking for committed relationships account for 23 percent of their visitors, more than double the number two years ago (Silver 2007). Deborah Carr, an associate professor of sociology at Rutgers University who has studied online dating interest among people of 65 and older who had lost a spouse, reported in the Journal of Marriage and Family that romantic relationships among the elderly are on the rise simply because the Internet has made it easier for older singles to meet (Dufalla 2006). All of these suggest that seniors are becoming more computer savvy and more comfortable surfing the Internet, which leads to their growing interest in online dating.

Therefore, the company tested ideas to make the site easier to use, especially for older and less technologically nimble visitors. Match.com developed a variety of one-click buttons such as “How It Works” to help new consumers navigate the site, “See More Like Him/Her” to help consumers find other candidates that might catch their eyes, and most important, a “No Thanks” button to ease the awkwardness of turning down electronic suitors. Mrs. Kristin Kelly, a spokeswoman for Match.com, said that the number of seniors using Match.com has jumped 350 percent since 2000 and one of the site’s most popular consumers is a 78-year-old retired physician, and some members are in their 90s (Scharper 2006). The site is also branching out to daters desiring privacy, like executives or teachers who are reluctant to post their pictures online where subordinates or students may find them. It has introduced Chemistry.com, a premium service that shows a subscriber’s profile only to those candidates deemed suitable by a personality test developed by an anthropologist.

Match.com’s reworking in targeting senior daters, as well as other overlooked markets such as divorcees and seniors, reflects a maturing web industry that is expanding beyond its fixation on the very young consumers.
The Marketing Strategy and Consumers' Expectation

Match.com has been performing various integrated ads and campaigns to promote the service and cultivate the online dating sector, yet some exaggerated and extraordinary remarks should make us intensively concerned. The site must be held up to the standards of social responsibility.

Match.com has promoted its service on a variety of media. It has run television commercials, radio promotion, print ads, out-of-home advertising, online advertising and email to increase awareness of the site. It also highlights success stories, testimonials and photos of happy and wedding couples, and lets singles know how many consumers are using Match.com. These are the example of advertising statements from Match.com homepage:

“The World’s Largest Online Dating Website” (Guinness World Records)

Why Match.com will work for you
1. “The most interesting mix of members. We are the biggest, so there is someone for every single person. No matter what your type”.
2. “The most people looking for a serious relationship. Over 75% of our members are looking for the person that will change their life”
3. “The most marriages. We have inspired twice as many marriages as any other site. That has a nice ring to it.”

Match has also worked to form valuable partnerships. In addition to operating its own site, Match.com operates America Online’s Love at AOL dating site and Earthlink’s Romance, Earthlink.Net, and it has business deals with the Microsoft Network, Excite Network’s Relationship Channels, BET Inter-active and the New York Times online. (Graham 2003; Tanaka 2002). Such partnerships have helped Match.com stay ahead of its nearest competitor, Yahoo! Personal.

It has also expanded its empire of services to include some other special features. Match.com Messenger, for one, allows subscribers to interact via instant messaging while on the site. MatchTravel is a service that plans and hosts singles vacations around the world. And Match.com’s most recent addition, MatchLive, organises salsa-dancing mixers, walking tours, cooking classes and more for singles in four major cities -- New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco (Tanaka 2002). The company has plans to expand MatchLive to other US and international cities in the near future.

Furthermore, Match.com hired “Dr. Phil” McGraw, the TV psychologist, who had won the respect of Oprah Winfrey’s largely female audience, to develop ‘MindFindBind’ campaign. It is a Match interactive program that leads consumers through the dating process with self-help questionnaires and video pep talks from Dr. McGraw (Bosman 2006).

It provides an online guide with tips and advice on setting expectations and finding a good partner which is available for an additional US$9 per month. In addition to being host of “Dr. Phil,” his daytime talk show, Dr. McGraw has written 11 books and sells merchandise on his Web site, drphil.com. In his latest book, “Love Smart: Find the One You Want -- Fix the One You’ve Got,” he extols the virtues of online dating. Mr. Safka, chief executive of Match.com, believes that “Dr. Phil can extend the loyalty of his female, largely older TV audience to the products he endorses, and that creates buzz about Match.com” (Stecklein 2005). Mr. Safka also hired a style expert from the TV show “America’s Next Top Model” to launch a free “Portrait Toolkit” to help consumers upload photos and personal messages to represent themselves well on the site.

The online dating website is not merely a transaction in the marketplace. The services, practices, and policies have a major impact on the most personal and private aspects of people’s lives (Thompson, et al. 2005). Undoubtedly, the intensively omnipresent commercials and campaigns of Match.com can lead consumers into the service with higher expectations. While it can still help people, we must also consider the fact that some exaggerated and extraordinary claims may hurt vulnerable people from their over expectations.

The study by Thompson et al. (2005), for instance, revealed the story of one woman who saw a commercial featuring an online dating specialist promising to find “the soulmate” and “the love of your life” based on a scientifically patented new system and a parade of loving couples who all credit the site with bringing them true love and happiness. She was not going to think she was buying something associated with love. She was buying help from a specialist to succeed where she had failed. Because she spent an average of 3 hours a week taking tests and corresponding matches, she decided against taking a class at the local community college. Because she was so confident that the specialist’s matching system works, she stopped going to her alumni’s singles mixers. After 6 months, she wrote to that expert and asked, why it was not working, and the specialist told her to be patient because her match could come any day. At his advice, she subscribed for a full year.

Further examples come from FAQ of the site; one consumer posted the question “What are the odds of meeting someone I am interested in on Match.com?” She got this answer:

“Sorry, but neither dating nor love has a formula or statistical equation you can use. However, over 200,000 members who found their match last year were subscribers. ...So, subscribe now to get started on your own happy ending. Put the protractor down, fill out your profile by clicking here, and let the probability distribution functions work themselves out”. (FAQ: http://www.Match.com)
Match.com's "Make Love Happen" advertising campaign (see M2 Presswire 2006a) also promises consumers by guaranteeing six months free membership if they do not find love on Match.com within six months of joining. Yet, the site does not guarantee a successful relationship, just the opportunity to find one.

All of these company's marketing strategies state the obvious that the approach evolved as it did in order to convey sufficient value so consumers will get out their credit cards and subscribe. Therefore, Match.com must be more aware of the social responsibility in creating marketing commercials that may mislead consumers' expectation.

The projection for hopes and dreams into real world

"... but I fell in love with one of them... and well... although everybody tells me that it is impossible, I will not stop loving him and I will not rest until I can kiss him" (Pineapple99, 29 Woman, Phuket)

Although not all the consumers registered in Match.com have the purpose of finding the man or the woman of their dreams, the aim of the site is to help the consumer find a partner that the consumer can take to a physical real world level. On its home page, Match.com displays a section with messages sent by consumers that had a successful experience; that is, found the ideal partner, established long-term relationships, rebuilt their lives, found a friend or a loving mate, or even got married. These stories provide a realist image of the virtual world as a path into the real world.

The process, that goes from online flirtation until the first physical encounter, may be more or less different, but follows a recurrent path that goes successively through sending pictures, talking on the phone, sending mobile messages, etc. until the participants go on a physical date. The same person may cross this path several times, creating a tacit knowledge of the rules to follow, the risks to avoid and the precautions to take. This knowledge expands over the site and generates its formulas, and its reputed success, failure and disillusion.

"We need to take in account an unwanted effect, although predictable, from the lack of initial context and social support in the virtual relationship: disappointment. Not to give a negative sense to disappointment, it is something we have to foresee, as well as—and proportionally—the imaginative use of the medium (to arouse feelings, to exercise the social world or to experiment with personalities), disappointment will take place, the collapse of effectiveness of what we have built, provided that it will not be somehow integrated in the daily life" (Nunez, 2001 cited by Ardevol 2005).

Love affairs over the Internet still have a flavour of the forbidden. Some consumers discuss the feeling of being in front of impossible and unimaginable things, and of the absurd situation of feeling affection for an unknown person. Match.com presents a problem of social legitimacy that translates, for example, into questioning the sanity of the subject that has fallen into contradictory experiences between what they believe to be in-between fantasy and reality.

"Of course you have deeper feelings ... I thought it was impossible... And I realise it is possible and it is real. There are days in which I feel crazy... a lunatic, because this cannot be very normal... or at least it is not very usual among the people I hang out with ... and clearly... you cannot believe it until it happens to you". (PeterPan, 35 Man, Victoria)

The initial taboos about this kind of relationship have gradually disappeared in the light of the evidence that it is a path that many consumers go through, like any other related to the establishment of emotional bounds, with its disillusion, lies and romance; the same as with ordinary love. However, in spite of this, it still is a socially debated issue, both by those who have experienced it and by those why do not know it yet, and are not planning to try it.

"I think that I advantage of these kinds of relationships on the dating website, is that at first we meet the person for him or herself, as we usually remove that wall which separates us from the others. In these cases, I do not know if it is due to the security our computer screen offers us or whatever, but we usually bare our souls to our friends, who come to love us what we really are". (Lisamahana, 32 Woman, UK)

There seems to be discussions in online forums about the 'fantasy' or 'reality' of the Internet relationships. Some consumers say that feelings generated in online interaction are not real or they are not fully true, but the result, in any case, of a mutual psychological projection. However, the ones having experienced such feelings usually claim while showing perplexity, that they have real feelings, more real and honest than the ones that can be aroused by a physical person. One of the justifications for this subjective impression is that in online interaction consumers get to know the other person better and what he or she "really" is like (Morris 1999).

The discussion surrounding the authenticity of these situations divides reality into two levels: inner reality, what we feel the person really is; and physical and social reality, appearance and mask (Hardey 2002). Physical reality not only embraces the body, but also the social context in which it is inscribed, to which it belongs and where it is accountable. This
social body and physical appearance are perceived in the virtual relationship as incidental, alien to the "real" relationship. However, the body emerges when "platonic" love is transformed into physical love:

"And if now someone asks me if I believe that one can love another person known only through this medium... I would say yes, what is more, I have experienced it, I love my friends. But, as for romantic love, as such and therefore any romantic relationship, for me it is very hard to believe that it is possible, as we all have the occasional need to feel a body by our side, to feel the warmth of a loved one, to feel their skin, their smell, their presence, their caresses, so I think that if two people only know each other through this channel, the relationship does not fully satisfy what we as beings, who have not only a soul, but also a body and senses, need to feel". (Jantana, 34 Woman, Chiang Mai)

"The world of the Internet cannot replace the real world. If you feel a strong attraction for a person you only know over the Internet, take it easy and when it comes time to talk about love, act as if you did not know the person at all. Because it is so, until you meet someone in person you will not know that what you really feel". (Close and Zinkhan 2004)

From this perspective, the distinction between the real and virtual worlds is not sustained. For the reality of the lived experience, social interaction in both worlds is equally "real" and the feelings they generate are "true". Nevertheless, it is the juxtaposition of both experiences that returns consumers to a commitment with their social environment and with themselves. Pursuing love relationships through Internet dating websites are lived as a dream that can become true.

The Legal Risks, Privacy Policies and Safety Issues

With the online dating industry rapidly becoming such a dream centre that gain an enormous profit from consumers' investment in both money and lives, an individual consumer may wonder what type of legal protection Match.com administers and restricts to ensure that personal information is kept private and confidential.

According to "Your Privacy Policy" statement on the website, Match.com clearly describes the steps it takes to maintain sensitive information in a confidential manner (see Your Privacy Policy, http://www.Match.com). Match.com's homepage reassures consumers about their corporate privacy and security policies, as well as outlining limitations on personal legal issues and overall liabilities. The site states in its privacy policy that it collects financial information solely to bill the consumers of its services, and that it strives to protect the confidentiality of its members. The site has security measures in place, such as secured passwords, linkages to secure servers, and encryption techniques. Nevertheless, the site emphasizes that it cannot completely guarantee that the measures organized by company will safeguard information from hackers/crackers and other illicit consumers. The company requests customers to sign a statement electronically so that company personnel are not legally responsible for customers' well being.

Although the more information that the service requires from consumers, the better service the site will be able to provide, the amount and type of information given is completely voluntary and common sense must prevail in order to protect privacy as much as possible. Match.com only monitors members' private exchanges if it suspects consumers of being under 18 years of age, and/or if the site has knowledge of violations of its services. The site provides "report this profile" options, which permit consumers to report potential problem members to a team of "abuse" monitors. The monitors typically employees, peruse a site, looking for risqué photographs, insincere profiles and consumers looking for a place to advertise their own business (Fantz 2005). Match.com further suggests that a user's account is private and should not be used by anyone else. Consumers are completely responsible for others who make use of their passwords.

Several situations have potentially serious ramifications for individuals who meet someone online who has a personal history of criminal behaviour. One type of dangerous situation is cyberstalking (Smith 2004). The electronic authentication techniques organized by the site cannot guarantee that consumers who meet online are who they say they are. The media, for instance has reported cases of individuals being raped or murdered by people they met online (Rubin 2006). The safety issues thus are of considerable concern.

In 2005, the Texas Legislature joined several states that were considering legislation to require background checks for Internet dating sites (Stecklein 2005). True.com is the only Internet dating site that does criminal background checks and pursue prosecution of those who lie about their criminal past (Rubin 2006). While Match.com does not provide the "background check" for its consumers, it gives safety tips for consumers to read before formally meeting a potential online mate. Kristin Kelly, representative of the site asserted that the company relies on consumers to alert the site about dishonest members:

"In order to protect privacy, we put a lot of power into the hands of the user. We are concerned with protecting our members' privacy, so we have argued against potential legislation requiring background checks" (Stecklein 2005).

Even though Match.com provides several safety tips on the website (see 10 safety tips for your next date, http://www.Match.com), consumers obviously take their safety into their own hands. Consumers
are advised to do some background research on their potential dates before meeting, such as asking for photos and phone numbers. Nevertheless, according to Jurin (2001), many consumers never read the safety messages, and of those who read, only half found the tips helpful.

Conclusion

The pursuit of love in Match.com is structured around the computer personal “profile” and “matching system” that the site designed for its consumers which changed the target group from young to senior daters. Even though the customers freely consume the service at any time and can register free of charge to create an online “profile” of themselves, to communicate with another consumer, they will have to pay a monthly fee. As running various integrated ads and campaigns to promote the service and special features, many consumers accept the investment in order to pursue their hopes and dreams. However, there are some considerable concerns about exaggerated and extraordinary claims in the company’s marketing strategy that may mislead consumers. Furthermore, the legal protections, privacy policies and safety issues have been discussed. The background checks for Internet dating websites also are required; in addition to the safety tips of the site that many consumers have ignored.

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