

The youth of social networks uses and the social networks for youth A comparison between the uses of Facebook and HI5 among Romanian youth

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The present article analyses the “Self”-disclosure of the Romanian members of social network sites, namely Facebook and HI5. The initial assumption was that the users of social network sites perform certain daily activities (such as making friends) at the intersection of the online and offline lives. This is a result of the fact that through these socializing networks (Facebook si HI5) users can both create and erase the differences between the two interfaces (off- vs. on-) with the purpose of rendering a unitary image of the “Self” as members of a social network site. The purpose of the present study is to show the meanings that the users attribute to the experiences of their online activity on the social network sites, preferring a qualitative approach of the studied issue. On the basis of the information provided by a specific age group – teenagers and young people – we can say that our results points to the fact that for the young Romanian users of social network sites (e.g. Facebook si HI5) the answer to the question: “Why should I register on a social network?” could be summed up the following way: “I register on a social network site because all my friends already have an account there”. In other words, like in the case of young people and teenagers from other countries, and as the specialty literature shows the idea of belonging as a member to a social network site is associated to the desire of integrating and being accepted in a group as equal (in age and preoccupations), to the desire of not losing contact with friends, to the appropriate medium for setting up a new friendship and at the same time, relaxing, and having a great free time.

Introduction

The present article analyses the “Self”-disclosure of the Romanian members of social network sites, namely Facebook and HI5. The initial assumption was that the users of social network sites perform certain daily activities (such as making friends) at the intersection of the online and offline lives. This is a result of the fact that through these socializing networks (Facebook si HI5) users can both create and erase the differences between the two interfaces (off- vs. on-) with the purpose of rendering a unitary image of the “Self” as members of a social network site.

The analysis of the two social network sites began with some statistic data regarding their use in Romania. Thus, in a research made in 2009¹ (Mercury Research, 2009), about 44% of the Romanian internet users from the urban environment admitted they were members of a socializing network, the main such platforms used in Romania being HI5, Facebook, Flixter,

LinkedIn and Twitter (Mercury Research, 2009). Regarding the Romanian socializing networks' hierarchy HI5 ranked first, more than a third (36%) of the internet users who participated at the research stating that they have had an account on that network. On the next places came Facebook (16%), followed by Flixter (6%), LinkedIn (2%) and Twitter (2%). The research quoted above also mentions the fact that from a demographic point of view, young people are prevalent on these socializing networks, being more interested in taking part to such a community than older people.

The purpose of the present study is to try to compensate for such limits by showing the meanings that the users attribute to the experiences of their online activity on the social network sites, preferring a qualitative approach of the studied issue.

I have thus had two main analysis objectives:

The first objective was identifying the similarities between the multitude of actions and the motivations that lie at the basis of the user's "Self"-disclosure for the members of two social network sites: Facebook and HI5.

The second objective aimed at delimiting the differentiation points regarding the appreciations and the motivations of the two social network sites users' online behavior.

The theoretic background

In our analysis we started from two main theoretic directions.

Firstly, we used as starting point the "dramaturgic theory" developed by Goffman in his study "The presentation of Self in everyday life" (Goffman, 1956), stating that the study of social network systems can be connected to the study of the mechanisms and practices related to the presentation of one's identity. Referring to the social network sites users' virtual presentations, boyd (2006; 2007) thinks that in the online environment we witness the revealing of unprecedented information about a person, especially those involving certain psychological qualities which are not easily perceived in the offline environment. Thus, articulating all the social network sites –more precisely the public disclosure of the connexions to these sites- implicately verifies a user's identity. In other words, the friends' network on these sites serves at building the claims for a truthful identity of the user and remains a guarantee of the correctness of those data. boyd and Heer (2004) think that:

"[on the profile] users do not just depict themselves, but help shape the representation of others on the system."

Building the self in a virtual medium functions as an essential context for further interaction. At the same time, this context is an equivalent of a dynamic performative

commitment at the dialogue level for as long as the participants communicate through public statements, photo comments, friendship requests and interests updates. Interactions with friends form the essence of the online social networking. After creating one's own profile and adding other profiles as "friends", users search for new friends crossing thus a part of the already existing network (boyd, 2006).

The second research direction used in the present article was offered by the theoretic approach of the "Uses and gratifications". The theory initiated by Katz (Katz, 1989) has differentiated for a long time between what media does to people and what people do with the media. The studies from this theoretic paradigm tried to understand why people use the media and why they make certain choices and take certain actions connected to the media. This is considered to be an active process.

Nowadays, the meaning of the interaction changed considerably in the context of the recent development of the internet, as Ruggiero shows (2000):

"The *Uses and gratifications* theory has always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium: newspapers, radio and television, and now the Internet. Although scientists are likely to continue using traditional tools and typologies to answer questions about media use, we must also be prepared to expand our current theoretical models of uses and gratifications".

The progress in computer mediated communication urged again towards putting into practice the uses and gratifications theory in the study of the media (Chung, Kim, 2008; Yoo, Robbins, 2008; Diddi, LaRose, 2006; Ferguson, Greer, Reardon, 2007; Li, 2005). Thus some of the analyses of the motivations that lie at the basis of the network sites use (Ofcom, 2008) focused especially on these networks users' behavior (Hargittai, 2007).

Research premises

In the present article we started from the standard definition of "computer mediated communication", seen as an exchange or a "flow" of information between a sender and a receiver, which involves using the computer or other computerized media electronic devices (Sproull, Kiesler, 1996; McClure, Bishop, Doty, Rosenbaum, 1991). The study of social network sites is connected to the analysis of the mechanisms and practices of presenting one's identity. Regarding the composition of this virtual identity (online) we considered that

it is formed of several segments. On the one hand, it's about a series of specific cultural models included in the profiles on the social network site (Liu, Maes, Davenport, 2006). On the other hand, it's about the technical skills that the user of a social network site possesses (boyd, 2007; Perkel, 2006). Thirdly, we considered that this concept also includes constituent, structural elements of the interactions performed by the users of social network sites, especially the communicational feedback with their friends (Golder, Wilkinson, Huberman, 2006). The aspects related to feelings such as safety or the risks of losing other members' credibility (Henderson, Gilding, 2004) were the fourth dimension included in the larger concept of "computer mediated communication".

In this way, we distinguished between four main analysis dimensions: the Sender's identity, the Use of social networks, Communicational feedback, Personal safety.

The method

The present study used as specific method the interview, the data being collected through the intermediate of the semi-structured interview guide. It included a series of indicators and variables existing on an empiric level.

The gathering of the data took place in April – May 2010 period. The sampling plan used was the "snowball" type. The volume of the sample was 56 responding subjects; more precisely we interviewed 14 boys and 42 girls. The criterion for the subjects' selection was "the use of online socializing networks" (Facebook and/ or HI5).

The final structure of the sample was the following one: 14 male subjects and 42 female subjects. Regarding the distribution on age groups: 11 subjects were between 15 – 18 years old; 28 subjects were between 19-24 years old and 9 subjects were between 25 – 34 years old. According to the level of education, 4 subjects graduated from high school or professional school, 14 were still students in a high school or professional school; 30 were students at the university; 5 had university degrees, 3 had post-university studies and one was still enrolled in a post-university studies program.

The interview guide was given to the respondents through the intermediate of the two networks - Facebook and HI5.

The application of the interview guide took place in the respondents' "natural medium" namely through the Internet– "Yahoo Messenger".

Although at the beginning the objective was to interview two particular categories of users – Facebook versus HI5 users, later there were three categories involved: Facebook

users, HI5 users and users of both Facebook and HI5 (the majority of Facebook users also had/have a HI5 account and the other way round).

In the case of Facebook the sub-sample of the users who only had a Facebook account was formed of 12 active users out of whom 7 girls and 5 boys were interviewed. For HI5 the sub-sample of users who only had a HI5 account had a volume of 9 active users, out of whom one boy and eight girls were interviewed.

Analysis and results

There are many studies that analyse both the activities involved in using social network sites and the members' motivations for such actions. In the ethnographic study on "Friendster" and "My Space" (boyd, 2006; boyd, 2004) d. boyd analysed the way in which social network sites' users experiment with building their identity using technology to articulate their online and offline social relations. The results showed (Boyd, 2006) that the members of the network were differently motivated when using this site, namely staying in contact with old friends, meeting new persons, dating and developing professional social networks. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2006) studied the extent to which Facebook members used in the online medium previously existing offline relations or were trying to develop new relations. The results of their analysis (Ellison, Steinfield, Lampe, 2006) showed that almost all (94%) Facebook users were in the first case.

The data of our research indicate as main reason for joining a social network site either "the novelty" (Facebook case) or "the notoriety" understood as reputation and size of the network in the case of the Romanian users (situation described by HI5 members).

For its users, Facebook has the capacity of offering a lot of benefits, the most important being the possibility for registered users to find friends – more precisely the capacity to put them into contact with various users all over the world, not just from their native town or country.

Box 1 – The reason for which Facebook is on top of the users' preferences

It is used by the majority of my acquaintances and friends. Strong points: format, options, decency. Weak points: they don't have a solid security system able to offer at least average protection. (Narcis, 27 years old)
These are the most popular; moreover all my friends use them. (Alina, 21 years old)

On the other hand, the majority of the subjects who are exclusively HI5 users stated that when they chose this network they were highschool students. So, the reason was mostly

belonging to a certain age group and to its values: the users chose HI5 because it was “trendy”, being a network devoted especially to that age category. The main reason was: “It’s the place where you can keep your friends close or even make new ones.”

Box 2 – HI5 is a high school students’ network

Only one – HI% for 4 years, I have decided this influenced by my friends; reasons: socializing, games. (Flori, 22 years old)
I only have a HI5 account, as far as I know ...:) I have had it for a while I think for about 4 years and to be honest I don’t know why a created the account... the herd effect ☺, or maybe also the fact that I had an easy access to my pictures in case I needed one. (Livia, 22 years old)

The “friendlier” features of HI5 – it’s easier to handle, it’s very simple to use it – this is another reason invoked by those who chose to be HI5 members. However, the “friendly” features of the network are also to be found on Facebook, the respondents failing to notice major differences between the two social network sites.

Table 1 – One or several active accounts on socializing sites?

Facebook	HI5
<i>No. One is enough. I wouldn’t activate others because this wouldn’t improve my life or relations. (Narcis, 27 years old)</i>	<i>I don’t want to activate other accounts on other networks. One network is enough, as it is universal. (Florentina, 30 years old)</i>
<i>No. I think one is enough. I don’t have time for others. (Magda, 26 years old)</i>	<i>Yes, I would like a Facebook account because I fell prey again to the same influences, of which I am now fully aware though. The majority of the people I know recommend this social network and are also registered there; I wouldn’t register because I know I would waste too much time with artificial communication. (Flori, 22 years old)</i>
<i>I don’t think I would activate another account on another network because the one I have now on Facebook is more than enough. (Emilia, 18 years old).</i>	

Out of the total of Facebook users eleven respondents stated that they didn’t want to activate another account on another social network site. Their motivation could be summed up as follows: the contentment with the services and the quality of Facebook socializing network, the lack of time and last but not least, the fact that they don’t see the point of using a new network². Regarding the reasons for which most of HI5 users wouldn’t activate another account on another network, they are exclusively subjective: lack of time, commodity, satisfaction, the lack of utility in creating another account.

Analyzing the development of online interpersonal relations Parks and Floyd (1996) discovered that 60% of the interviewed subjects established online relations. Thus, in their opinion (Parks, Floyd, 1996: 25):

“the growth of computer-mediated communication poses new challenges for our understanding of social relationships both in cyberspace and in general”.

The internet becomes a place for developing and refining social relations (Parks, Floyd, 1996), social network sites encouraging this phenomenon. Regarding the results of our analysis the subjects’ answers seem to confirm an old Romanian saying: “Birds of a feather flock together”. Both Facebook and HI5 are virtual groups of persons with obvious similarities in the virtual medium.

Referring to online “Self”-disclosure, Wheelless and Grotz (1976) state that (Wheelless, Grotz, 1976: 338):

“a self-disclosure is any message about the self that a person communicates to another”.

Self-disclosure is a key-element in the relations development because it favours approach (Derlega, Winstead, Wong, Greenspan, 1987). Moreover, it plays a vital role in the case of growing relations and in each partner’s contentement degree.

Table 2 – The dimension of online self-disclosure

Facebook	HI5
<i>Contact information, education, photos, favorite webpages and groups. (Raluca, 21 years old)</i>	<i>On my profile I included my nickname, my favorite movies and the music I usually listen to, a few of my favorite bands, languages that I speak, my interests, my date of birth, my favorite TV show and quotation (HI5) and on Stargames I also put my e-mail. (Andreea, 20 years old)</i>
<i>A minimum of contact information and sometimes a favorite quotation. (Narcis, 27 years old)</i>	<i>Biographic data (to let everyone see my target group – namely young people), education information (especially education), favorite movies, books, a lot of deep quotations which for me became almost creeds (but I am sure that my depth is already crippled by the disadvantages of virtual communication), I also wrote a few words in the diary section which should have been more of an article to promote honesty, culture and love. (Flori, 22 years old)</i>
<i>First name, last name, city, date of birth. (Radu, 17 years old)</i>	

The answers to the question referring to the type of information included on the profile from social network sites show a certain “reluctance” of the Romanian users. In the case of both Facebook and HI5 users, the data which were made public in the virtual profile had

general characteristics. The main reason for such decision was that the users are trying to increase their own safety inside the social network.

Regarding the types of activities in the virtual medium, the answers we received allowed us to emphasize certain “regularities” in the users’ activity. Among the daily Facebook and HI5 routine activities we can mention: visiting the “home” page – the place where one can find news about one’s friends – uploading new photos, commenting on statuses, games and socializing with new or old³ friends.

As Gross and Acquisti pointed out (Gross, Acquisti, 2005) there is a tendency of the social network sites members to use in their profile presentation the real name, identifiable photos, the achieved education level, political ideas, sexual orientation and relationship status. Nevertheless, such extremely detailed presentations can cause problems in their turn. On the one hand, an abundance of personal details build a profile through which the users reveal their online thoughts and behavior. On the other hand, social network sites can be thus an easy prey for online personal data trafficking (Stutzman, 2006). This is precisely why the persons criticizing social networks warn us: If this information is not secure, then private life could be endangered (Barnes, 2006).

Gross and Acquisti (2005) show that a careless and permissive attitude towards life and personal data can have a series of risky results for social network sites users (Facebook or HI5 type) (Acquisti and Gross, 2006; Stutzman, 2006).

Table 3 – (In)Security on social networks?

Facebook	HI5
<p><i>I feel safe firstly because I take care what sort of personal information I make public on such sites. Of course, in the IT medium the crime rate is very high and various and unfortunately for the moment security only means the measures taken by the sites administrators. (Raluca, 21 years old)</i></p> <p><i>I feel somewhere in between secure and insecure. ☺ Although my friends alone have access to my profile, there are always means of breaking into an account. (Magda, 26 years old)</i></p>	<p><i>YES, I feel safe on the sites where I have accounts because I didn't enter any information or photos that could be interpreted. (Andreea, 20 years old)</i></p> <p><i>I don't feel very secure, there's too much transparency... and on the internet only God knows what these IT geniuses might come up with next. (Livia, 21 years old)</i></p>

The respondents’ perception of the “security” issue on social network sites shows that they have a pretty realistic image of the potential risks. Thus, both Facebook and HI5 users think that safety on an online network is relative and at the same time directly proportional to

a member's published information: the more ostentatious is the personal information they published, the less safe the social network becomes.

For Facebook users the measures they take for securing their social networks are strictly connected to the information posted on their standard profile and the internal settings: *"I protect myself by posting a minimum level of information and accepting on my list only known persons."* (Narcis, 27 years old); *"To give you more realistic examples on Facebook I restrict my profile visibility (only friends can view my profile), I accept friendship requests only from my friends' friends, I control the possibility of having my profile searched on Facebook etc."* (Alina, 21 years old)"

Choosing not to post personal information (phone number, address etc) increases the safety degree on a social network, HI5 users stated. At the same time, the internal profile settings may be of a crucial importance regarding the HI5 users' safety according to these subjects: *"For the safety of our online profiles, we can choose who will have access to our profile and data. Those whom we don't know could be prevented from viewing our profile. (Andreea, 20 years old)"*

However, what are the differences in between the two social networks – namely Facebook and HI5? According to the answers we received from our subjects, the differences were not major but they had the role of influencing the choice of one or the other.

Among the people who only use Facebook, a significant number stated that they were active in the past on the competing network – HI5 – but out of more or less subjective reasons they decided to disable that account. The moment the account – on HI5 in this case – was disabled coincided with the appearance of a rejection reaction towards this social network site. The data indicate to this effect that the present Facebook users, former HI5 users, have a negative attitude towards the network they are no longer active on: *"I erased my HI5 account because I didn't like anymore the messages I was receiving, the quality of the people writing to me, and the standard flirty lines I received from who knows what guys. Too many available girls, boys who were only interested in flirting, I think these are the persons who resort to HI5. It is getting spoiled and lacks the quality it previously had. It's not professional at all, it's rather a kitsch. (Elena, 22 years old); I think I erased my HI5 account (if not I think it got disabled because I haven't signed in for a long time), the reason being the fact that it became "full" of all sorts of strange people. (Gabriel, 28 years old)"*.

The most frequently stated reason by the former HI5 users is connected to this parasite site members' quality, who are characterized as "freaks", "circus idiots" etc⁴.

After these interviews, we can say that the results we obtained indicate a “sudden” wish of the subjects who have active accounts on both sites. To be more precise, these subjects stated they wanted to detach themselves from HI5 in the near or distant future.

At the same time, respondents who still have a HI5 account would like to register on Facebook and implicitly to erase their present account (on HI5). There could be one more category – the “faithful HI5 users” – namely the respondents who activated a Facebook account out of sheer curiosity, erasing it afterwards due to the previously mentioned reasons: *“Yes, I also had a Facebook account but it seemed too much for me and as HI5 was the first I disabled the second. (Florentina, 30 years old) There is this Facebook trend nowadays, so I registered out of curiosity, to see what’s new over there. I noticed that it is similar to HI5, being both social entertainment sites so I erased the account. I thought it is useless to have two similar accounts and to exhibit my photos on all the sites. (Andreea, 20 years old).*

One could notice that in this case, as in all other domains, the idea of novelty draws the social network sites users’ attention, managing to determine the members to give up what has been until recently part of their “lives” – as HI5 was – in favour of the newly-arrived Facebook.

Conclusions

According to the existing statistical data for Romania (Mercury Research, 2009) in 2009⁵, the Romanian internet users aged between 18 – 24 years old were the most active users on online networks as both membership and sign in frequency. Only 20% of the young people who belong to this age segment didn’t have an account on at least one of the mentioned social networks, the opposite being represented by the persons over 45 years old, 80% of them not being registered in any online community.

A comparison between the different social network sites (Mercury Research, 2009) showed the fact that HI5 members were more open towards new friends or groups, having an average of 140 friends on their network. At the same time, approximately a fifth (17%) of HI5 members were registered in another social group. On the other hand, the average connexions number on the socializing platform was more than four times smaller in the case of Facebook, only 9% of the users being members of another group as well. Regarding the sign in frequency more than half of Facebook and HI5 members access their personal account at least once a week. Thus, 70% of HI5 members aged 18 – 24 years old sign in at least once a week, as compared to a third of the users aged 25 – 34 years old. In the case of Facebook, 74% of the young people aged 18 – 24 access their account at least once a week, as compared

to 45% of the users aged 25 – 34. In the case of this socializing network, women are more active, 22% having an account, while men are less interested, only 10% being present on Facebook. The study notices the fact that the majority of the interviewed internet users have accounts on several social networks, an average of two social communities (Mercury Research, 2009).

The results of our study firstly indicate that the membership on an online network or the other is not exclusive and generally, the persons active in social communities have accounts on several online networks, an average of two communities, as the online interviews show..

Referring to the first objective of the present article (identifying any similarities between Facebook and HI5 users) the answers regarding online Self-disclosure and relations in a virtual medium indicate a certain resemblance between the two considered sub-samples. Interpersonal relations through social network sites are governed by both computer mediated communication and the dynamics of the face-to-face interaction. The resulting relation is a mixture of these two elements. According to Goffman (1959) Self-disclosure is not just a conscious act but also an interactive exchange. This interactivity lies at the very basis of social network sites so that an adequate “cyberSelf”-disclosure (Olaniran, 2001) is an essential component for an active participation on such social networks. A higher level of self-disclosure is a direct positive correlation with the number of one’s friends on social network sites which an individual must reach (Lampe et al., 2006, 2007).

At the same time, the data showed that the resemblances between the two categories of users (Facebook vs, HI5) are relatively important in what concerns both self-disclosure and establishing online friendship relations. The results back up previous researches on self-disclosure which considered trust as an essential element in developing online relationships. This is because trust is the foundation for both online and offline relations (Olaniran, 2004; Walther, 1994; Wheelless, Grotz, 1977; Jourard, 1971). HI5 as a social network site is associated with the idea of flirt, finding new friends, eventually finding your life mate, being meant for a certain social category, generally teenagers in their high school years. Facebook, is considered a more serious network, focusing rather on networking, and it is seen as created for another social category, more mature, profession and friendship-oriented (less for online dating).

Regarding the second objective of our present article (delimiting differentiation points related to the appreciations and motivations of the two social network sites members’ online behavior) the differences we perceived allowed us to “theoretically” build some distinct user profiles. Thus, HI5 users’ characteristics, as they came out in our analysis, were the

following: they were individuals for whom belonging to a group is essential, who kept up with the new trends, who wanted to be informed about what is “trendy” and adopted a new tendency (behavioral or linguistic) as soon as it became popular. HI5 users were persons who wanted to impress and they were mostly persons who still haven’t graduated from high school at the moment of the interview.

Our study reinforced Rheingold’s conception (1993) according to whom, online virtual communities are (Rheingold, 1993: 5):

“Social aggregations that emerge when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships (in cyberspace)”.

In a similar way, the data show that in the case of the Romanian users of the two social network sites - Facebook and HI5 – there appears the phenomenon of “virtual stakes” competing during the online activity (Feenberg, Bakardjieva, 2004).

On the basis of the information provided by a specific age group – teenagers and young people – we can say that our results are close to boyd’s thesis (2008) according to which the essential characteristics of the social network sites technology– “persistence, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences” (boyd, 2008: 22) – help creating a strong normative lifestyle for today’s young people. This online normativity is important for young people and teenagers because this is how they negotiate their social identities’ construction. For the young Romanian users of social network sites (e.g. Facebook si HI5) the answer to the question: “Why should I register on a social network?” could be summed up the following way: “I register on a social network site because all my friends already have an account there.”. In other words, like in the case of young people and teenagers from other countries, and as the specialty literature shows (Schaefer, 2008; Lampe et al., 2007; Ellison et al., 2007; Fono, Raynes-Goldie, 2006; Holme et al., 2004; Maia, Almeid, Almeida, 2008; Choi, 2006; Govani, Pashley, 2005; Gross, Acquisti, 2005; Ahn, Han, Kwak, Moon, Jeong, 2007; Dwyer, Hiltz, Passerini, 2007; Lenhart, Madden, 2007; Donath and boyd, 2004; Kreps, 2008) the idea of belonging as a member to a social network site is associated to the desire of integrating and being accepted in a group as equal (in age and preoccupations), to the desire of not losing contact with friends, to the appropriate medium for setting up a new friendship and at the same time, relaxing, and having a great free time.

Notes

¹ The study was made online by Mercury Research in November 2009, on a sample of 301 internet users from the urban environment, aged 18-64 years old (Mercury Research, 2009)

¹ In this context, we can also mention an exception: one of the respondents said she would like to activate an account on another socializing site (LinkedIn), this time the reasons being strictly professional.

¹ The majority of the respondents who use Facebook said that profile data changes are not among the activities made on social network sites. Moreover, according to the answers during the interviews, the frequency of changing profile data is extremely reduced – from “very rarely” to “at all/ never” – the only changes being made when there is a significant event. Regarding HI5 users, the majority of the respondents declared that the profile data changes are not among the socializing network activities, on the contrary, their frequency is extremely reduced – from very seldom to none at all – the only changes being made when a significant event happens. We can notice both a visible enough negligence and a lack of interest for this type of activity (for several consigned answers).

¹ For example, I heard such answers related to giving up HI5 accounts: *Hi5 – I don't like it much, but it's a "legacy" account and it's ok out there. (Silviu, 22 years old); I use HI5 more and more rarely. I am not necessarily looking for new friends anymore. (Ileana, 21 years old); I sign in on HI5 less and less frequently because I don't find it attractive anymore. (Raluca, 21 years old)*

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