

UAICCRUSH - LOVE 2.0. A STUDY ON VIRTUAL FORMS OF STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract: *This paper presents a new situation in terms of human relations. Nowadays, the new technology changes our way of communicating and relating. UAICCrush is a Facebook page which exemplifies this kind of situation. Our research analysed the exchange of messages through this page. As a result, we developed a typology of the Internet users who send messages in order to be published on the page (the dreamer, the undecided, the sarcastic, the charming, the detached and the pragmatic). Also, we established a quantitative description of the page activity during the analysed period. This (micro)research opens future directions for scientists interested in the effects of virtual interactions between people.*

Key words: *virtual, relationship, liquid modernity.*

1. The Internet: A Contemporary Panacea of all Problems

The latest decades have showed us a disruptive evolution of the Internet, without any borders or limits. From a simple network of computers, a simple communication technology, the Internet has started to dominate different aspects of our lives. The Internet models relations and the patterns of communication between people. Like any instrument, it recalibrates social knowledge and communication, including in the case of affective and friendly reactions. The advantages of mediating the relationship through such an instrument are marked by a cult of rapidity (Larchet, 2018) and anonymity. Thanks to this relationship tool, the individuals benefit from a presence-absence, exposing themselves and camouflaging themselves equally. The final relationship becomes a result of negotiations and bumps made in short sentences, emoticons and different forms of reaction to the message. For Finkelkraut (2001, p. 26) the man connected to the Internet is a prey of immediate satisfaction of lusts, “a prisoner of the zero waiting limit”. The modern youngster is hasty, way too hasty and he builds his own emotional and relational universe with the same hurry. In this world, the individual becomes a “hunter”, instead of a character who is gradually developing a relationship or an emotion. So, if in the past there was the emotion of discovery, nowadays, the accepted friend requests and the number of the reactions are the trophies. The lover’s

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rejection is no more a reason to suffer, as it happens in romantic old movies, when the main character lives a terrible drama facing the rejection of the loved one. Hiding behind the screens or using fake identities, the young people try their luck just like in a game. This trivializes the feelings, weakens relationships and affects the inner social life.

In this context, we problematize online interactions between students from Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iaşi through a Facebook page: UAICCrush (UAIC is the acronym of the Romanian name of the university); the page is independent (without any institutional affiliation), created and administrated by students. This paper aims to describe the activity of the page, both quantitatively and qualitatively, using content analysis. We have chosen to use this methodological design based on the type of the collected data.

In the past, we can find this type of pages around 2012-2014 in some American colleges and universities, known as *confessions pages* (Kent & Leaver, 2014). These presented (anonymously) confessions about students' love lives, about the life on campus, also messages from students who were looking for a partner. Although it was a common trend, we were unable to find further research on this subject.

The working principle of these confessions pages is quite simple: students or any other person sends a private message to the page, then these are published on the page, without disclosing any information about the sender. In some cases, some details can be censored (usually personal data, such as telephone numbers, names etc.). UAICCrush works based on the same principles.

Bauman (2003) uses the concept of "top-pocket relationships" in order to describe the relationships in today's world. By using this concept, he highlights how people treat the relationship as a simple decoration element. This theory explains the effects of the modernity and technological advancements on social interactions, as a part of the generalised "liquefaction". Bauman (2003) says that we tend to have more connections than relations.

Castells (2015) has a complementary vision regarding the relation between real networks (offline networks) and virtual networks (online networks), describing them as inseparable realities.

2. Methodology: Study on University Alexandru Ioan Cuza of Iaşi (UAIC) Student Relations in the Online Space

The UAICCrush Facebook page was created on 15 November 2017, when the first post was published on the page. The page was designed as a space for communication and establishing affective relationships and friendship among students. In a way, this construction represents the modern version of the old oracles or dating pages in the newspapers. The difference lies in the speed with which the messages are changed and the way the messages are expressed. Everything is moving faster and faster, and the relationship development is suppressed, some stages are skipped and rash conclusions are made. Closeness between young people takes form of an episodic socialization, where the chance, hazard or the pleasure of the game is decisive.

Currently, the page has over 18.000 likes, several thousand posts and tens of

thousands of comments. This page was created to help the students to find their other half. No matter if they wanted to find a person whom they had seen before or they wanted to leave it to chance, the members of the UAICCrush community succeeded in fundamentally changing what was once known as “dating announcements”.

A pseudo-community has developed around this page, with a core of people constantly commenting and reacting to the posts on the page. The interactions between the members of the page were not limited only to the messages sent anonymously, as an event was also organised: UAIC Crush Party, on 18 May 2018, at the Oxford Club. According to the event data from Facebook, 82 people participated, 391 were interested, but we are unable to know the real situation. During the party there were markers regarding the status of those who were present: those who were alone and available received green bracelets, while the `taken` ones – those who were in a relationship (unavailable) received red bracelets.

Basically, the online environment becomes an opportunity for young people to know and recognize other people according to their preferences, aspirations, character and temperament. The purpose of this virtual community is to know and meet real people. In addition, the transition from the captivity of the virtual world (Larchet, 2016) into real life explains the desire to develop authentic relationships. They can be expressed in simple friendships, in affective realities or in social relation networks that confirm the need for belonging and identification with a certain group, with a community. In our case it is the community of the UAIC students.

The working principle of the page is very simple: students send messages to the page, and these are published on the page, without revealing the identity of the sender.

Figure 1 represents the profile image of the UAICCrush Facebook page, composed of the logo of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași which is framed in a red heart, with a red-cherry background. Basically, this is the visual identity of the page, as the students recognize the UAICCrush page.



Fig. 1. *Profile photo of the UAICCrush page*

The activity of the UAICCrush page is diversified, we can identify patterns that may be

more or less representative for students' lives, which is why we chose to dedicate a whole research to analysing the activity of students on this page.

The research consisted in conducting a content analysis (Babbie, 2009) of the posts from the UAICCrush page. We didn't pre-establish a certain number of posts to be analysed. We started with an open coding of the posts collected from 1 February 2019 until the data was redundant and the model was saturated (the new posts didn't provide any new information). Throughout the entire analysis, we used the comparative method (Duşa, 2014): we compared the analysed posts, the identified codes and categories, other characteristics of the posts etc.

The whole approach was composed of a "game" of interpreting the codes and categories resulting from the analysis - the purpose of this hermeneutics is to describe the different facets of the interactions within the UAICCrush page, the result being a radiography of a small universe from the entire online space.

The purpose of this research is to identify interaction patterns in the online space - UAICCrush.

2.1. Objectives

Identifying the main criteria that young people use in the posts sent to the page.

Establishing a typology of Internet users from the UAICCrush page, starting from the collected posts.

2.2. Sampling

The analysed posts were selected using convenience sampling, so we analysed all the posts from the Facebook page, starting with 1 February 2019, until the end of April 2019 when we reached the saturation of the model (89 days, 372 posts analysed).

The research tool used was the unstructured content analysis grid (data coding frame). This was gradually created and structured, starting from the main themes identified through the open coding.

3. Findings: Virtual Admirers. Disclosures and Self-Disclosures

3.1. A brief quantitative analysis of the data

Our research among the UAICCrush student community reveals a special typology of those who frequent this environment. The virtual admirers are shocking, in a hurry and they are lucky in a world marked by uncertainty and camouflage.

Out of 372 posts collected, 124 were published in February 2019, 206 in March 2019 and only 42 in April 2019. In January 2019, no posts were published on the page. The activity of the page is linked with the students' activities - January is the examination period (also, the first semester ends). Also, during July-September 2018 (when the academic year ends), the administrators of the page made an announcement of the temporary cessation of the activity as it was the summer break.

Regarding the length of the posts, we distinguished between several categories of

posts: 1-50 words: 49% of the posts; 51-100 words: 18% of posts; 101-150 words: 23% of posts; 151 words and over: 10% of posts. The average length of the posts is 45 words.

We identified two types of posts shared on the page: text posts (85% of them, we can find them as simple statements or as lyrics), as well as images accompanied by text (15% of posts, images that have small fragments of text; usually, these are pictures of people and short descriptions, used by the users in order to identify them).

The analysed posts have an average of 12 comments. 3 have no comments, while the maximum number of comments is 89. We can find in the comments students who tag their friends, but also direct or indirect answers to those who sent those messages to the UAICCrush page.

The strategies of disclosure and self-disclosure of these virtual admirers cover a quite different range. The messages focus on a variety of formulas that want to capture in precise and concise sentences a whole series of preferences, requirements and projections. They are also a form of disclosure of the personality of the individuals behind the monitor/ screen. Following a game of the appearances and the essences of reality and fiction, today's traders are evolving on the virtual scene trying to maximize the capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that they have. These "young traders" can be concentrated to raise their capital on communication, on the fields they study, or on material things and leisure.

4. A Typology of Virtual Admirers

The current typology is the result of a long process of data coding (as a part of content analysis), which was carried out in two main stages, the first one - open (primary) coding and another stage, in which we restructured and refined the existing codes, in order to create well defined categories.

The dreamer (idealist)/ romantic type

- They believe in love at first sight; usually they look for a specific person who impressed them;
- Bohemian, they use a variety of adjectives to impress the others;
- They like long discussions, they look for someone who can resonate with them and who is willing to start a serious relationship.

Reluctant/ undecided type

- They usually look for a specific person (an unknown person) - they don't give too many details about that person;
- The posts are very short, they do not talk about themselves;
- They indicate the time and place;
- They do not know if that person follows the UAICCrush page and also, they do not have a lot of information about that person - they try their luck to find that person.

The sarcastic type

- They try to impress, they make jokes and they want to look mysterious;
- Their aim will be always questioned: do they want to make fun or are they looking for 'the one'?

The charming type

- They use a detailed self-presentation;
- They highlight their qualities, hobbies and what expectations they have from the chosen one;
- They have a clearly egocentric tendency.

No strings attached type/ detached type

- Their philosophy is `live the moment` – they do not want long term relationships and they admit this directly;
- They explain what their expectations are and what are they looking for.

The pragmatic (down to earth) type

- They know what they search and what they want to find;
- No matter if they want something material or they want to find the chosen one, they communicate this clearly and in detail;
- They work according to economic principles – they state what they can offer and the expectations they have from the person they are looking for.

Equally, this typology of virtual admirers also expresses a self-disclosure formula in front of a diverse and unknown audience. It is difficult to say whether the image transmitted or constructed by the interlocutors in the virtual space overlaps with the real one. It works as a business card, a wrapper or even a mask under which young people scroll. Things don't happen differently in real life either. However, in the case of direct interaction, there are other stimuli or indicators that can be important signs of the interaction. We have here the data related to non-verbal and contextual language. The Internet world limits the manifestation and (self)disclosure of young admirers, they only juggle the written message and the reactions to it.

In this context, immersion in the virtual world of relationships allows the subject to better control their self-image and reactions. The person's identity is perfectly camouflaged behind some fictitious accounts and operators try to maximize their chances from a comfortable chair, controlling the way they express emotions and making strategic calculations. Therefore, the typologies revealed by our analysis present a choice considered by the young person to be a winner. It is based on personal data, more or less expressed interests and personal experiences in the seducer hypostasis. It should be mentioned that the new admirers of the virtual world are also girls and boys.

4.1. UAICCrush - the second chance on the screen?

Without falling into the trap of a general pessimism, where we identify only the dysfunctions of the interactions carried out in the online space, we can reflect on this space from a positive note. Without judging the emotions or the veracity of online interactions, we can perceive them as a second chance, a “screen chance”, as Bruckner (2011) called it. After all, if individuals fail to establish enough interactions in the real world, the virtual environment may be a substitute and may facilitate the establishment of relationships in reality.

It is essential that all of these should not only remain at the connection stage, there should be a transition to a relationship/ interaction in the real world. If this happens, then we can consider Internet and the online space as a facilitator to establish relationships that can be transferred to the real world, but also a space where communication can be achieved. Nevertheless, everything must be used moderately, without transforming the virtual world into the space that takes up most of our time and activities.

5. Conclusion: Love 2.0?

The present research captures the quantitative dimension by analysing the posts published on the page for 3 months (there were 372 posts during that time). On the other hand, we also conduct a qualitative analysis of the collected data; as a result, we elaborate a typology of the users from the page (the dreamer, the undecided, the sarcastic, the charming, the detached and the pragmatic). For each of these types we highlighted the main features of the senders. The romantic wants to find the love of his life; the reluctant searches for a specific person who impressed him/ her; the sarcastic wants to make jokes/ maybe find someone; the charming searches for attention; the detached wants just to have fun, without any obligations and the pragmatic knows exactly what he/ she wants and what could offer.

This type of research correlates two worlds (the virtual world and the world of affective relationships) and also launches questions regarding the reconfiguration and the reshaping of affective relationships due to the communication tools we used (Postman, 2016). Is 'Love 2.0' really a paradigm shift regarding the affective relationships? Apparently, yes!

Each communication channel has a certain resonance (Frye, 1981), which determines a new way of organizing our minds and our actions. The 'seducers' from the virtual space reconfigure their entire arsenal of strategies according to the opportunities and limitations offered by these new technologies. The admirers from the past have turned into 'online seducers'. However, the patterns around which the whole discourse is built include camouflage and (self) disclosure techniques that we can easily identify in classic versions as well.

However, by exposing the seduction strategies to a public scene, the virtual admirer transfers the feelings from a personal (intimate) area to the public one. In fact, what really changed is a certain representation of feelings for the other. In the virtual market, love turns into a feeling that is easy to be quantified in words. Love is no longer a feeling which no amount of words can describe. In the absence of real interlocutors, love is virtualised and it can manifest itself as a commodity that can be traded in the virtual space. At the same time, the effort of the young modern admirers reiterates in the virtual world their own searches and projections, but also feelings accompanied by the fear of a rejection or a failure. Also, the new technologies constantly mediate the feelings of the young Internet users, protecting them from facing a rejection or from a damaged image.

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