

## Meet the "E-Strangers". Predictors of Teenagers' Online-Offline Encounters<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate several factors associated with adolescents' online-offline dating behavior (On-Off Dating), i.e. romantic encounters initiated online and transferred offline at a certain point. Due to the novelty of the topic in the Romanian context, multiple dimensions were taken into consideration. In order to move beyond the victimization perspective, this article relies mostly on the social agency theory that envisions teenagers as skilled and informed actors, who possess the technological, social and communicative competencies which enable them to distinguish between safe and unsafe situations (both online and offline).

The sample consisted of 1806 subjects aged 10 to 19 who completed a self-report questionnaire administered in 101 classrooms from secondary schools and high schools in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, in November 2007. Results of the analyses indicate a series of factors significantly associated with this particular practice, with some differences for boys and girls, e.g. parental monitoring, identity management (disclosure and dissimulation), exposure to unsolicited (and deliberate) sexual material and unwanted solicitations online, use of Social Networking Sites (SNS), and several psychosocial factors. Among the most important predictors, e.g. use of IM, the amount of time spent online, and positive social self-concept appear to influence both boys' and girls' decision for online-offline dating. Other items, like parental monitoring and exposure to sexually explicit content, showed ambivalent relation to the investigated behavior.

**Keywords:** adolescents, online-offline dating, predictors, skilled social agents

## **Introduction (overview)**

Early concerns about the way children and teenagers are using the Internet have generally followed the trend established by dystopian theories about ICTs, suspected to have negative side-effects, such as increasing depression and loneliness, weakening social ties and promoting superficial relations (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay & Scherlis, 1998). More recently, while technophobes are increasingly nuancing their discourse, scholars have begun to focus on specific issues and risk groups. The topic of online victimization of youth has started to grow in breadth and coherence, with valuable studies focusing extensively on online sexual victimization (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000; Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2003a and 2004), or even more specifically, on online harassment (Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak & Finkelhor, 2006) and Internet-initiated sex crimes (Walsh & Wolak, 2005). More recent approaches suggest that an authoritative, adult viewpoint to youth's behavior online that would further emphasize parental control is only prone to produce normative statements, panic-driven recommendations, without a comprehensive understanding of "what the kids are really doing online" (Goodstein, 2007; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008, p.2).

Without further legitimizing parental control and exaggerated safety advice, a closer look and deeper understanding of adolescents' romantic and sexual experimentations on the Internet is needed. First, a safe assumption would be that teenagers tend to keep their Internet communication ties in their close circle of friends and real-life acquaintances (peers), rather than adventuring outside (Barbovschi & Diaconescu, 2008, Annex, p.250)<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the imagery of Internet dangers described by terms like "strangers" and "sexual predators" is often over-represented and counter-productive. Second, adolescents often act as skilled agents, employing various communication tools for a series of purposes, although the delineation is not always clear (instrumental, rational purposes that overlap with ludic, playful experimentations); it should be kept in mind that while teenagers might become victims of online deceit, they themselves may also misrepresent personal information and lie.

However, the great increase in the frequency of online-offline dating - 33% from our sample report having met offline at least one person they met online, in comparison with the first Youth Internet Safety Survey 2000 (Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2002, p.441), where only 7% reported face to face meetings with online friends, and 2% who described the relationship as romantic - requires a closer look into the mechanism of this particular practice.

## **Breaking with the discourse of innocence: the agency perspective**

As one can easily notice, most research in this field has focused on 'what the media do to children' as opposed to 'what children do with the media' or, as pointed out in a review of Internet usage written by Livingstone (2003), most research on the usage and impact of the Internet actually ignores children. Therefore there is a need for contextualizing Internet use within everyday practices, for

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<sup>2</sup> The pattern might not apply to SNS profiles, where teenagers tend to add "friends" just to boost their online status.

seeing children as active agents, in order to avoid constructing them as passive or vulnerable (Livingstone, 2002). In Livingstone's perspective, the depiction of children as vulnerable only legitimates further disempowerment and adult authority in the regulation of children's life.

Although the debate will only advance when it transcends the futile oppositions between optimists and pessimists or technophiles and technophobes, this rough categorization of opportunities and dangers, from both children's and adults' perspectives, organizes what follows. In addition to this, I will try to avoid the rhetoric of moral panic, doubled by the 'moral quality of the discourse of innocence' (Meyer, 2007) intertwined with the sacralisation of childhood. On the contrary, it becomes more and more necessary to view the children as skilled agents in using different Internet tools, often more skilled than most adults:

On the contrary, the discourse of innocence is reinforced through calls for adults to 'do more to make the Internet safer for children'. Such demands assume that children need adult protection, which is incongruent with claims that children tend to be more skilled at using the Internet than their parents. (Livingstone, 2002, p. 89)

Although, critics could argue that this is precisely the problem: they are skilled, but not self-reflexive and they lack the maturity to grasp the whole meaning and possible implications of their actions, I feel strongly that a shift in perspective is necessary.

It has been argued that the discourse of innocence turns children into helpless victims in constant need of adult protection, through re-productions of children representations as both structurally and innately vulnerable (Meyer, 2007, p. 89-90). One concept that proves useful is structural vulnerability (as opposed to physical or social vulnerability), which is constructed through asymmetrical power relations (mainly between children and adults) and reinforced by the discourse of innocence. The necessity to consider children'/teenagers' behavior from a perspective of social agency has been also formulated by Jill E. Korbin (2003), who talks about an increasing need for the inclusion of child perspective in the explanation of larger structural conditions of violence. In my opinion this theoretical approach could be applied for the analysis of teenagers' romantic and sexual behavior in relation to the use of online communication tools. As it will become apparent throughout the present study, I chose the title in a rather "subversive" way, in order to emphasize the exaggerated concerns that populate the collective in regards to Internet dangers and pitfalls.

The attempt to bring together research on adolescent behavior and research related to romance and sexuality on the Internet appears to be a difficult endeavor. While on one hand, there is the mainstream panic voice that calls for safety precautions when surfing the Web (doubled by the fear that adults will not be able to keep pace with the technological perspective), on the other hand we have the perspective of skilled, rational, utilitarian adults, using the Internet for various instrumental purposes, including sexually related.

From the latter, two theoretical ideas about dating practices of adults investigated by Peter and Valkenburg (2007) have caught my attention: the compensation hypothesis (looking for casual dates online in order to compensate for shortcomings in offline dating, e.g. low physical self-esteem, high dating anxiety) and the recreation hypothesis (sexually permissive people and high-sensation seekers who value the anonymity of the Internet). However, in the case of teenagers, specific conditions such as

peer pressure and the nature of the online communication might work in a completely different direction: popular teenagers, with high physical and social self-esteem might have a higher probability to engage in online-offline dating (due to the high visibility to their circle of friends, classmates or schoolmates). Conversely, the same mechanisms would prevent shy ones to expose themselves to possible scrutiny and ridicule). As for the recreation hypothesis, even though high-sensation seeking adolescents might engage in more active search for sexually explicit material or dates, any investigation should take into account their ludic tendencies, such as deliberate dissimulation of information on the Internet.

### **Unwanted and Wanted Exposure to Sexual Materials and Sexual Solicitations Online**

Earlier research on adults has also found a positive connection between exposure to sexually explicit materials and more permissive sexual attitudes (Davis & Bauserman, 1993). Scholars have also explored youth's deliberate exposure to sexually explicit materials (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006a, Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2007) and the connection between this type of exposure and positive attitudes towards uncommitted sexual exploration (Peter & Valkenburg, 2008), with findings suggesting a positive connection between the two. Wanted, deliberate exposure was found to be higher for boys and youth who talked to strangers online about sex (Wolak et al., 2007).

In line with the above mentioned research, I predicted that *deliberate* exposure to explicit content, along with surfing for topics related to sex life or surfing for romantic contacts, would be positively connected to the online-offline dating decision; however, my subsequent goal is to see also whether the exposure to *unwanted* sexual materials and solicitations online acts as a (negative) predictor of the decision to continue the interpersonal relation formed online with an offline date (encounter).

There has been a significant amount of work done in the area of online sexual victimization of youth, including unwanted exposure to sexually explicit content and sexual solicitations; some of the most relevant (Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2001; Wolak et al., 2007) has brought important nuances to the exploration of risk situations and risky behaviors through an integrative explanatory approach to the sexual interpersonal victimization. There are a priori reasons to presume that unwanted or unexpected exposure to such content might trigger negative feelings and distress that could further impede teenagers from engaging in various types of romantic/sexual explorations (including on-off dating). Nevertheless, previous research investigating the relation between unwanted exposure (unwanted sexual solicitations, respectively) and distress/negative feeling has reached cautious conclusions (Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2003b; Mitchell et al., 2001). Unwanted exposure might indeed affect young people's sense of safety (Mitchell et al., 2003b, p.351). Moreover, unwanted exposure seems to be higher for teenagers with higher depression scores (Wolak et al., 2007). Consequently, I formulated the following hypotheses:

*H1.* The surfing behavior (*purposive/deliberate* surfing for romantic contacts and sexual content on the Internet- both pornographic and related to sexual life advice) is positively connected to the On-Off dating decision (the item "Have you ever gone on a date offline with someone you previously met online?").

H2. Exposure to *unwanted* material and sexual solicitations online is negatively related to the On-Off dating decision.

In line with previous findings (Mesch, 2008), I expect deliberate exposure to pornography to be gender-dependent.

### **Identity management. Disclosure and deceptive strategies**

Previous research has focused either on disclosure of personal information (and its self-perception) as a potential risky behavior for the youth victimization online (Moscardelli & Divine, 2007) or on deceptive strategies usually employed by adults for instrumental purposes, namely securing a romantic date offline (Toma, Hancock & Ellison, 2008). However, keeping in mind that teenagers act as skilful social agents, it is time to bring these two perspectives back together. While engaging in various degrees of online disclosure (usually on their SNS profiles), some teenagers also choose to deliberately dissimulate (lie) about their age, looks, school or even sex. While safety advocates recommend that teenagers should refrain from divulging personal information online, Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2007) suggest that actually talking with people teenagers know only online ("strangers") that constitutes risky behavior, more than sharing personal information.

While "privacy concerns" lead to adoption of careful (self-protective) behavior (Moscardelli & Divine, 2007), the ludic, playful nature of teenagers' online communication might lead them in a totally different direction. One theoretical tool for the investigation of adolescents' dating behavior could be the theory of filtering (Davis, Hart, Bolding, Sherr & Elford, 2006; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008) in the selection of possible sexual/romantic partners. For example, teenagers use deception strategies (either for play or identity management purposes) in order to maintain the control over the online interactions. On the other hand, teenagers misrepresent or simply lie about various information (Knox, Daniels, Sturdivant & Zusman, 2001) because it's fun; the items we included in our questionnaire were related to age, sex, school, occupation, physical appearance, and one item of general misrepresentation.

Previous research about deception in self-presentation in online dating profiles suggests that the deceivers strategically manipulate the information accuracy in order to match their romantic expectancies and constraints (Toma, Hancock & Ellison, 2008) and tend to be more honest if they place greater importance on long-term face to face relationships goals (Gibbs, Ellison & Heino, 2006). However, in the case of teenagers' dating experiences, the deceptive strategies have a greater chance to derive from ludic behavior, rather than to serve instrumental purpose (finding a romantic partner, the indicator of dating „success“).

According to Toma et al. (2008), two factors are crucial for the configuration of dating patterns, namely the characteristics of the online communication and the connection between one's online self and offline self. In case of the adolescents, most of the communication is synchronous (90% from the teenagers in our sample use IM services – Barbovschi & Diaconescu, 2008, Annex, p.250), while the asynchronous communication is mostly adjacent to self-presentation and interactions on SNS profiles (comments on each other's profile, pictures, status etc). The dynamic nature of this communication pattern restricts any elaborate self-presentation to the personal profile on the SNS, while maintaining scarce cues and scripts for the instant communication.

For adolescents, the relation between the offline and online self has a particular nature. As members of certain online/offline peer groups, their visibility (and accountability) restricts their

dissimulation possibilities, at least within the circle of their friends or their friends' friends. In addition to this, teenagers employ various strategies to optimize their dating selections (through referrals, e.g. friends or colleagues that give „credentials” and who can certify the other person is trustworthy).

In terms of deception opportunities, the *warranting* elements (Walther & Parks, 2002) - the connection between the self and the given self-presentation, might reduce the deception. Photographs on SNS profiles and referrals might work as warrants.

Nevertheless, identity experiments on the Internet might prove to entail several benefits. Valkenburg and Peter (2008) report that adolescents who engage in online identity experimentation also communicate more often with people of various ages and cultural backgrounds.

Identity protective behavior could be seen as a component of the broader attitudes and behavioral set that can be described as Internet safety practices. Identity protective behavior could be influenced by various factors (e.g. parental monitoring, previous negative online experiences) and could further influence the decision to move offline an online relationship.

Consequently, I formulate the following hypothesis for identity management:

*H3.* Identity protective behavior (nondisclosure and dissimulation) is negatively related to On-Off dating decision.

### **SNS use and online profiles**

One of the tools from the multimodal technologies (Ledbetter, 2008) the adolescents employ in order to present themselves to peer-groups and potential partners are the personal profiles on SNS sites that have recently received increasing appeal among the communication and networking tools employed by the young Romanian population. According to the recent findings of Pew Internet & American Life Project, 55% of U.S. teenagers use SNSs and have created an online profile (Lenhart & Madden, 2007), while 70% from the adolescents in our study report SNS use.

The SNS profiles, as individually owned and controlled spaces (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008), often serve as dating profiles through their self-promotion tools they offer (the possibility to display various information about oneself, including relationship status and pictures), as well as embedded communication and social networking tools (the "wall", the picture comments, private messaging systems, the visible friendship network).

“The creation and editing of personal profiles, how online daters balance accuracy with self-promotions and desirability, and how they establish their credibility online are important components of self-presentation.” (Couch & Liangputtong, 2008, p. 270)

Recent concerns about risks related to the creation and use of SNS profiles, in relation to adolescents' identity as display or identity as connection (Livingstone, 2008), have led to the investigation of specific forms of sexual victimization related to such sites. Smith (2007) found that teenagers who have a SNS profile or post pictures of themselves online are no more likely than other youth to be contacted by online strangers. Ybarra and Mitchell (2008) present the results of the Growing Up With Media Survey (sample size 1588), where fifteen percent of all of the youth reported an unwanted sexual solicitation online in the last year, while 4% reported an incident on a social

networking site (consistent with our findings). Among targeted youth, solicitations were more commonly reported via instant messaging (43%) and in chat rooms (32%). However, their findings suggest that SNS use does not appear to have increased the risk of sexual victimization online (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008, p. e355). In addition to this, some have tried to emphasize that restricting teenagers' access to SNS might even hamper other educational and psychosocial benefits (Tynes, 2007). Others (Rosen, 2006) have discovered other benefits of SNS use: more support from friends, more honest communication (that would complement our suppositions), less shyness both online and offline.

Because of the extensive use of IM communication among Romanian teenagers, I presumed a similar connection to the dating behavior; therefore I included both social tools in the analysis:

*H4.* The use of social tools (IM, SNS, webcams) is positively related to the On-Off dating decision.

### **Parental monitoring**

Transferring a relationship from the relatively safe online playground to the offline territory outside, to „the real life” might require a certain degree of autonomy and independence. In previous research, parental monitoring was defined as children's perception of their parents' awareness of where and with whom they are spending time when they are not at home or at school (Heim, Brandtzæg, Kaare, Endestad & Torgersen, 2007). In a study related to feelings of insecurity and fear of crime among teenagers, Saskia de Groof (2008) assessed the positive connection between the level of parental supervision (here, monitoring) and the level of fear experienced by children. Moreover, in their study conducted on Australian teenagers, Fleming, Greentree, Cocotti-Muller, Elias & Morrison (2006) found out that younger teenagers who do not discuss Internet safety with their parents are less safety conscious. In line with this logic, I assumed that a perception of more extensive supervision (of time, content and Internet contacts) would be negatively related to the decision of meeting someone offline.

However, when measuring parental mediation (or monitoring), researchers need to take into consideration the gap between children's and parents' reporting of Internet use monitoring, with former being usually much lower than the latter. In a study related to Internet filters employed by parents in order to regulate their children's use of the Internet, Lenhart (2005, p. ii) discovered a significant gap in the perception of parent-child monitoring, with 62% of parents who declared checking up on their children, in comparison with only 33% of adolescents who report parental monitoring. Two years later, this gap showed signs of decrease, with 41% teenagers believing their parents are checking up on their Internet activities (Lenhart & Madden, 2007, p.vi).

In spite of the concerns related to the gap in reports/perceptions of parent-child Internet monitoring, the situation of Romanian families might be a real case of difference in computer literacy skills between children and parents. With a 33.4% Internet penetration and the second highest user growth between 2000 and 2008 (Internet World Stats, 2009), Romania is in top 10 Internet countries in the European Union. Nevertheless, the adults' perception of their own computer literacy is rather modest. According to the last Public Opinion Barometer (Comşa, Sandu, Toth, Voicu & Voicu, 2006, pp. 25-26), most of them self-rate their skills with 7 points out of 10, 9% declare low or no skills at all, whereas only 5 % give themselves a maximum score. Due to the lack of studies related to Romanian parents' monitoring practices, we can't assess at this moment its real extent and scope, the safe assumption being a rather low awareness, knowledge and control of children's Internet use.



H5: The extent of parental monitoring (online and offline) has a negative influence on the On-Off dating decision.

### Other factors

Consistent with previous studies, I presumed that loneliness and social anxiety are positively connected (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2008) and that both influence the On-Off dating decision negatively. Conversely, I presumed that teenagers with a more positive self-image are more likely to engage in offline encounters with people met online.

Some of the psychosocial factors defined as self-concept (Harter, 1985; Heim et al., 2007) might be significantly related to the behavior of online-offline dating. Teenagers' favorable self-perception, especially related to social acceptance (self-assessment of popularity among peers, perceived ability to make friends) could play a decisive role in the translation from online to offline encounters, with those more outgoing being more easily inclined to engage in this kind of activity.

The following hypotheses completed the theoretical model:

H6. The amount of time spent online is positively correlated with On-Off dating decision.

H7. The positive self-description behavior (PSDD) is positively related to the On-Off dating decision.

### Method

1806 self-report questionnaires were administered in 101 classrooms from secondary and high schools in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, in November 2007. Approval to conduct the survey was obtained from the local school inspectorate and from the principals of each school included in the sample. Parents were informed through the teachers and the pupils' consent was also requested for participating in the survey. Although the questionnaire aimed to encompass a variety of activities and behaviors, both online and offline, a special part was dedicated to issues related to online-offline dating.

**Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample**

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	%
Sex	Male	768	42.3
	Female	1038	57.7
	Total	1806	100.0
Age	Age 10	1	.1
	Age 11	1	.1
	Age 12	29	1.7
	Age 13	232	13.2
	Age 14	289	16.4
	Age 15	291	16.6
	Age 16	331	18.8
	Age 17	321	18.3
	Age 18	247	14.1
	Age 19	14	.8
	Age 20	1	.1
Total		1757	100.0

Years of using the Internet	0	108	6.7
	1	294	18.2
	2	412	25.5
	3	322	20.0
	4	221	13.7
	5	100	6.2
	6	58	3.6
	7	43	2.7
	8	23	1.4
	9	12	.7
	+	Total 1613 (with outliers)	100.0 (with outliers)
E-mail use	Yes	1161	65.9
	No	601	34.1
	Total	1762	100.0
IM use	Yes	1585	90.3
	No	171	9.7
	Total	1756	100.0
SNS use	Yes	1229	69.5
	No	410	23.2
	Don't know what it is	129	7.3
	Total	1768	100.0
Ever dating (face to face) a person met online	Yes	554	33.0
	No	1126	67.0
	Total	1680	100.0
Number of persons met Online then Offline	0	1309	72.5
	Between 1-5	386	21.4
	Between 6-10	60	3.3
	More than 10	51	2.8
	Total	1806	100.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>Total sample 1806</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source:* Adolescents Internet Survey in Cluj, 2007. CNCSIS research grant 2007-2008, director Prof. Maria Roth, PhD

On average, boys in our sample use the Internet for 3 hours on a school day (Std. deviation =1.856) and 5.44 hours on a weekend day (Std. deviation=3.311), while girls use the Internet for 2.77 hours on a school day and 4.61 on a weekend day. Also, the teenagers have been using the Internet for 2.88 years on average (Std. deviation=2.123). Almost half of them use a webcam when they talk on IM, boys being less selective than girls (girls use the webcam with a few friends, boys with virtually anybody in their list - the difference is significant,  $r=.143$ ,  $P<.001$ ).

### **a) The Use of Internet, E-mail and Instant Messenger Related to Active Searching for Sexual Information and Romantic Partners**

Several items related to the frequency of searching for dating partners through web surfing, e-mail, IM, as well as the frequency of looking for sexual information (both pornography and sex advice) were included in the analysis. Correlation coefficients were moderate but significant at  $p < .001$ . Another interesting aspect were the strong correlations *per medium* (e.g. types of uses through e-mail, items 4-6 were highly correlated, as well as types of uses through instant messaging, items 7-9) and moderate-low correlations between different media.

1. How often do you surf the Internet to find pornographic material? (S1)
2. How often do you surf the Internet to find dating partners (on websites such as The Two of Us, Sentiments etc.)? (S2)
3. How often do you surf the Internet to find advice about sex life? (S3)
4. How often do you use the e-mail to talk to people from Cluj that you've met online and also face to face? (S4)
5. How often do you use the e-mail to talk to people from Cluj that you've met online and want to meet face to face? (S5)
6. How often do you use the email to talk to people from Romania that you've met online but never met face to face? (S6)
7. How often do you talk on IM with people from Cluj that you've met online and also face to face? (S7)
8. How often you talk on IM with people from Cluj that you've met online but never met face to face? (S8)
9. How often do you set up actual dates on messenger with persons you've met online? (S9)

The measurement scale for these items was constructed as a 5-point Likert scale, varying from "very rarely/never" to "very often/daily".

A reliability analysis was conducted for the nine items. One item had rather low interitem correlations with the others (S1) and the Alpha coefficient was .807 after the exclusion. The item that had the highest interitem correlations overall was setting up actual dates with persons met online. The items that had significant difference for boys and girls were S1 and S2 (boys more than girls,  $r = .435$  and  $.192$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The most salient item, S9, that makes the translation from active searching to actual dating, also presents significant differences between boys and girls, with boys reporting slightly more than girls setting up dates through IM ( $r = .191$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### **b) Parental monitoring: offline, online and SNS specific**

Teenagers in our sample reported low levels of parental monitoring, both online and offline, both general and SNS related. In spite of the concerns related to the usual gap in parent-child Internet mediation, I tend to take the children's answers at face value, due to the current Internet penetration

rate among Romanian adults and their self-perceived computer and Internet literacy (Comşa et al., 2006).

Parental monitoring was measured by means of children's reported knowledge of their parents' awareness of their leisure time online and offline. Teenagers' activity is poorly supervised/ monitored by their parents, 58.6% from our sample declared they do not have any restrictions whatsoever in using the computer and the Internet (N=1806). The most frequent form of parental control is related to the time the children spend in front of the PC (reported by 29.7% of the boys sample and 33% of the girls). However, no significant differences were found for these three items of parental monitoring according to teenagers' gender.

**Table 2. Parental monitoring**

Parental monitoring items	Sex	Categories	Count (%)
<b>I have restrictions/rules about the time I spend on the Internet (Online Monitoring 1)</b>	Girls	True	335 (33)
		False	680 (67)
	Boys	True	221 (29.7)
		False	523 (70.3)
<b>I have restrictions/rules about the pages I open on the Internet (Online Monitoring 2)</b>	Girls	True	72 (7.1)
		False	943 (92.9)
	Boys	True	76 (10.2)
		False	669 (89.8)
<b>I have restrictions/rules about the persons I talk to on the Internet (Online monitoring 3)</b>	Girls	True	74 (7.3)
		False	941 (92.7)
	Boys	True	42 (5.6)
		False	703 (94.4)
<b>My parents are interested in the way I use the SNS (SNS-M1)</b>	Girls	Yes	50 (7)
		No	667 (93)
	Boys	Yes	12 (2.6)
		No	447 (97.4)
<b>My parents are interested in the persons I add as friends (SNS-M2)</b>	Girls	Yes	62 (8.3)
		No	684 (91.7)
	Boys	Yes	23 (4.9)
		No	448 (95.1)
<b>Total</b>			<b>1806 (100)</b>
			<b>1229 (100)*</b>

\*For the items related to SNS use.

Among the parents 43% have restricted, one way or another, their children's access on the Internet. Although we didn't ask more questions about children's relationship with their parents, that could have granted us a broader perspective on different parenting styles and monitoring motivations, we have also included two other items of parental monitoring, adapted from Heim et al. (2007, p.436), related to teenagers' general relation with their parents, namely: "My parents/tutors always know where I am when I'm not at home or at school" -OffM1 and "My parents/tutors always know with whom I spend my time when I'm not at home or at school"-OffM2 ( $r=.447$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). 30% and 40% of the children gave negative answers to these two items.

Significant differences were found between boys and girls for these two items, girls reporting more general parental monitoring for both items (though the value of the correlation coefficients were rather small, they were significant at 0.01 level ( $r=.145$  for the first item and  $.200$  for the second). An independent T test was conducted for the two items of offline monitoring, that also confirmed the different monitoring for boys and girls ( $t= -5.934$  for OffM1 and  $-8.287$  for OffM2,  $P<.001$ ).

About their kids accessing the SNSs, 82.5% of the parents know about it (according to the children's statements), but a large majority (94.7%) are not interested at all in what the children are doing on these SNSs. Concordantly, 93% of the parents are not interested about the persons their children add to their friends lists. However, girls report more parental interest on how they use the SNS (although the values of the coefficients were small,  $r=.133$ ,  $P<.001$ ). No significant differences between boys and girls were found for the item "persons that I add as friends". No differences were found between children who use SNSs and children who do not use SNSs for the items of online monitoring (OnM 1 to 3).

The nature of the parental monitoring online can be summarized as following: it declines with age, it does not differ significantly for boys and girls in terms of time spent, content or persons the children talk to. Nevertheless parental monitoring offline (general) can be described as characterizing girls more than boys.

No significant correlation was detected between the items of parental monitoring online (both general and SNS specific) and offline. Weak positive correlations were found between the items of general online monitoring and SNS monitoring.

There is no special attention in terms of parental monitoring for children that use SNSs (in comparison with children that do not use these services). Moreover, the vast majority of SNS users (92%) declare that their parents show no interest in neither the way they use these social tools, nor the persons they add as friends in their buddy lists.

However, parental monitoring (or mediation) items were included in the regression models, even though the prediction value was rather low.

### **c) Unwanted Exposure to Sexual Materials and Sexual Solicitations Online**

One of the most important privacy issues is the one related to sexual predators that „groom“ children through various forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and attract them into offline encounters. Other concerns have focused on teenagers' exposure to inappropriate content; according to recent findings, younger adolescents (13-14 years old) and those who have not discussed

safety issues with their parents seem to be more exposed to sexually explicit content online (Fleming et al., 2006).

60% from our sample declare they have at least once opened an Internet page with pornographic images and 35.5% declare they felt indifferent. 31% have told somebody about it, usually a colleague, friend or sibling. Amongst those who have not, the most frequent reason is the minimization of the importance of the incident.

2.5% (n=30) declare they have been exposed to sexual solicitations on a metropolitan network, half of them told somebody, in most of the cases a friend. The ones who didn't tell also minimized the importance of the incident.

5% (n=74) declare they have been exposed to sexual solicitations on a social networking site (SNS). 72% (n=46) have told somebody, usually a friend or a sibling. Those that didn't say anything also minimized the importance of the incident. Our results are consistent with previous research on Internet dangers (e.g. Finkelhor, Mitchell & Wolak, 2000- One in 5 youth received a sexual approach or solicitation over the Internet, data from the first Youth Internet Safety Survey).

However, the unpleasant incidents related to sexual solicitations didn't have a predictive value for the On-Off-dating dynamic. Only the item "exposure to unsolicited pornographic material" was included in the regression model.

Even though our research confirms previous findings about adolescents' unrealistic perceptions about the safety and benign nature of these experiences, we need to take into account the purposive and agentic nature of teenagers' experiments with romance and sexuality on the online-offline continuum.

**d) Identity management (disclosure and dissimulation)**

According to teenagers answers, 36.4% from our sample declare they have posted their e-mail address on a website, forum or blog, making it thus accessible to anyone (N=1284). In addition to this, only 20% have restricted SNS profiles (from N=1276). We also included several items of personal identity management (disclosure but also dissimulation, on the grounds of the agency perspective).

**Table 3. Disclosure of personal information on SNS profiles**

Characteristic	Categories	Frequency	%
<i>...in my profile</i>			
I included my phone number	Yes	57	4.6
	No	1177	95.4
	Total	1234	100.0
I included my home address	Yes	72	5.8
	No	1161	94.2
	Total	1233	100.0
<i>I posted the name of my city (excluded)</i>	Yes	902	72.3
	No	346	27.7
	Total	1233	100.0

I included my e-mail address	Yes	333	26.7
	No	913	73.3
	Total	1246	100.0
I posted my full name	Yes	266	21.4
	No	978	78.6
	Total	1244	100.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>1246</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source:* Adolescents Internet Survey in Cluj, 2007. CNCIS research grant 2007-2008, director Prof. Maria Roth, PhD

One item had the lowest interitem correlations with other items in the reliability analysis (posting the name of the city in the personal SNS profile), the explanation being that all the SNS sites offer default enabling of location visibility and favor the display of geographical networks. After the item was removed, the Alpha coefficient was .736.

Another dimension of identity management can be classified among agency items, namely the online dissimulation and identity play. For the six items of dissimulation (without the ones related to dissimulation for parents), the reliability analysis revealed moderate interitem correlations, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficient .745.

**Table 4. Dissimulation of personal information online**

Characteristic	Categories	Frequency	%
<i>...at least once on the Internet</i>			
I told somebody I have another age (than my real one)*	Yes	871	48.9
	No	912	51.1
	Total	1783	100.0
I told somebody I am of opposite sex	Yes	264	14.8
	No	1517	85.2
	Total	1781	100.0
I said that I have a different occupation	Yes	318	17.9
	No	1462	82.1
	Total	1780	100.0
I said I go to another school/ high school (than the real one)	Yes	411	23.1
	No	1366	76.9
	Total	1777	100.0
I said I look different (than I really do)	Yes	271	15.2
	No	1508	84.8
	Total	1779	100.0

I tried to make other think that I am different (than I really am)	Yes	336	18.9
	No	1445	81.1
	Total	1781	100.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>1726</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\*We avoided formulations in terms of “lying”, in order to eliminate social desirability effects

### e) Other factors

We asked our subjects to self-evaluate a series of social skills and abilities in comparison to other peers of same age and sex, on a 5-point scale varying from 1 (much less) to 5 (much more). Some of the items (those with positive connotations) revealed internal correlations (interitem analysis – Alpha coefficient .744) suggested through the grouping of 5 items, into what I called the Positive Self-Description Dimension (PSDD). The items included in the PSDD are:

How much you would say the expression ....characterizes you (in comparison with a person of same age and sex)?

1. “leadership abilities”
2. “I make new friends easily”
3. “open to new things”
4. “popular among the other sex”
5. “self-confident”

There is a positive correlation between the PSDD dimension and the experience of meeting offline someone previously met online, though very low ( $r = .180$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Even though self-reported loneliness and five items of social anxiety may not be as equally suitable to predict the studied behavior as more elaborated depression and loneliness scales, I included one item as independent variable (“I often feel lonely” –dummy variable); in addition to this, I included an item of Internet sociability (“Since I’ve been using the Internet, I have more friends”, dummy variable). The self-assessed loneliness showed a low relevance only in the girls’ case.

I’ve separated the number of persons into three categories (1 to 10 persons, 10 to 20 and above 20). The correlation was .156 ( $p < .001$ ) after I excluded the subversive responses (teenagers declaring they have met over 100 persons). A safe assumption would be that the number of romantic partners the adolescents meet offline is not determined by the positive self-perception, but nevertheless the latter influences the very step of meeting somebody offline in the first place.

Other items included in the analysis were related to possible gratifications the teenagers can obtain through the initiation of romantic interactions on the Internet:

1. “I’ve found intimate relations, without danger”
2. “I’ve found intimate satisfactions, without danger”



## Results

The study was design to investigate a series of adolescents' behavior associated with Internet use, among those behaviors, the practice of online-offline dating. 33% from our sample reported at least one online-offline encounter, i.e. relationship initiated online and moved offline at a certain moment. First, bivariate associations were calculated in order to assess the preliminary impact of the independent variables in the explanatory model (Tabel 5). Several differences can be observed from bivariate analyses between boys and girls with respect to factors that might influence the On-off dating decision.

**Table 5. Bivariate associations with online-offline dating for boys and girls**

Bivariate associations with On-Off dating	Boys	Girls
Age	-	-
Web-surfing on dating sites	.239*	.103 *
Web surfing for advice related to sex life	.263*	.129*
Web-surfing for finding pornographic material	-	-
<i>lie item</i> : if you happened to open pages with pornographic images	.153*	.147*
Hours spent on the Internet on a week day	.246*	185*
Hours spent on the Internet on a weekend day	.210*	170*
Years of using the pc/or the Internet	-	-
Unpleasant incidents online (including sexual solicitations)	-	-
"You've found intimate relations, without danger"	.255*	.214*
"You've found intimate satisfactions, without danger"	.156*	.098*
OffMon1- my parents know where I am all the time	-	-.130*
OffMon2- my parents know whom I spend	-	-.111*
Restrictions about time spent on the Internet	-	135*
SNS monitoring (3 items)	-	-
E-mail use	.117	.100*
SNS use	.193*	.241*
Use of e-mail for talking to persons from Cluj that you've met online and you also met offline	.249*	.101*
Use of e-mail for talking to persons from Cluj that you've met online and you want to met offline	.257*	.101*
Use of e-mail for talking to persons from Romania that you've met online (but not offline)	.209*	.200*
Use of e-mail to set up dates with persons from the Internet	.218*	-
Restricted SNS profile	-.135*	-.167*

Making public the personal e-mail address	.159*	-
Inclusion of the name in the SNS profile	.127*	-.131*
IM use to talk to persons in Cluj (that you've met online and also face to face)	.315*	.324*
Use of IM to talk to persons in Cluj (that you've met online but not face to face)	.342*	.350*
Use of IM to set up direct dates with persons you've met online	.391*	.305*
Use of webcam	.207*	.195*
"Since I've been using the Internet, I have more friends"	.204*	.069
The number of persons they talk to on the Internet	.240*	.146*
PSDD	.244*	.183*
Lying about physical aspect	.114*	-
Lying about general self	.109*	-
Lying about age	-	.170*
Lying about school	-	.097*
Lying about sex	-	.089*
Loneliness	-	.073
<b>Total</b>	<b>766</b>	<b>1036</b>

\*p<0.01, other values p<0.05

*H1. The surfing behavior (for romantic contacts and sexual content on the Internet- both pornographic and for advice related to sexual life) is positively connected to the On-Off dating decision (variable: "Have you ever gone on a date offline with someone you previously met online?"- dichotomous scale). **Partially confirmed for boys and girls (the active search for pornographic materials is not significant)***

*H2. Exposure to unwanted material and sexual solicitations online is negatively related to On-Off dating decision. **Not confirmed for the unwanted solicitations- there is no connection. Inferred for the unwanted exposure to sexually explicit content (positive connection for both boys and girls).***

Adolescents who seek potential partners do not hide. Their SNS profiles are open to anyone, some of them revealing personal information (e.g. full name); on the other hand, some of them might engage in various dissimulation games, for ludic gratifications. Boys tend to offer false/deceiving information related to sex, physical appearance, while girls incline towards dissimulation about age, school and sex (less than boys).

*H3. Identity protective behavior (nondisclosure and dissimulation) is negatively related to On-Off dating decision. **Partially confirmed for boys and girls – restriction of SNS profiles are***

**negatively related to the On-Off dating. Some of the dissimulation actions are positively connected to the On-Off dating decision.**

Furthermore, the use of social and communication tools (Instant Messaging, SNS, webcams) is positively related to the On-Off dating, as well as to other aspects of online sociability (number of persons the teenager talks to on the Internet, higher number of friends since using the Internet).

*H4.* The use of social tools (IM, SNS, webcams) is positively related to the On-Off dating decision.  
**Confirmed for boys and girls.**

The parental monitoring (mediation) of online activities of children is almost non-existent, at most it is directed towards the children's time spent on the Internet; as for the relation to the investigated behavior, only the offline monitoring seems to have a negative impact on girls' decision for online-offline dating. Other mediation items had no influence in the model.

*H5.* The extent of parental monitoring (online and offline) is negatively correlated to the On-Off dating decision. **Not confirmed for boys. Partially confirmed for the offline monitoring of girls. Partially infirmed for the general online monitoring for girls.**

Further items were introduced, e.g. the time spent on the Internet on a school day and on a weekend day (positive correlations).

*H6.* The amount of time spent online is positively correlated with the On-Off dating decision.  
**Confirmed for boys and girls**

As predicted, a higher sociability and social self-esteem is positively connected to online-offline dating, one explanation being the relative visibility of this particular practice to the peer group. Loneliness does not influence the decision.

*H7.* The positive self-description dimension is positively related to the On-Off dating decision.  
**Confirmed for boys and girls**

It is important not to overstate the relationship between Online-offline dating and characteristics such as offline monitoring or positive self-concept. These associations were not strong and the explanatory model can be influenced by other factors that we didn't take into account, e.g. peer pressure, perceived controllability or reciprocity (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006b) of the online environment.

I further conducted a binary logistic regression (table 6) due to the characteristics of the variables in the model (dependant- categorical, dichotomous; independent variables that violated the assumptions of the linear regression, namely the normal distribution requirement). After I excluded the subversive (exaggerated) answers, the self-reported number of online-offline encounters was used as a filter for all calculations.

The binary logistic analysis showed interesting results: older teenagers are more likely to engage in on-off dating, they tend to use the Internet more on a week day, they also have publicly available SNS

profiles and use IM to talk to people in the proximity to set up dates. In addition to this, they tend to agree more with the statement “You’ve found intimate relations, without danger”. Consistent with other computations, the positive self-description dimension had an influence on the overall model, although the OR was low. What was rather surprising was the influence of the online monitoring item “restrictions about time I spend on the Internet”, with teenagers who report this type of monitoring being 1.812 more likely to engage in online-offline dating than other teenagers. From the dissimulation items, only lying about one’s age appeared to have a significance in the regression model.

**Table 6. Binary logistic regression predicting online-offline dating decision**

Characteristic	OR (95% CI) N=890 On-Off dating decision
<b>Age</b>	1.146(.994-1.322) <sup>b</sup>
<b>Sex</b> (0=Girls, 1=Boys) –negative relation	.610 (.352-1.058) <sup>b</sup>
Web-surfing on dating sites	NS
Web surfing for advice related to sex life	NS
Web-surfing for finding pornographic material	NS
<i>lie item</i> : if you happened to open pages with pornographic images	NS
<b>Hours spent on the Internet on a week day</b>	1.160(.680-1.963)
Hours spent on the Internet on a weekend day	NS
Years of using the pc/or the Internet	NS
Unpleasant incidents online (including sexual solicitations)	NS
<b>“You’ve found intimate relations, without danger”</b>	2.462(1.018-5.954) <sup>b</sup>
OffMon1- my parents know where I am all the time	NS
OffMon2- my parents know whom I spend	NS
<b>Restrictions about time spent on the Internet</b>	1.812(1.175-2.794) <sup>c</sup>
SNS monitoring (3 items)	NS
Use of e-mail for talking to persons from Cluj that you’ve met online and you also met offline	NS
Use of e-mail for talking to persons from Cluj that you’ve met online and you want to met offline	NS
Use of e-mail for talking to persons from Romania that you’ve met online (but not offline)	NS
Use of e-mail to set up dates with persons from the Internet	NS
<b>Publicly available SNS profile</b>	2.486(1.368-4.249) <sup>c</sup>
Making public the personal e-mail address	NS
Inclusion of the name in the SNS profile	NS
<b>IM use to talk to persons in Cluj (that you’ve met online and also face to face)</b>	1.243(1.040-1.485) <sup>b</sup>

Use of IM to talk to persons in Cluj (that you've met online but not face to face)	NS
<b>Use of IM to set up direct dates with persons you've met online</b>	1.830(1.420-2.239) <sup>c</sup>
Use of webcam	NS
The number of persons they talk to on the Internet	NS
<b>PSDD</b>	1.100(.970-1.298) <sup>b</sup>
Lying about physical aspect	NS
Lying about general self	NS
<b>Lying about age</b>	1.628(1.026-2.584) <sup>c</sup>
Lying about school	NS
Lying about sex	NS
Loneliness	NS
For the model, -2 log likelihood=440.328, $\chi^2(df)=290.816$ (P $\leq$ .001)	<sup>a</sup> P $\leq$ .01
<b>Nagelkerke's R square=.357</b>	<sup>b</sup> P $\leq$ .05
<b>Cox &amp; Snell R square=.266</b>	<sup>c</sup> P $\leq$ .001
	NS= not significant

As the number of dating partners (measurement –scale) showed positive correlations with several dimensions and key variables, I conducted separate linear regressions for boys and girls, each time controlling for age (table 7). The collinearity analysis showed that multi-collinearity was not a problem for the regression model and the highest variance inflation factor (VIF) of any of the predictors was 1.760, which is below the threshold for multi-collinearity problems.

Among the items with strong predictive value for both boys and girls, the amount of time spent on the Internet on a school day, along with IM use for talking to various people online, as well as for setting up offline dates appear to have the most influence in the regression models.

Other items had different predictive value for boys in comparison to girls' case. For example, boys who are surfing for information related to sex life, or those who value the development of intimate relations have a higher number of dating experiences. However, deliberate search for pornographic material was not significant, while unintended exposure appears to influence the model, one possible explanation being the general surfing behavior that leads to exposure or the social desirability effect.

Other significant items were related to online sociability indicators, namely number of persons they talk to online or perceived increase in number of friends since they have started using the Internet. Parental monitoring items revealed ambiguous relations to the number of on-off encounters. On one hand, offline monitoring doesn't seem to have any effect whatsoever, while restrictions about the content accessed on the Internet seem to have a positive effect on the dependent variable. Only SNS monitoring, i.e. general knowledge about their children's use of SNS and interest in the persons their children add as friends has a negative influence in the model.

Similarly for girls, the parents' interest about the persons their children add as friends has a negative influence in the model. As opposed to boys, in girls' case the positive self description dimension seemed to influence the model.

Other items, like loneliness, dissimulation dimension, offline monitoring, e-mail and SNS use didn't have any significance for either boys or girls.

**Table 7. Linear regression for predicting boy's number of dating partners through online-offline encounters**

Characteristic	St.Beta	
	Boys	Girls
Web-surfing on dating sites	NS	NS
Web surfing for advice related to sex life	.156*	NS
Web-surfing for finding pornographic material	NS	NS
<i>lie item: if you happened to open pages with pornographic images</i>	.160*	NS
Hours spent on the Internet on a week day	.355***	.142**
Incidents online (sexual solicitations on the SNS)	.168*	NS
"You've found intimate relations, without danger"	.176*	NS
Offline parental monitoring (2 items)	NS	NS
Restrictions about content accessed on the Internet	160*	NS
SNS monitoring		
-parents ask about persons they add as friends	-.200*	-146*
-parents knowing about SNS use	-.109*	NS
IM use	.126*	NS
E-mail use (general and for talking to persons and setting up dates – 5 items)	NS	NS
SNS use	NS	NS
Making public the personal e-mail address	.150*	NS
IM use for talking to persons and setting up dates (3 items)	.300***	.250***
Use of webcam	NS	NS
"Since I've been using the Internet, I have more friends"	.207*	NS
The number of persons they talk to on the Internet	.270***	NS
PSDD	NS	140*
Dissimulation items	NS	NS
Loneliness	NS	NS
"Some persons were 5 years older than me"	230**	208***
*P≤.05	<b>N= 766</b>	<b>N= 1036</b>
** P≤.01		
*** P≤.001 (two tailed)	<b>Adj.R<sup>2</sup> = 262</b>	<b>Adj.R<sup>2</sup> = 112</b>
NS= not significant		

## Discussion

In this article I discussed some of the possible predictors of the teenagers' decision for online-offline dating, i.e. romantic online interactions transferred offline at a certain point (although the denotation of „romantic” was extended beyond the platonic idealism). Although causal interpretations of statistical correlations must always be received with a reasonable amount of caution and skepticism, some of the findings deserve our attention.

I first looked into the surfing behavior and its connection to the online-offline dating practice. Surprisingly in both girls' and boys' cases the active search for pornographic material does not influence the dating decision. However, the active search for advice related to sex life and surfing on dating sites showed positive relations in boys' case. Moreover, the unwanted exposure to sexual solicitations online seems to have an impact on the investigated behavior of boys. This might be explained through the general surfing patterns of boys who engage in online-offline dating. However, in line with previous research (Wolak et al., 2007), wanted and unwanted exposure to sexually explicit content is more relevant for the boys behavior than for the girls'. We can presume there is still a great deal of self-restraint from the adolescents in admitting to socially undesirable practices. At the same time, the lack of impact of sexual solicitations on the overall model of analysis (correlated with the minimized importance of these incidents), might represent an alarming indication of teenagers' attitudes towards sexuality and sexual relations (instrumentalization of sexual relations, uncommitted sexual explorations, a phenomenon revealed by Peter & Valkenburg, 2008). Even the high frequency of On-Off dating (33% from our sample) might indicate a similar transformation.

Furthermore, the parents' generalized lack of knowledge and control of their children's online activities is in itself an issue of concern. It should be mentioned that numerous parents of Romanian teenagers are digitally illiterate or have little knowledge of social media, especially Instant Messaging or Social Networking Sites. It is not surprising that the impact of parental monitoring on the dating decision (online and offline, general and SNS specific) is almost null. Far from me the idea of preaching more parental control over children however, I found it really alarming that parents have little clue what their children are doing online and with whom. Several items of general offline monitoring, general online monitoring and SNS specific were included in the analysis and they revealed ambiguous relations with the investigated behavior. Consistent with previous research (de Groof, 2008; Fleming et al., 2006), SNS monitoring seemed to reduce the incidence of on-off dating, more for boys than for girls. However, regression models showed a counterintuitive impact of content and time monitoring on teenagers' on-off dating. Last, offline monitoring showed only negative associations with girls' dating, but it had no predictive value in the regression models.

One possible explanation for the ambiguous results might reside in the nature of the parental monitoring itself. The lack of computer and Internet literacy of most Romanian parents might result in some of the parents' rejection of various forms of Internet use that are not perceived as “educational”. However, these parents are more likely to regulate first their children's time, then content and only last, the persons their children talk to online. Probably they have little knowledge of social networking tools therefore they don't try to regulate its use. On the other hand, children's responses to authoritative regulation might be exactly the opposite of what their parents are expecting. On the contrary, parents who do have knowledge of the functioning and use of SNS (higher computer and Internet skills) might also have a deeper understanding of the Internet social dynamics, risks and opportunities, therefore

they might be better equipped to regulate effectively and in a non-authoritative manner their children's exploration with online and offline relationships. Unfortunately, due to the extensive exploratory nature of the project, we were not able to include more items related to parenting styles and communication, which would have given us more detailed insights into this particular issue. What is also lacking is the parents' view on Internet safety issues.

In terms of online disclosure and dissimulation, it appears to be difficult to draw a clear distinction between rational/instrumental purposes and ludic behavior; this zone of uncertainty might hinder explanatory approaches such as "the recreation hypothesis" or "the compensation hypothesis" (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007) when it comes to adolescent behavior. However, such practices indicate an active exploration of romantic relations and encounters, which might dismiss the victimization perspective as unilateral and sometimes inaccurate. Apparently, teenagers who "put themselves out there" in terms of profile visibility are the ones with more on-off dating. Some of the dissimulation items were also significantly correlated, differently for boys and girls but had no predictive value (with the exception of lying about age). Teenagers seem to use deceptive strategies in order to meet their dating goals (Toma et al., 2008) -lying about age- more than for the sole ludic purpose (e.g. lying about sex). More research related to the dynamics and specificities in the selection of dating partners is much needed.

In line with previous research (Daneback, 2006; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006), the use of social media has predictive value for general dating, in this case, for the on-off dating of teenagers in our sample. It is especially the extensive IM use for various types of communication and for setting up offline dates that seems to be the most salient in the explanatory model. Other than availability of SNS profiles, other items related to SNS use didn't have any impact. Also, no significance was detected for e-mail use, which has a lower popularity among teenagers today. Together with the extensive IM use, the amount of time spent online is one of the best predictors for the investigation of the online-offline dating, in both the logistic and linear regression models.

Last, items related to online sociability and positive social self-concept seem to influence this particular type of dating behavior. Teenagers who have more friends, talk more on the Internet, are more outgoing (self-perceived ability to make friends, openness to new ideas, leadership abilities, self-confidence, perceived popularity among other sex) are more inclined to experiment with online-offline relationships.

As it became apparent throughout the article, I deliberately chose a rather subversive title, since the generic category of "online strangers", usually seen as "online sexual predators" has been pushed in the background of the argumentation; instead I chose to focus more on the agency perspective and to search for the factors that influence adolescents' decision to transfer an online relation to an offline date/encounter.

### **Limitations of the study**

In spite of some advantages in exploring adolescents' dating behavior, the present study suffers from several limitations. The first is related to the nature of adolescents' experiments with online identity and interaction, most of which are marked by a ludic component; the distinction between instrumental behavior (lying about age in order to get a date) and ludic behavior (lying about age to get a date because "it's fun") is increasingly blurred. Further studies should try to investigate in-depth



different adolescent gratifications of deceiving in relation to online relations. Another important limitation is the data collection method. In-class self-report questionnaires are more susceptible to provoke subversive responses, i.e. providing deliberately false or joking answers, while the presence of class-mates or desk-mates might further distort the answers (the visibility of their answers to their peers might induce the social desirability effect).

Also noteworthy is the partially exploratory nature of the study that merely began to scratch the surface of multiple issues related to Romanian adolescents' use of the Internet. While on one hand the survey covered various issues (gain in breadth), it sometimes failed to explore in detail those problematic areas that emerged (loss in depth). Moreover, some of the areas investigated could have benefitted from a bidirectional perspective, i.e. children's perception on parental monitoring, as well as parents' reporting of their supervision of children's activities on the Internet.

Another assumption of the study was the heteronormativity, due mainly to the heightened sensitivity of public opinion towards studies related to teenagers' sexuality.

In addition to this, the whole concept of "dating" as an adult activity might not be useful when thinking /talking about teenagers' romantic and sexual practices, a more useful term could have been "hooking up", which is far different from the entire "dinner and a movie" experience.

Finally, the cross-sectional data collection does not allow any temporal inferences at this point. Longitudinal designs could shed more light on the dynamic of teenagers' online and offline romantic and sexual behavior.

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