

# ThE iNs aNd OuTs oF FiNdInG LoVe@LyCoS

A virtual ethnography of one site,  
in the online dating cyberworld



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Love@Lycos (<http://love.lycos.co.uk/lovelycos/>) is the focus of my virtual ethnography. I have chosen this website for a number of reasons.

*The online dating industry is 'Used by one in five single adults in the UK' (Brooks, February 13, 2003).*

Online dating has had its fair amount of sceptics and negative press, so I thought this would be an interesting online community to investigate.

*'It was always something other people did, and these "other people" were often perceived to be sexual deviants, axe murderers and paper bag wearers.'* (Semple, August 22, 2002).

Due to using the website for some time, I thought this would aid my unravelling of how other members use the site.

*'Online dating has definitely come of age. In 1995 the concept was not necessarily understood and probably even deemed questionable. We've come to see that it's a sound business model - probably one of the better ones out there.'* (McDermott cited in Mackintosh March 8, 2001).

On a personal level I was able to learn more about something I had been part of for many years and on the academic side, I was able to immerse myself in theory, academic studies and articles on the topic.

*'On most weekday evenings, the increasingly active Love@Lycos service has more than 3,000 UK singles logged on simultaneously, ready to flirt with whoever takes their fancy.'* (Semple, August 22, 2002).

Gulia and Wellman's (1999, p.178) question 'Are strong, intimate ties possible online?' is at the heart of my virtual ethnography. In May 1997, Lycos Europe was founded as a joint venture between Lycos Inc and Bertelsmann. Since then, Lycos has launched a search engine, been floated on the Neuer Market and now offers community/communication tools after being bought by Swedish portal, Spray, in 2000/01.

Lycos describes itself as providing its users 'with three basic but essential functions: the ability to find knowledge on the Web through search; the ability to communicate and interact

with other users; and the ability to shop.' Lycos describe their range of products as 'communitainment'. This suggests there has been some convergence online of communication and entertainment. Among the communitainment products offered, Lycos Chat (Chat Rooms) and Love@Lycos (Flirting and Dating), are the most popular. There are currently 550,000 flirts on Love@Lycos and 570,00 Chat users (as stated on the Lycos website).

The main form of research I used during my virtual ethnography was the email interview. The messages I sent to perspective interviewees are held in the appendix. I made it clear from the outset that their real names, locations, profile names, email address' would not feature in my study and would not be passed to any third party. Once users had agreed to take part, I would send the email interview to the email address they have supplied me with (see Appendix K for a copy of the interview sent).

I ended up with 21 females and 28 males returning their interviews to me. I would say that about 20 people did not end up sending back their questionnaire, but this could be due to them giving me the wrong email address accidentally or the many other technological problems computers come with!

Throughout their sites, Lycos highlight that they are hot on safety and offer much guidance for keeping safe online. The tips offered on Lycos are much the same as offered on other chat/dating sites.

*'Always tell someone where you are going, who you are meeting and when you are due home. Always meet in a public place. Don't invite anyone to your home or go to theirs until you feel you know them well enough. Ideally, take a friend with you. Get your date to do the same and have double the fun! Take your mobile phone if you have one and make sure it's fully charged and has calling credit. Get someone to call you at a pre-arranged time to check everything is OK and give you an alibi if you want to escape.'*

The level of stigma that a user thinks online dating has, would have an impact on their opinion about strong, intimate ties being made online. Strong, intimate ties are going to be mainly based upon a mutual trust. Someone that thinks online dating still has stigma is not going to find it as easy to trust other users, as they might feel some people are just doing it for a laugh.

To investigate this, I asked users if they would feel embarrassed if someone they knew, that did not know they were on Love@Lycos, saw their profile. 43% of users said they would (see Appendix F). I do not think this is conclusive enough to say that the entire stigma has diminished from online dating, as almost half of users do feel there is stigma attached, as they would feel embarrassed. This point is further stressed by the fact that only 23% of users

said they had been in an online based relationship (see Appendix F). So if the stigma still seems to be intact, then just how many users feel strong, intimate ties can be made online?

*Sites such as ours have helped people to get to know each other from the inside out. Traditionally, it has been the other way around.' (McDermott cited in Semple, August 22, 2002).*

Surprisingly, 85% of users think that they can, more men (62%) than women think they can and the age group with most believers is 30 year olds with 25% (see Appendix F). This suggests that men believe in the possibilities of online dating rather than women. This is surprising as more than half of users said they would be embarrassed if someone found out they had a profile on Love@Lycos. Therefore I thought a lot less users than 85% would think strong, intimate ties could be made online! Here are some comments about strong, intimate ties being made online, from the users I interviewed.

*'Yes, because there is usually total honesty and an intimacy you'd never get face to face. People become friends first based on character and then they grow to love the other person without even seeing them sometimes...so when the physical revelation occurs, it is not the most important aspect. There is a spiritual bonding established which then is hard to break even if one person turns out to be not the physical ideal for the other.'*

*'Yes, as it is the person you fall in love with, not the aesthetics; it can be very hard to maintain as entirely spiritual relationship though. At some time, we all want a cuddle and when a partner is a great distance away this is not possible.'*

I found that most members interviewed had joined in 2003 (see Appendix B, graph When Love@Lycos users joined).

*'Internet dating had lost its stigma, particularly among hard-working young professionals.' (Josephine Adams, European managing director of Yahoo! Personals cited in Gibson June 11, 2003).*

49% of users had been using the Internet for more than five years (see Appendix B, graph How long been an internet user for). This might suggest that the more novice Internet user might be too wary to venture into such things as online dating.

Only 55% of females and 49% of males were single and using Love@Lycos. It seemed odd that only about half of people interviewed, on a dating site, were single!

*'The Internet will soon become the most common form of infidelity, if it isn't already.' (Online Dating Irresistible to some married Folks - 7/03, n.d.)*

18% of males were married, but no married females replied (see Appendix B, graphs male marital status and female marital status). However, there are many female profiles stating that their marital status is married.

*'Online dating is now a mainstream activity and, if anything, the Internet has helped make dating services more legitimate by adding a fun element.' (Alex Kovach, Managing Director of Lycos UK cited in Semple, August 22, 2002).*

According to my research, real photos are shown on 62% of profiles (see Appendix C graph overall is a real photo of the user shown on their profile). More men than women show a real photo (see Appendix C) and the age group who mostly show a real photo is 20 year olds.

*'When we first added a picture service, we were surprised by how many men had a pet by their side. Then I was directed to a recently published piece of research, which had found that women trust men with dogs. And as trust is a big factor in online communities, it sort of made sense.'* (Kovach of Lycos UK cited in Semple, August 22, 2002).

Only 12% of users lie about their age on their profile (see Appendix D). Interestingly 20 and 40 year olds are the most likely to do this. Here are some reasons for users doing this.

*'Knocked a few years off my age as I seemed too old and desperate!'*  
*'Because I look younger, so I put an age to match what I think I look like.'*

Harassment and abuse is one main area of negative criticism that online dating (and online chat as a whole) suffers from. 37% of users had experienced some form of abuse on Love@Lycos. Here are some of the explanations I was given of these occurrences.

*'Woman who have lied to me...just wanting a free meal...women who have lied about their age, weight, height, photo etc etc etc etc. I'm not bitter, I just have the worst luck!'*  
*'Yes, a lot of abuse and men who were totally different than they came across online and on the phone.'*  
*'One or two abusive messages, but it is like water off a ducks back!'*

I wanted to find out just how many users have actually found love at Lycos, as this is a clear indicator of people building strong and intimate ties online. New research from Bath University reveals that online relationships have a better than average chance of success in the real world.

*'Contrary to popular belief, chatrooms don't lead to shallow and impersonal relationships,' says Jeffrey Gavin, the lecturer who headed the research project. 'They lead to really close relationships because people express themselves more freely on the Internet.'* (Gavin cited in Semple, August 22, 2002).

Dr Adam Joinson, a psychologist from the Open University, agrees. 'The specifics of Internet communication help explain the comparative success of online dating. Not being able to see the other person means we don't need to worry about controlling our physical appearance and can concentrate on the actual communication. After all, trying to sound and look interested, while at the same time holding in your stomach, can play havoc with your ability to actually listen when courting in 'real life'. (Joinson cited in Semple, August 22, 2002). Somewhat disappointingly, only 11% have found love at Lycos (see Appendix G).

*'If you are prepared to pay a little - or a lot - it has never been easier to meet a partner. So why are so many people still single? Perhaps the commodification of romance hasn't been as good for our hearts as it has for business.'* (Brooks, February 13, 2003).

Of the lucky people to have found love at Lycos, 60% are in their 30s and 60% are male. Joe Cohen thinks that younger generations are going to be where the growth of online dating takes place due to '18-25 year olds have grown up using computers for everything and have a high degree of trust in the medium' (cited in Brooks, February 13, 2003).

*The conventional ritual, apparently, is for couples who meet on the internet to spend weeks, if not months, exchanging email messages before they even start to telephone one another. So by the time, often weeks after that, that they actually meet in person, they already think they know each other pretty well. And a study carried out at New York University has found that the system makes for happy and enduring relationships.' (Chancellor, November 22, 2003).*

Lycos publish 'success stories' every so often, on the 'True love @ Lycos' pages of the site. The stories seem to be uploaded every few months, or when they get a few stories through. Here are some quotes from these success stories.

*'I wasn't expecting to find love, just a place to make more friends but I'm glad I kept trying...We hit it off straight away...it's been three weeks now and I'm still on a constant high...i would like to thank Lycos immensely as I wouldn't have found xxxx(name removed)xxx any other way.'*

*'If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be as happy as I am! I'm now engaged to a wonderful woman, thanks for your site and we're setting a date for the wedding as well.'*

Ethnographic knowledge is discussed by Christine Hine as the knowledge gained through taking part in a virtual community. (Hine, 2003, p.64). I feel I gained this at a rapid rate during my research and still am, during the write up. Some findings surprised me; some were in keeping with my expectations.

There were many areas that I researched and gathered information on using the email interview, but sadly have not had enough word space to discuss. I wanted to focus on strong, intimate ties being built online, so I picked areas that related and intertwined with this core idea. I feel this was a successful virtual ethnography and it was really interesting to conduct my own research of this kind.