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ABSTRACT In this article, I investigate the linguistic practices by which participants in online dating chats become authentic gendered and sexual beings in the virtual world. This process of authentication validates them as members of a specific gender or sexual group, which is a key prerequisite for engaging in the intricacies of online desire and eroticism. Authentication in this context is necessarily a discursive act because of the absence of visual or aural cues, and it takes place through linguistic strategies such as the age/sex/location schema, descriptions of the self, and screen names. The resulting gender and sexual identities are sketches or stereotypes whose value derives from the acceptance of social and cultural discourses on gender and sexuality that are negotiated in the interactions. Authentication, therefore, is not an external process imposed upon people, but the result of specific social practices.

KEY WORDS: *chats, computer-mediated communication, discourse, gender, identity, sexuality*

1. Introduction

Text-based Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), such as some varieties of chats, instant messengers, or electronic mail, seems at first sight a body-free environment. The absence of visual and aural cues downplays participants' biological bodies, and thus greatly reduces the amount of personal information available in the interactions. Social traits such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, or features such as height, tone of voice, or hair color are invisible unless a participant makes a point of displaying them. For many users, the appeal of this immateriality resides in its democratic potential, but research has shown that CMC participants show more or less conscious linguistic strategies that index gender (Herring, 2000), social membership to ethnic groups (Kroløkke, 2002), or physical features and gestures such as smiles or voice volume (Werry, 1996). In dating chat rooms, where people flirt, look for partners, or test the waters

of online romance, the frequent display of gendered and sexual identities and bodies should not come as a surprise, since as Cameron and Kulick (2003: 5) have argued, 'having a certain kind of body (sex), living as a certain kind of social being (gender), and having certain kinds of erotic desires (sexuality) [. . .] are not understood or experienced by most people in present-day social reality as distinct and separate'. Interestingly, participants in dating chat rooms not only experience this link between sex, gender, and sexuality, but they must also show that they are authentic members of a given gender and sexual group in order to interact and engage in Internet desire.

In chat rooms, the issue of authenticity has often been raised in regards to the truthfulness of the identities displayed in the rooms, taking 'true identity' as a match between the 'real' offline identity and the 'virtual' online one. This opposition between the real and the virtual worlds presupposes an independent and pre-existing identity to be discovered and then contrasted, but studies of different varieties of CMC have shown that such opposition is questionable (Cherny, 1994; Danet et al., 1997; del-Teso-Craviotto, 2005; McRae, 1997). Following Bucholtz (2003: 399), who proposes a shift from 'presupposing the authentic as an object to be discovered' to a 'notion of authenticity available for analysis as the outcome of the linguistic practices of social actors and the metalinguistic practices of sociolinguists', I intend to show some of the discursive practices by which participants in dating chat rooms create authentic gender and sexual identities in conversation. In this context, an authentic identity does not depend on the correspondence between the gender and sexual orientation of online and offline people, but on the authenticating processes that take place in interaction. As we will see, the processes by which dating chat participants present themselves as gendered and sexual beings constitute linguistic performances that are context-bound and locally managed, and, at the same time, are informed by social and cultural discourses of what it means to be a gendered and sexual being.

Authentication processes and strategies vary across rooms and participants, but their manifestations are not limitless, since they are shaped by the very nature of chat room discourse. When people log on and choose to participate in a chat room, a chain of decisions starts that has a direct bearing on how identities are constructed and displayed, as will be seen later. First of all, participation takes place under a screen name that is oftentimes the result of a careful and creative process, since it comes to represent the person(ality) who is posting the messages (see e.g. Bechar-Israeli, 1995). Although chat conversations happen in real time, there is no strict turn structure because of the time lag between the posting of the message and its appearance on the screen, and because of the existence of multiple threads of conversation. While interacting in the chat, messages pop up on the computer screen and scroll upward at a pace that increases with the number of posted messages. Because of the very fast pace of conversations, messages tend to be short and not carefully edited, with a profuse use of abbreviations (e.g. 'later' for 'see you later'), acronyms (e.g. 'lol' for 'laughing out loud'), and other symbols (e.g. ':-)' to represent a smile).

Chat room interactions have often been compared to face-to-face conversations, remarking on the limitations that the textuality of the medium imposes on communication and on participants' attempt to create language that is as speech-like as possible (Crystal, 2001; Noblia, 2000; Rintel and Pittam, 1997; Werry, 1996). Although we need to acknowledge the impositions of the technical features of Internet chats, and CMC in general, these are not simply limiting, but also allow users to establish new types of communication and language use that are sensitive to the temporal, spatial, and channel characteristics of the chat rooms, as well as to the tasks, topics, and interpersonal relations that are developed in the interactions (Baym, 1996; Condon and Cech, 1996; Hancock and Dunham, 2001; Mabry, 1996; Murray, 1991).

Chat room discourse is embedded in larger social practices, and consequently, it draws from much of the same socio-cultural discourses (including gender and sexuality discourses) as other types of interactions. Gendered and (hetero)sexist conduct in CMC, in particular, seems to reproduce offline behaviors such as male interactional domination, sexual harassment, and even virtual rape (Cherny, 1994; Clerc, 1996; Herring, 1994, 2000; Soukup, 1999). At the same time, however, online environments have offered a space for challenging traditional gendered practices and ideologies, and experimenting with different gender identities (Cherny, 1994; Clark, 1998; Danet, 1998; Fredrick, 1999; Gruber, 1999; Hall, 1996; Witmer and Katzman, 1996). As mentioned above, in this essay I am questioning the assumption that men and women are categories that exist in the 'real' world, and that chat interactions simply reproduce (or hide) those categories online. Instead, I focus on the specific ways in which people draw from socio-cultural discourses on gender to construct an authentic gender identity online, thus following studies that explore the performativity of gender rather than the communicative behavior of men and women online (Kroløkke, 2002; Rodino, 1997). Given the purpose of dating chat rooms, the display of a certain gender identity is only part of the identity work that takes place in the conversations. Participants in dating chats and other forms of CMC also show a variety of strategies to construct a sexual identity that enables them to engage in online desire and flirtation (Ito, 1997; McRae, 1997; Menon, 1998; Waskul, 2005).

1.1 DATA

The data for this analysis have been taken from three half-hour conversations[1] each from five English-speaking chat rooms hosted by America Online (AOL) ('Thirties Love', 'Lesbian 30s', 'Gay 30s', 'Catholic Singles', and 'Ethnic Latin'), and four Spanish-speaking rooms from the mIRC channel #Hispanic ('Gays', 'Más_de_30' ('*More_than_30*'), 'Amor' ('*Love*'), and 'Lesbianas'). AOL is an Internet provider that offers a variety of online services in addition to full Internet and World Wide Web access. mIRC, on the other hand, is an Internet Relay Chat shareware that can be downloaded into a computer and is independent of the World Wide Web, but works very similarly to AOL chats. Both chats were popular at the time of data collection in 2003. The rooms selected include a variety of sexual identities and reflect the features most often used to classify chat rooms.

I investigated English- and Spanish-speaking chat rooms (with participants mainly from the US and Spain, respectively) to explore the intersection among the globalizing nature of the Internet, the influence of national cultures, and the local norms of each individual room. Although it is not the purpose of this article to discuss the nature of chat room discourse from this perspective, I will make note of some instances in which English and Spanish chat rooms differ.

For the collection of data, I adopted a participant-observer role, although not as is traditionally understood in ethnolinguistics or anthropological linguistics, where the researcher is physically on the scene and known to the participants. First, I did not participate in the interactions that were actually recorded so as not to interfere with the data. Instead, I participated in the chat rooms when the conversations were not being recorded to familiarize myself with the environment, language, and dynamics of the interactions under investigation. Second, given the difficulties present in informing all participants about my goals or obtaining their consent (participants log on and off sometimes in a matter of minutes or even seconds), I was not able to reveal my role as researcher or the purpose of my investigation, nor could I ask for permission to reproduce the conversations. This obviously raises some ethical concerns that I had to weigh against the nature of the data and the technical characteristics of the medium. I took into consideration the fact that chat conversations are similar to television or radio interactions in that they happen in a public medium and, therefore, are accessible to anyone. I also followed Sharf (1999) in pondering the implications that my research would have in terms of privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, and appropriation of others' stories, and in the end, I decided to proceed as described.

2. Age, gender, and sexual categories: the gatekeepers

Dating chat rooms could be classified according to hobbies, jobs, income, or any other aspect of life that can be of interest to people looking for a significant other. Instead, we find that rooms are organized according to a reduced number of categories. This suggests that there are also a limited number of features that seem to be important for the presentation of an appropriate and authentic identity. I have examined the organization of numerous chat rooms besides the ones that provide the data for the present study, and three features never fail to appear as criteria to divide dating chat rooms: age, gender, and sexual orientation. This is the case for both AOL and mIRC, which have rooms such as 'Bisexuals', 'Thirties Love', 'Gay 40s', 'Lesbianas', or 'Más_de_40' ('*more than 40*'), although religion and ethnicity are also important criteria in the AOL chat rooms, where we can find rooms such as 'Jewish Singles' or 'Asian Singles'. The distribution of dating chat rooms predisposes participants to highlight certain aspects of their identity, makes gender and sexual identity salient, and reinforces social arrangements and ideologies of gender, sexuality, and age. The criteria used for the division of rooms are highly ideological because they reinforce heteronormative and racial expectations, since the default participant is heterosexual and white, and

deviations from this must be specified in the name of the room. We do not find, for instance, a room called 'Caucasian Singles' in contrast to 'African American Singles' or 'Asian Singles', nor a room called 'Heterosexual 40s'. Furthermore, sometimes participants make an explicit statement about race or ethnicity in their screen names (e.g. 'Cray z Chicana') or messages (e.g. 'looking for a black man press 123'), but this happens almost exclusively to show or request a non-white identity.

We can think of age, gender, and sexual identity as 'über-categories', as the three main features that validate participation in any given room. The existence of identity prerequisites is not exclusive of dating chats, but also appears in other contexts such as heterosexual personal ads, where 'gender data can be thought of as establishing a basic, qualifying criterion' (Coupland, 1996: 193). People are expected to present an authentic identity, which in the chats I observed meant displaying an identity that matched the age, gender, and sexual orientation of the room, and breaking this unstated chat room etiquette was considered reprehensible, as illustrated in Example 1 from 'Lesbian 30s'. Here, the participant Robshape 'interrupts' a conversation by posting a message that does not contribute to the topic that was being discussed at the time (a road trip, marked in bold in the example).

Example 1: Lesbian 30s[2]

Luv2D2M:	**NOW ladies watch out for DRINKINg to much!! and NO driving while drinking!!**
. . .	
SpecialK1975:	**I WILL BE THE PASSENGER IF SOMEONE ELSE DRIVES, SO i CAN DRINK**
. . .	
Robshape:	im soooo horny can any body help me???
Rmtempo:	16-F-WITH SELF PICS S2R IM ME '*16 female with self pictures, send to receive, send me an instant message*'
. . .	
Nyclatin38:	robshape how about u helping yourself
Zuukie:	rob the strait room is >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>
AM69Dreamer:	**i can't drive..unfort. i learned my lesson the hard way. . .lol** *'lol = laughing out loud'*
SpecialK1975:	**SHOULD WE HEAD SOUTHEAST AFTER**
Wed1963:	**i drove home 1 nite n passed out in the yard.....lol**

Robshape's contribution, as we can see in Zuukie's and Nyclatin38's responses, is met with rejection. I would argue that it is not the 'interruption' (Rmtempo also interrupts the 'road trip' conversation) or even the content of the message (sexually explicit messages are not uncommon in this room) that provoke Zuukie's and Nyclatin38's upset reaction. I believe that Robshape's fault lies in his screen name, which evokes a male identity and thus makes him an invalid interlocutor in the 'Lesbian 30s' room, as we can see in Zuukie's invitation for Robshape to look for a straight room, where he would be an appropriate participant.

As I have explained, the distribution of the rooms facilitates participants' expectations about the age, gender, and sexual identity of other participants and instances of deviation from those expectations are met with rejection. This means that in order to converse in a room, in order to flirt, in order to be subjects and objects of desire, participants must be authentic members of the group described in the name of the chat. The question remains, however, of how one becomes an authentic man or an authentic lesbian, for instance, in the context of dating chat rooms. As we will see, the authentication of the participants' gender and sexual identity is a performative act achieved through different linguistic strategies.

3. Gender authentication

There is a strong connection between sexual desire and physicality, since desire is constructed culturally in gendered terms, and gender is considered to be rooted in biological differences: being a man or a woman means having male or female genitalia, even though there are people with ambiguous genitalia and people whose chromosomes and external genitalia do not 'match'; likewise, being homosexual or heterosexual means being attracted to people who have the same or different genitalia than one's own. The importance given to gender and sexual identities in dating chat rooms is therefore somewhat of a paradox given the characteristics of the medium and the purposes of the interactions. While gender and sexual categories and identities are normally conceptualized as based on the biological body, in text-based chat rooms there is no physical space that the bodies of the participants can inhabit. One could argue that perhaps participants are concerned about the possibility of eventual face-to-face meetings and thus expect other participants to be 'real' men or women, but in many cases flirtation and sexual behavior are purposely confined to the virtual world. We can conclude, therefore, that the variety of ways used to signal a gender identity in dating chat rooms is not only intended to index the gender of the 'real' person but also to create a persona, an online alter ego that may or may not share the identity of its offline counterpart.

A common way of claiming a specific gender identity is the age/sex/location schema (or variations thereof), a short introductory message also known in chats as 'a/s/l'. Many participants' first message consists of this information, with or without other types of greetings, as we see in Examples 2 and 3, where Jamel22305, Infilm919, and SingleMDgrl introduce themselves following this pattern. As can be seen, this type of message includes not only information about one's gender but also age (one of the 'über-cataegories', as we have already seen) and location, in case the relationship wants to be transferred from the chat room to the offline world. This type of self-introduction is so common that many participants also create their screen names with this information, as is the case, for instance, of SingleMDgrl in Example 3.[3] Other participants, however, may not be interested in the possibility of a face-to-face encounter and thus choose to describe themselves by means of explicit statements about their gender (and

other attributes) without indicating their location, as shown in SKIPPY1278's introductory message in Example 3.

Example 2: Gay 30s

SKIPPY1278:	<———Muscular gay boy in girls panties
Jamel22305:	hey room
Jamel22305:	19yr old m Va
	'19 year old, male, Virginia'
GaelVr29:	ANY ONE FROM VA IM
	'anyone from Virginia, send me an instant message'
SKIPPY1278:	Any feminine boys here?
Nate11127:	I AM
SKIPPY1278:	Hi Nate

Example 3: Thirties Love[4]

Infilm919:	< 34/m/Virginia/pic
	'34, male, Virginia, picture'
SmrtMenComeHithr:	How are ya?
SingleMDgrl:	33/f/Maryland
	'33, female, Maryland'

Example 4 shows that in Spanish, it is also possible to learn the sex claimed by the participants by observing the morphological gender marker of nouns, adjectives, pronouns, or determiners. In Example 4, for instance, alegria39 greets the room with a variation of the age/sex/location schema, giving her age in the screen name (39) and her geographical origin in the message (Galicia, a region in Spain). In doing so, she has to choose between the feminine and the masculine form of the adjective ('gallega' versus 'gallego'), thus signaling her gender without stating it explicitly.

Example 4: Más_de_Treinta

<alegria39>	hola soy gallega, algun chico de mi tierra quiere charlar?
	'hello, I'm a Galician girl, any guy from around wants to chat?'

The salience of gender is also quite obvious in the participants' screen names. In general, we could think of screen names as standing for the body when it comes to attraction, since screen names offer one of the first impressions participants get of other participants. Just as we dress, put on make-up, or move in certain ways to display an attractive image of our bodily selves, participants choose screen names to create an 'appearance' that will attract other participants to chat with them. The presentation of the self in screen names follows gender lines, and emphasizes those aspects of physicality that highlight typical feminine or masculine traits. This is especially true of heterosexual rooms, but these traits are also important in the gay and lesbian rooms to construct more or less feminized or masculinized versions of their sexual identity. Screen names tend to index the participants' online gender by including semantically gendered nouns (e.g. MALE4SALE30, LVNVCowboy, Diamondboy02, sirenita1 '*mermaid 1*', ELHOMBRE157 '*the man 157*', MsGaPeach35 '*Ms Georgia Peach35*', TiO18Mad

'*guy 18 Madrid*'). Spanish screen names, to a much larger extent than in AOL, rely on first names to mark their gender (e.g. IVANN_22, from the male first name Ivan, anitaaa, from the female first name Ana), or use nouns and adjectives marked with the morphological endings -o (masculine) and -a (feminine) (e.g. gata00001 '*female cat 00001*', diablo23 '*male devil 23*'). In other cases, screen names are also used to create sexualized bodies that evoke stereotypical desirable features (such as eyes and lips) that are socially scripted with genderized erotic potential (e.g. rubia peligrosa6 '*dangerous blonde 6*', TRUEblonde821, blueeyescs, Hazelbrowneyes69, or SoftNSweetLips). Given the lack of visual and aural cues in the medium, the range of personal images people can create has fewer limitations than in face-to-face encounters. Accordingly, chat participants not only evoke human bodies in their screen names, but they also adopt animal bodies, or present themselves as objects, for example, diablito18769 ('*little male devil 18769*'), gata00001 ('*female cat 00001*'), MsGaPeach35 ('*Ms Georgia Peach 35*'), SurfingPoohBear, A kitty kat 4 u, DRMMMYAngel, DarrellRooster5, Sweettalknbear, TAMED SEX KITTEN, BadKitty040270, BIGBADBLUEDOG, or KittyCatPurrs68. We can observe that many of these screen names are gendered, since animals chosen for the screen names usually underscore stereotypical female or male features. In the list I just presented, for instance, females are cast as kittens while males are roosters or big bad dogs.

The genderization of online identities is also achieved in some occasions through the depiction of bodies using letters and diacritics. As we can see in the examples below, this genderization highlights the biological basis of gender and allows for erotic and sexualized meanings at the same time. In Example 5, HOTAZHEAT88 initiates a conversation with a sexually charged message that gets three responses from two participants. In these responses, we see that the breasts are dealt with as real objects ('nice and perky and firm') that remain, nevertheless, in the fantasy world created in the conversation (you cannot detach and send breasts, as Xboigyrlx2227 pretends, unless they are imaginary objects). In Example 6, SameOldTrik sends several sexually explicit messages, including one that also depicts male sexual organs, that, as in the previous example, index the real as well as the virtual world by coming to represent the sender of the message while requesting an action that can only be performed in a fantasy world (as suggested by the choice of the demonstrative 'this').

Example 5: Lesbian 30s

HOTAZHEAT88: COME HERE I GOT TITS (@) (@)
. . .
Xboigyrlx2227: OOOOOOO NICE AND PERKY AND FIRM
Da1nonlyteas: my god look at the size of Hots nips
. . .
Xboigyrlx2227: SEND THEM THIS WAY

Example 6: Gay 30s

KNIGHT OWL 928: i wanna meet
SameOldTrik: i wanna "MEAT" somebody too
. . .

SameOldTrik: anybody naked right now . . .
RHNIC 21: i am
reb3579reb: me
RujolikidR: oh yes
KNIGHT OWL 928: me
SameOldTrik: me 2
. . .
SameOldTrik: b naked & jerk it boys
. . .
SameOldTrik: / /U\ \ play w/this
'*(penis between legs) play with this*'

Authentication of a gender identity in the conversations is also achieved through the display of gendered behaviors. The use of emoticons and graphic symbols, for instance, seems to be a gendered act, since women use this strategy more frequently than men. This may be due to the fact that emoticons, as their name indicates, have an expressive function, and as such, they can be used to create a traditional type of femininity. Emoticons and other graphic symbols, however, do not only help construct female identities. For instance, some male participants use letters and other graphic symbols to conjure up images of gentlemen courting ladies. In Example 7, TNCharmer's message functions as an introduction, since this is the first message he sends after logging on. Instead of a regular greeting, he offers coffee (symbolized as a cup, c( ), in the message) and roses (@}}~~~),[5] but significantly, only to 'the ladies' in the room. Although later he identifies himself as a man ('38/m/tn' '*38/male/Tennessee*'), his introductory message already suggests that he is invoking a male identity. The case of BGHEARTEDCOWBOY in Example 8 is especially interesting, since apart from depicting a person with a hat (a cowboy hat, we imagine) and representing a potentially gendered action (winking), this depiction comes to be part of the alter ego he is constructing for himself in the room, since he adds the same emoticon to many of his messages and to all the greetings he sends to 'female' participants such as brat (TheBRAT4UisME) and sin (SinfullySwt32).

Example 7: Thirties Love

TNCharmer: c(_) @}}~~~ coffee and roses for the ladies and hello room

Example 8: Thirties Love

BGHEARTEDCOWBOY: single m with pic on profile c);o)
'*single male with picture on profile (winking man with a hat)*'
. . .
BGHEARTEDCOWBOY: hey brat, c);o)
. . .
BGHEARTEDCOWBOY: hello sin c);-)
. . .
TheBRAT4UisME: awww cowboy is sweet and cute as hell
SinfullySwt32: bg u being a playa again
'*bgheartedcowboy are you being a player again?*'
. . .
SinfullySwt32: naaaaaaa he isnt hes an honest one

Especially interesting is the case of hugs, represented by brackets around a participant's screen name. Hugs are quite typical of the AOL data, but they are not present in all rooms. They are completely absent from 'Gay 30s', and profusely used in heterosexual rooms. Crucially, hugs in the latter rooms happen between women and men, or between women, but rarely between men. Although there is no possibility of physical contact, a virtual hug seems to be considered a gendered act. A hug between men has the same homoerotic connotations as in offline contexts, and thus it also triggers the same homophobic ideas, as illustrated in Example 9. Racerxgundam greeted with a hug several 'female' participants, who in some cases responded likewise, as Darla8881 does, but with the exception of HERB, he only greets 'men' by writing their name followed by exclamation marks, as we see in the fourth message of the example:

Example 9: Catholic Singles[6]

Racerxgundam:	((((((((((((DARLA))))))))))))
Darla8881:	(((RACER THE MOST GORGEOUS)))
. . .	
Racerxgundam:	((((((((((((HERB)))))))))))) the only guy here i am not scared to hug
. . .	
Racerxgundam:	POET!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

4. Sexual identity authentication

The sexual identity of the participants is also conveyed in chats, albeit more indirectly through the display of a particular gendered body in a particular room. If bianca66 interacts in 'Amor', she will be presenting a female, heterosexual identity. However, if she interacts in 'Lesbianas' she will be presenting a female, homosexual identity. Beyond this indirect way of constructing a sexual identity, we also find interesting interactional dynamics in the gay male rooms that set them apart from other rooms, both in English AOL and Spanish mIRC. In the gay rooms, conversations are extremely scarce, and what we find instead are messages from people looking for sexual partners, as illustrated in Examples 10 and 11.

Example 10: Gay 30s

BMJS 85:	ANYONE WANT HOT PHONE WITH YOUNG PRESS 333333
OBMASDOG:	chicago here
Aioli222:	atlanta here
Lesisfilling:	anyone looking for phone
Busagi18:	Hi, guys.
Hittem:	S.F. bay area??
edrino38:	new york puerto rican bottom here
PONCE0731:	hello i like they are 30 or 35
Lesisfilling:	chicago here
PONCE0731:	yes i like 38 smile
Diamondboy02:	hi room
Diamondboy02:	i'm looking for a black man press 123
Frnndseg:	18yr old looking for older men in minnesota

Example 11: Gays

<MATOTE>	Algun papito para pajearnos. . . . muy calentito.. con CAM Y MIC. . . cara a cara *'Any hottie to jack off with me . . . very hot . . .with webcam and mic . . . face to face'*
<WapTe21>	Chico WAPO busca chico WAPO para charlar por la cam. . .no todo es sexo. . . *'Q.T. guy looking for Q.T. guy for videochat . . .not just sex . . .'*
<SexoenCR>	Chico de 18 años busca chico, chica o pareja para sexo real en ciudad real. Hago lo que se me pida, interesados /q me. *'18-year-old looking for a guy, a girl or a couple for "real" sex in Ciudad Real. I'll do whatever you say, interested? /q me'*
<gayu_21>	alguien de galicia???????????yo delgado guapete y fibradillo de 21 años. alguien mas o menos como yo??????????? *'Anyone from Galicia????? Thin, hot and buff 21-year-old. Anybody out there like me??????'*

In gay rooms, people typically log on, post a message (once or several times), and wait for a response from somebody in the room at that moment, creating a series of unrelated messages that appear on the screen just as they are displayed in the examples above (with the exception of my translations in Example 11, which are included here for the benefit of the reader). Messages usually describe the participants' location (e.g. 'chicago here', 'S.F. bay area??'), the type of sexual partner they are or they are looking for (e.g. 'new york puerto rican bottom here') and the type of meeting they want, whether face-to-face, by phone, or through a private meeting on the Internet (e.g. 'Algun papito para pajearnos . . . muy calentito . . . con CAM Y MIC . . . cara a cara '*Any guy to wack off . . . very hot.. with cam and mic . . . face to face*').

The resemblance between the messages posted in the gay rooms and those posted in personal ads is quite evident. Shalom (1997: 187) argues that personal ads are a genre that 'aims to set up a certain type of communication between writer and reader and to attract the desired other', that is, they have a clear instrumental function. Since the goal is, for the most part, to find a romantic or sexual partner, people strive to present themselves as desirable and attractive subjects, or they specify the attributes they look for in the object of desire. Although there are cultural and linguistic differences in personal ads produced in different countries (compare, for instance, Coupland, 1996; Jones, 2000; Livia, 2002; Thorne and Coupland, 1998), the personal ad genre typically consists of short messages with an inventory of wanted and/or unwanted attributes where non-essential items such as function words have been eliminated and where the structure of the message follows a more or less standard order: 'ADVERTISER seeks TARGET GOALS (COMMENT) REFERENCE' (Coupland, 1996). Although, as Shalom (1997) argues, personal ads do not simply describe and reinforce gender stereotypes, the fact remains that people usually draw from a rather limited lexis so that a few attributes come to symbolize the specific masculinity or femininity they are searching for. In personal ads and gay dating chat rooms alike, gender and sexuality are reduced to a few essentialist ideas that set up a common ground for the emergence of attraction. In a number of ways, messages in gay male rooms

tend to follow the personal ad genre. Although brevity is not a necessity in chat rooms, messages in 'Gay 30s' from AOL and 'Gays' from mIRC normally exhibit the style of personal ads and rely on easily identifiable categories and gendered attributes such as 'top', 'bottom', 'black', 'calentito' ('*hot*'), 'machote' ('*stud*'), or 'atlético' ('*athletic*'). The description of the self or the object of desire is even less detailed than in personal ads, mostly limited to the age/sex/location schema and a few other attributes. The possibility of immediate response probably affects this reductionism because participants can proceed to a private chat room where they can engage in a two-way conversation and explore in more detail whether they want to pursue further interaction. Why it is precisely participants in gay rooms who have an instrumental approach to dating chats is not clear, but it does not seem unique to the specific chat rooms under study. In PlanetOut.com and Gay.com, two websites where people can find personal profiles and get in contact with other lesbians and gays, lesbians tend to go to topic areas of the chat rooms and engage in group conversations, while gays browse profiles and tend to move to private, one-to-one online conversations (Quittner, 2003). This different pattern for lesbians and gays, therefore, invalidates explanations that rely exclusively on sexual orientation.

The instrumental approach to dating chat rooms is somewhat present in heterosexual rooms, where we also find participants that post 'personal ad' messages, and is much less frequent in lesbian rooms. Within heterosexual rooms, men are more likely than women to use the public room merely as a meeting point and to request private conversations. It is possible, therefore, that the intersection of gender and sexual orientation has given rise to specific Internet cultures of dating. Interestingly, a very similar pattern is found in AOL and mIRC in terms of what rooms favor the 'personal ad' messages, but there are also noticeable differences. In AOL, participants (regardless of the room) tend to follow the age/sex/location schema to 'advertise' themselves, and very rarely post messages about who they are looking for, as illustrated in Example 12. Here, I have selected a conversation from 'Ethnic Latin' that captures the trend in AOL heterosexual rooms. In the example, I show only 'personal ad' messages in the order they appeared, and have deleted the conversations that were taking place while these messages were posted for ease of reading.

Example 12: Ethnic Latin

KJC22702:	<<<<<< 20 f nj <<<<< sexy
	'*20 female New Jersey, sexy*'
Rubia peligrosa6:	hello room
. . .	
Rubia peligrosa6:	F/NY/37
	'*female, New York, 37*'
. . .	
Jubjubbbbb:	hello ladies
. . .	
Jubjubbbbb:	26 sexxy blk m ny pics yo
	'*26 sexy black male New York pictures yo*'
. . .	

Georgerolon4433: 32 m pr fla
'*32 male Puerto Rican Florida*'
. . .
A Cool New World: pr/sicilian male nyc 32 bx w/pic
'*Puerto Rican/Sicilian male New York City 32*
. . .
PapiBori2002nyc: 20 YR OLD PUERTO RICAN MALE FROM THE BRONX HERE WITH PICS IN PROFILE..... FOR ANY FEMALES THAT MIGHT WANNA TAKE A LITTLE PEEK....:-D
. . .
BIGDADDY420825: 20 m va anyone from northern va or live close by im me
'*20 male Virginia anyone from Northern Virginia or live close by send me an instant message*'

This excerpt captures the pattern of 'personal ad' messages in AOL rooms. In general, people present themselves following the age/sex/location schema, although sometimes, they also make reference to whom they want (e.g. a female in PapiBori2002nyc's case), what type of contact they are interested in (e.g. BIGDADDY420825 requests instant messaging) and some other attributes of the self such as ethnicity or race (e.g. Puerto Rican, Sicilian, black) and attractiveness (e.g. sexy).

In the case of Spanish chat rooms, users' messages tend to focus on the desired traits of the person they want to get in contact with, instead of following the age/sex/location schema for self presentation, as illustrated in the example from 'Amor'. As is the case with 'personal ad' messages in AOL, the information about the desired other is kept to a minimum, mostly location (e.g. Bilbao, Barcelona, Barakaldo) and vague adjectives such as '*maja*' ('nice'). Spanish users also indicate what they want from the other person (whether conversing in a private chat room, with or without a cam, or meeting somewhere, for instance). Importantly, in both AOL and mIRC, the messages depart from the typical pattern of personal ads and tend to include only one of the two important elements in the potential relationship, either the subject or the object.

Example 13: Amor

<StRaPpInG> HOlasssssssssssss
'*heeeellllllloooooo*'
<StRaPpInG> alguna chica maja de bilbao???
'*any nice girl from Bilbao?*'
. . .
<Dj_Projec> Alguna chica de Barcelona kiere ir de fiesta
'*any girls from Barcelona wanna party?*'
<[COSMO]> alguna chica maja de barakaldo?
'*any nice girls from Barakaldo?*'
. . .
<RUIZZTQ> Alguna Chica Aburrida para charlar un rato.
'*any bored girls to chat for a while*'

Coupland (1996), Jones (2000), Livia (2002) and Thorne and Coupland (1998), in their analyses of personal ads, acknowledge the variety of lesbian and male gay

life styles, while at the same time calling our attention to the insider knowledge that one must have in order to understand the intertextual and metaphoric references included in many of the advertisements. These references can only be completely understood if one is familiar with the national cultures where the ads are produced (UK, France and Hong Kong, respectively), and with the lesbian and male gay subcultures that most frequently appear in the ads. Likewise, the more or less instrumental function that dating chats have for different groups, and the differences found in the formulation of 'personal ad' messages point to the existence of local Internet norms that must be taken into account in addition to the cultural and social norms that operate within national gender or sexual groups.

5. Discussion

We have seen that the presentation of a gender and sexual identity relies on a variety of linguistic and extra-linguistic strategies. Regardless of how participants construct such identities for themselves, the authenticity of their presentation seems to be rooted in more or less traditional and hegemonic ideas of gender and sexuality. There is very little room for gender or sexual variation in the chat rooms that I have analyzed, although there are significant exceptions that highlight the subversive potential of CMC. Xboigyrlx2227's participation in 'Lesbian 30s', for instance, points to a female lesbian identity. With her screen name, however, she is challenging the prevailing ideology regarding the separation of the genders by including both 'boy' and 'girl' as part of her self-presentation. This type of ambiguity or breakdown of gender categories is the exception rather than the norm, since most identities displayed in the chats fall within discrete and easily recognizable male, female, gay, and lesbian categories. It could be argued that the use of screen names evoking animals or objects challenges the established gender order, but I believe this potentially subversive presentation of the self is mostly lost in dating chat rooms, because the animals and objects chosen for the screen names usually reify gender and sexual categorizations. What the analysis thus shows is that the gender and sexual identities constructed in these dating chat rooms draw from prevailing ideologies of gender and sexuality, and do not engage in much experimentation or subversive performances, which contrasts with the transgression that has been found in other varieties of CMC such as Multi-User Domains (Cherny, 1994, 1999). This happens because, as Sundén (2002) argues:

> textual bodies exist only as language, and as such inhabit a symbolic universe, temporarily released from the physical reality of their typists. Simultaneously, these online bodies can never be completely released from the material and cultural conditions in which they are grounded, nor from those discourses of the gendered body that render them meaningful. (p. 298)

The range of existing femininities and masculinities in the rooms are very frequently built upon a few elemental features based on commonly held beliefs about gender identities and desire: women are kittens and men are big strong

animals; men do not hug other men; women use more emoticons, that is, they are more expressive; eroticism gets constructed through graphic depictions of penises and breasts. The question remains of why simplified or stereotypical versions of reality can be meaningful for dating chats participants. The answer to this question is not simple. First, the very nature of these encounters, ephemeral and taking place in a public space, may determine the superficiality of the identity constructions. Second, the scarcity of cues in this medium and the fast pace of the conversations seem to limit the possibilities of presenting a complex and nuanced identity so that participants in chats have to maximize the resources they have to create online identities that do not need lengthy descriptions but are, nevertheless, able to trigger certain images and assumptions in other participants. A third factor that may influence the proliferation of easily recognizable or evocative identities is the assumption that there is some truth behind stereotypes and clichés. I believe that the succinct presentations of the self that are typically observed in chats suffice to create an online identity because participants draw from shared cultural and social ideologies about gender and sexuality that function as authenticating devices in this local context. As Hall (1996: 190) argues in her study of adult phone lines, 'for fantasy to be effective, it must somehow parallel reality, and if its intended audience is the culture at large, it must necessarily prey on certain cultural perceptions of what the ideal reality is'. Because of the vagueness of the descriptions, there is no guarantee of a match between the identity intended by a participant and the identity imagined by others, but this does not seem to be an obstacle for communication. For instance, the participant 'RiCaN CuTeY', who self-identified as a woman in a conversation in 'Ethnic Latin', created her screen name by referring to two aspects of identity, nationality (Puerto Rican) and physical appearance (cute). These two aspects of identity are general enough to trigger a wide variety of (gendered) images, but they are communicatively effective because the images prompted by the screen name are likely to be drawn from shared cultural notions of what cute Puerto Rican women are like. To what extent someone from the US will share those cultural notions with citizens of other countries or cultures is questionable, but the fact that chats tend to be frequented by people from the same country facilitates participants' identity work, thus enabling the authentication process.

Reliance on shared cultural notions of identity is aided by the general assumption that stereotypes and clichés are constructed upon some objective reality. In this sense, dating chats resemble other situations where the key to a successful identity performance is the belief that stereotypes always contain a grain of truth. In drag queen shows, for instance, performers exaggerate cultural notions of gender and race for entertainment. The audience knows that they are not 'real' women, and that they are not necessarily trying to pass as 'real' women, but the success of drag queens' performance is partly based on their ability to evoke features of femininity that the audience can interpret as typical of 'real' women (Barrett, 1999). People know, for instance, that not all white women use rising intonation, hedges, or empty adjectives, features that are often associated with women's speech since Lakoff's (1975) description of women's language. Yet by choosing these features the African American drag queens that Barrett

studied were not only able to claim a white woman identity for themselves, but they were also able to evoke certain images of femininity that audiences are familiar with. Likewise, when people participate in chats, they may well be aware of the caricatures of gender and sexuality they are constructing, but these caricatures are effective as authenticating strategies because they are able to evoke certain ideas about sex and gender that are socially held as true.

6. Conclusion

The linguistic practices observed in dating chats, as in any other social practices, are a product of a particular intersection of technical, contextual, and social features. In cyberspace – at least a priori – gender does not pre-exist because the bodies that sustain it are absent, and everything has to be created in the interactions, for the purpose of the interactions, and with the joint collaboration of participants. Nevertheless, gender and sexual identities in chats are the result of local norms and expectations as much as they are constrained by socially sanctioned categories. The identities that surface in chat conversations thus depend on the existence of previous models and ideologies that people can draw upon. Gender and sexual identities are saturated with meaning, so even subtle references can be enough to evoke masculine and feminine images. The gender and sexual identities that are constructed in dating chat rooms are thus 'interactional roles', established through conversation, but also, and perhaps more importantly, 'institutional roles' defined in terms of group-external social structure (Preisler, 1986).

How one becomes a woman or a man, homosexual or heterosexual in dating chat rooms depends ultimately on the acceptance of a variety of authenticating processes that are not explicitly stated, but constitute a real force in ensuring successful participation in the conversations. These processes start with the choice of room and are developed in the creation of screen names, the use of the age/sex/location schema and other descriptions of the self. Each of these strategies is a performative act because it is by these more or less explicit statements that participants recognize each other as members of a gender or sexual group. This does not necessarily mean that everyone that participates in a chat believes that everyone else is being truthful about the identity they display, but that belief is a communicative pre-condition for flirtation and eroticism to take place in the rooms. As the present analysis of chat rooms shows, authentication is not always an external process imposed upon people, but may be an interactional product, the result of the conversational practices of a particular group. In other words, being a woman or a man has a different meaning in different contexts because what an 'authentic' man or woman is has to be negotiated (i.e. authenticated) differently in each community of practice where gender or sexual identities are salient characteristics of the self.

These practices produce specific forms of gender and sexual identities whose meaningfulness can only be understood in the context in which they arise. The results of the analysis can, however, illuminate our general understanding of

how gender and sexuality are constructed beyond the specific setting under investigation. Although I cannot explore in detail the implications of this study for our understanding of the linguistic construction of sexuality, it is worth mentioning that the results can be illuminating for our consideration of the role that sexual identity plays in the construction of our sexual beings. Despite Cameron and Kulick's (2003) call for research based on a broad definition of sexual desire rather than focusing exclusively on matters of sexual identity, the importance of presenting an authentic gender and sexual identity in dating chats as a pre-condition for desire supports Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) stance that we cannot artificially separate desire and sexual identity because they are both integral parts of human sexuality, and both appear inextricably linked when we examine locally produced sexual manifestations such as the ones observed in dating chat rooms.

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NOTES

1. Each half-hour conversation resulted in a very different number of messages depending on the number of participants and the liveliness of the conversation, from approximately 100 messages in 'Lesbianas' to more than 1000 in 'Más de 30'.
2. All the examples are presented exactly as they were downloaded, that is, I have not corrected any misspellings or typing mistakes. I occasionally delete some of the participants' messages and substitute dotted lines for them when they are part of parallel conversations – so far as I can tell – and thus not relevant for the purposes of the discussion. For the Spanish examples, I offer a translation that tries to capture the meaning and key of the message rather than a word-by-word gloss, as is usually done in linguistic research.
3. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the pattern in this screen name.
4. As Infilm919's message in Example 3 shows, the desire to embody the interactions that take place in dating chat rooms goes beyond the creation of discursive bodies, and some participants offer or request pictures. In this article, however, I focus only on the linguistic creation of gender and sexuality.
5. To see some of these emoticons, one has to tilt the head towards the left.
6. This message is part of a conversation in which I was able to ascertain without any doubt that Racerxgundam was presenting a masculine online identity.

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