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THE DIGITAL AGE: VIRTUALIZATION OF THE COMMUNITY

Tarihsel ve Sosyolojik Gerçeklikten Dijital Çağın Sanallığına: Cemaatin
Sanallaşması

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Öz

‘Cemaat’ sosyal bir varlık olan insanın insanlık tarihinin ilk günlerinden itibaren kendisini içinde bulunduğu sosyal birimdir. Çoğunlukla da ailedir, köy, mahalledir, akraba topluluklarıdır. Fakat her geçen gün daha fazla küresel unsurların hâkimiyeti altına giren dünyada sürekli olarak yeni topluluklar ve kimlikler oluşmaktadır. Bunlar çoğu durumda, yapmacık, sahte topluluk duygusu veren oluşumlardır. Sanal cemaat ise bu oluşumların en bilinenidir. Fakat ne var ki bunlar geleneksel cemaatlerin yerini dolduramamaktadırlar. Yeni ilişkiler biçimlerine giren insanlar, bu yeni ortamda kendilerine ait kuralları ve bu sanal gruplar içerisindeki davranış şekillerini belirleyerek alternatif bir sanal kültür oluşturuyorlar. Bu kültürün sınırlarını ya da içeriğini de sanal cemaat üyeleri belirlemektedir. Belirlenen kültürel unsurlar internetin kendine özgü dili aracılığıyla sanal cemaat üyelerine aktarılmaktadır. Bu araştırma, sanal cemaatlerin hangi şartlarda doğduğunu, oluşum sürecinin genel gidişatının özelliklerinin neler olduğunu, işlevinin neler olduğunu belirlemek amacıyla yapılmıştır. Konu bağlamında detaylı bir şekilde mevcut literatür incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cemaat, Sanal Cemaat, Sanallaşma, Kültür, Sanal

Abstract

‘Community’ is the social unit in which man, who is a social being, has been present since the first days of human history. It is generally the family, village, neighborhood and relatives. However, new communities and identities, which are increasingly dominated by global elements, are constantly emerging in the world. They are usually formations that give the impression of factitious and false communities. The virtual community is the most well-known one among these formations. However, they cannot take the place of traditional communities. In this new environment, the people entering into new forms of relationship constitute an alternative virtual culture by identifying their own rules and behavior within these virtual groups. The boundaries or content of this culture are determined by the members of the virtual community. The cultural elements that are determined are transmitted to the members of the virtual community through a language peculiar to the internet. This research aims to determine the conditions under which virtual communities are formed, what the characteristics of the general course of the formation process are and what their functions are. The existing literature has been examined in detail in the context of the issue.

Keywords: Community, Virtual Community, Virtualization, Culture, Virtual

Introduction

To put it with the most well-known definition, human is a social being. This being, which is born as a ‘human being’ in the physiological sense and dimension, is transformed into a real ‘human being’ with his attitudes and behaviors, emotions and preferences, consciousness and will, etc. in and by the society. Society is formed by the individuals who have become ‘human’. There is a mutual cause-effect relationship between society and human. However, no matter how it starts, the priority belongs to the society in the process. The individual is born in society and becomes human in ‘society’. When the known or predicted history of the whole human history is considered, the name of the structure called ‘society’ is not always and even generally ‘society’. The common form of ‘society’ in the history of humanity whose past dates back to the unknown depths of time, was formed by units called ‘communities’ in the sociological sense and naming. Family, clan, tribe, neighborhood, village, relatives, etc. constituted the most common forms of the community. With the formation of the urban community under the influence of trade, security needs and religion, humanity faced a new and different type of society that had not been known until then; this type of society has continued to develop by growing, multiplying and becoming more dominant over many of the other society units. The famous sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies dealt with the recent situation in society types as of the 20th century in two different categories with the words *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society) and tried to determine the characteristics of these two distinct social conditions. According to Tönnies (Bond, 2009: 165-167) ‘community’ is a state of sociality composed of people who have common life experiences (traditions) and care about these experiences. People live under the dominance of ‘we’ in this structure; there is no individuality; the individual does not perceive himself as a subject; he interprets and defines himself with reference to his community. There is

sincerity, emotionality and sacrifice among the community. Solidarity is built with sincerity; and responsibility is shared with the same sincere acceptance. Although, some difficulties -such as; drug, alcohol, unemployment and low education level (Robertson, 2011: 1-10)- emerge out of community, solidarity might improve the lives of negatively affected members within community. Thus, there is a strong spirit of solidarity among the members of the community. Solidarity is the most characteristic feature of the community. Surveillance is carried out through unwritten norms in communities. Status, economical, socio-cultural, socio-political statuses are inherited and represented throughout life. Responsibilities and social relations are inseparable in communities. Social change is slow. On the other hand, relationships and social control are ensured by legal rules and written contracts in the *gesellschaft* type social structure (society). Emotionality is weak and rationality is strong in relationships. Sacrifice is weak; individual expectations and personal interests are strong. People perceive themselves as individuals. Commitment to space and to the common past (tradition) is weak. The city is a typical *gesellschaft*; metropolises represent the ideal state of being *gesellschaft*.

In addition to the community structure, which was dominant in a great part of the history of humanity, the city phenomenon that functions differently than the community structures emerged; a conflicting relationship has developed to a large extent between these two forms of sociality (community-society). While the community structures tried to open a new living space within the structure of the society either as they were or by partially transforming themselves in some areas (such as fellow townsman groups), the structure of the society and the way that this structure worked deconstructed the communities to a large extent in terms of structure, interrupted their working style or changed and transformed them in terms of both structure and working style. A typical example of it is the family institution, which is the

most basic unit of community. The family institution shrank structurally and weakened functionally as the structure of the society became widespread and dominant, and based on the effect of production-consumption relationships, which were required by society life, and the effects of values and norms. The social gender roles of the family members, which were based on a long-standing tradition, changed radically, and some of the statuses and roles that individuals respected either disappeared or were transformed. For this reason, whether the family, which is one of the most fundamental institutions of humanity, disappeared or not and whether it will continue to live in the future or not started to become a very important issue on the agenda of the people, concerned with the issue, and the experts beginning from the years of the Industrial Revolution, when the process of change and transformation became a very important and frequent topic of discussion. These discussions still exist today and have been on the agenda of even the man in the street.

This article focuses on the features of the virtual community. It is examined how the virtual community was formed and what results it caused. While doing this, the literature has been examined. The findings in the literature were determined. The subject is new yet. The subject will be examined in more detail in the future. However, the boundaries of the subject must be clearly laid out today. This article is intended to do this.

Virtual Community

Virtual and Virtuality

The virtualization of time, space, identities, community, religion, sexuality, etc. or the formation of their virtual versions is often mentioned in today's world. What is virtuality? Many definitions and explanations that may answer this question have been made. According to Oral (2005:92), the word 'virtual' is generally used in connection with the environment built by the internet technology. This usage refers to an environment and process in which there is no meeting in terms of the body/physical space, participants can meet

only through the messages they exchange via the internet technology, and relationships take place not face-to-face but only through voice, video and correspondence. This placeless space, in which 'bodiless communities' are formed, is far from the qualifications of the real world but it leads to the perception that we are confronted with a completely different world; therefore it is described as 'virtual'. According to Oral, the place of the virtual environment is the internet. People come together in a virtual environment based on the opportunities provided by the internet and create new groups and communities. The word virtual defines events or phenomena that exist in terms of effect but do not actually exist. Moreover, according to Star Roxanne Hiltz and Barry Wellman, another definition of the 'virtual' has been made that "the primary interaction is electronic or enabled by technology. This type of computer-mediated communication (CMC) allows people to locate and talk to others with similar interests, thereby forming and sustaining virtual communities (Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 2017)." Additionally, another definition of 'virtual' according to Charles Handy is that "the 'virtual' part of the term 'virtual community' indicates without a physical place as a home (Handy 1995)." In sum, virtual community is a digital environment in which individuals, entities, groups and organizations encounter and interact with other users in virtual, nonphysical space. This interactions with each other is mainly social or economic interactions (Saunders, 2011:1081).

Virtuality and Network Society

Definitions of 'virtual community', which have very little differences of meaning from one another, are widely used in literature today. One of them is Robins' well-accepted definition. According to Robins, virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Robins, 1999:143). According to Jan

Van Dijk (b. 1952), who has made valuable studies on ‘network society’ and has an important place in communication theories, ‘virtual community’ is a way of social organization in which net users who cannot come together due to many reasons like their lifestyles interact with one other independent of time and physical environment (Van Dijk, 2012:166). Wellman-Gulia define ‘virtual community’ as ‘social networks’ that emerge through internet applications like e-mail, BBS, newsgroups and IRC and provide their members with friendship, information sharing and a sense of belongingness (Barry and Gulia, 1997: 169). Bradford W. Hesse’s understanding of virtual community is also included in the literature. According to Hesse, the structure called ‘virtual community’ is a community that is realized by technologies designed for information, and it does not have geographical limitations. As it is seen, ‘being isolated from physical space’ is an important criterion in Hesse’s definition. According to Hesse (1995:478), communication and interaction in the virtual community takes place through the ‘information highway’ unlike the community structure, which is the product of communication and interaction among physically close individuals in the previous community structures. Transnational communication networks encourage people not only to buy products of the cultural industry, but also to join communities and alliances that cross-cultural boundaries such as class, race and nation. The use of music and style to express new identities is remarkable. These new forms of expressing identity, which Hebdige (1995: 92) calls ‘emotional communities’ are types of connections made possible by communication systems. Social structures like emotional communities show that identities can never be fixed in modern times.

There are also those who are critical of the phenomenon of the virtual community and claim that virtual communities are in fact ‘pseudo-communities’. Some individuals who oppose the views and thoughts that evaluate the ‘virtual community’ with a positive approach state that the most

important feature of the virtual communities is their distance from sincerity. According to them, virtual communities claim that people have the potential to direct their existing relationships in real life to undesirable directions. They state that virtual community relationships prevent people from fulfilling their responsibilities in real life and weaken their valuable and real relationships with their families, children, spouses and friends. The objections to the responses to this critical approach include the claims that the internet or virtual community relationships do not steal individuals' valuable time to be spent with their families and work but that they reduce their television viewing time and that virtual community relationships provide an important opportunity for everybody, particularly for disabled, ill and old people. They state that it is wrong to identify the virtual community with Tönnies' community (gemeinschaft) though there are some similarities in terms of belongingness because Tönnies' community is a defense environment against external threats and dangers whereas the virtual community has no 'other' and that it is built based on the individual's own will and desire (Bozkurt, 2006: 91,92).

Development Process of Virtual Community

What are the historical conditions behind the formation of the virtual community? It is necessary to look at the conditions of the formation and development process of modernity in order to understand this. The most characteristic feature of modernity is reactance: it was built as a reaction to the mentality and lifestyle dominant in the medieval Catholic world. Due to its reactance, it regarded the existing community structures, which were among the important elements of the historical and social conditions (traditional structure) in which they emerged, as a problem. It was thought that the establishment of modernity, which advocated the abandonment of the traditional values, understandings and lifestyle based on transcendent values and beliefs and the acceptance of immanent values, understandings and lifestyle, could only be achieved by the disintegration of the traditional

community structures. It was not only necessary but also obligatory for modernity because the backbone of the traditional social structure and living styles, against which modernity built itself, were formed by community structures and the community spirit; this structure and spirit surrounded the individual like insurmountable and unbending armor. It was necessary for modernity to destroy all traditional community armor in order to build the individual severed from its traditional ties to be processed easily and shaped as desired because community structures prevented modernity from building the individual it wanted. Therefore, primarily the traditional family institution, followed by traditional neighborhood-village structures, guild system, and social structures based on the union of religion were rapidly disintegrated. This disintegration and change did not take place with individual and social subjects but as the natural necessity of the process, with the principles, understanding and acceptance of the modern mentality because the unity of the traditional and the modern could not be possible: it was 'a case of either this or that'. The traditional mentality and lifestyle struggling to survive under historical and cultural burdens could not stand against the dynamic and new modernity. Modernity demolished the traditional society building and mentality and broke them into the smallest building blocks. However, it did not neglect to benefit from the experiences of the traditional period while constructing its own building and world; in fact, it had to benefit from them because cement was needed to connect the bricks of the community building, whose cement was 'religion' and 'belief', and it was necessary to invent the new cement to replace the old one. This cement turned out to be 'nationalism'. In fact, both religion and nationalism took strength from the holy. Religion has transcendental references and nationalism has immanent references. The holy of religion is transcendent, the holy of ideology is immanent. Nationalist ideology soon began to produce its own sociality. It managed to do it to a great extent. It built its own community, primarily the 'nation'. However, this

community is a much more imagined community than the traditional/organic community. First, it was first imagined and then was generally built by the will of the nation-state. However, the community structures of modernity began to disintegrate in the process of globalization because the case of 'either this or that' was transformed into the case of 'both this and that'. The mentality and lifestyle, in which different people were separated and kept away from one another, were shifted to the mentality and lifestyle, in which different ones stood together and even one within another.

The loss of the power of the 'welfare state', which melted different cultures in the pot of nation through minimum trust and prosperity, has a major effect on the formation of the community that can be defined as postmodern (İnsel, 1996: 7,8; Castells, 2008: 398). In parallel with transition to the ideology of consumption, people in the overly bureaucratized and extremely rationalized modern industrial societies are reluctant to perform their social roles assigned by the social system in a life without naturality, originality and innovation, and try to retreat to their subculture islands with the hope of 'abandoning' the real society that they cannot change (Oskay, 1993: 410). There is a new state of acquiring identities brought about by the search for solidarity for the self-defense of individuals who were left vulnerable because the welfare state does not function as before. This change in the welfare state accelerates the return of new identities to communities. In this context, the explanation put forward by Richard Sennett (b. 1943) is important. According to Sennett (2012: 119- 137), who examined the effects of capitalism on personality, there is a connection between the orientation towards community today and the economic system. The increase in the number of people failing in the modern capitalist system makes a larger feeling of community inevitable. The simplest definition of such postmodern communities was made by Bauman (1925-2017): the 'single problem' formations reduced to the lowest smallest common denominator and brought together around a subject

(Bauman, 2011: 176). Bauman's approach is only one of the efforts to conceptualize the communities that emerged in the process of disintegration of the total structures formed by modernity. The idea underlying Bauman's approach is the meaning of the term 'the Time of the Tribes', which Michel Maffesoli (b. 1944) gave to the sociology of the community. Maffesoli (1996:19) explained the search for the community today as 'tribe' and 'tribalism' in the metaphorical sense. This 'tribalism' refers to the framing of values and ideals that are the subject of social networking with localization. While establishing his own definition, Bauman confirms that we are in the era of 'tribe' and 'tribalism', whether postmodern or not, in addition to Maffesoli's approach. He even says with a further description that the postmodern age is the 'age of community' of the 'lust for community', 'search for community', 'invention of community' and 'imagining community' (Bauman, 2003: 315).

Human and Virtual Community

Human, who is as mentioned a social being, cannot do and be without a 'community'; 'community' environment/relationship becomes meaningful for the individual as the basic and natural need of his existence. Therefore, when an individual is 'without a community', he 'gets hungry', 'gets thirsty' and builds the opportunities and conditions to meet this need. In fact, what happens in modern-postmodern times, which are essentially opposed to all the community structures, is nothing else. In this respect, it is important that 'lust for community', mentioned by Bauman, is important. Although the term 'lust for community' has a nostalgic meaning that may lead to misunderstandings, it can be a good evaluation criterion in understanding the reasons for the formation of the 'virtual community' and the way it works. 'Lust for community' becomes meaningful as a requirement of the fact that 'the area of sociality cannot remain empty' (Bauman, 2011:173) in a world where previously experienced natural/organic human associations are disintegrating.

However, the natural/organic sociality that will satisfy this 'lust' is neither left nor desired. 'Suppression of lust' is preferred. Virtual communities are the product of this. Individuals think they are 'full up', but the truth is not like that at all. Psychological problems and social conflicts occurring at global or local, individual or social level are the concrete products of this. The human individual tries to survive in life, on a loose ground, under the guidance of a mentality focused on filling the moment with pleasure because the built postmodern societies cannot be more than 'undeveloped tribes' as Eulman (2011:175) puts it. This description is related to the unidimensionality of the allegiances in the tribe in question. The fact that they offer unidimensional identities rather than a more encompassing identity in ethnic, regional, sexual, religious and cultural areas causes these tribes to remain 'undeveloped' compared to their traditional examples.

The 'possibility' of leaving the virtual community easily and the abundance of alternative community options prevent the long-term 'netizen' settlement in any cyber space. Citizens of the Internet world are on the move in the immense cyberspace without difficulty and without encountering a situation that requires them to pay the price. Komito (1998: 102) explains this state with the metaphor of 'hunter/gatherer societies'. According to him, in the context of physical space, communities based on physical closeness are associations with clearly defined objective and intellectual boundaries. However, hunter-gatherer groups were the temporary association of individuals. The feeling of common identity in the hunter-gatherer groups was rather weak. Therefore, belonging to a group could easily be realized and it was quite easy to terminate the belongingness, just like today's virtual community memberships. Netizens lack the capacity to create institutional solutions to the problems they experience because they often prefer 'emigrating' easily to accepting the decision of an authority or seeking compromise in a discussion. For this reason, there are very close similarities

between hunter-gatherer groups and netizens who have the opportunity to move in a large virtual space. The opportunity of flexible mobility that virtual spaces present to people caused Geser to make an interesting conclusion. According to Geser (2002: 11), the ever-present ease of exiting the virtual space and the widespread integration without the need for authoritative ruling eliminate the pressure to develop a Hobbesian social order in the virtual world.

Social networks ensure that the interaction among individuals is shaped according to the common values such as 'lifestyle', which they obtain in their lives, not according to the characteristics such as age, gender and race, which they obtain by birth (Haberli, 2014:91). This is a requirement of the changes and formations caused by the internet technology. Besides, they are not the only ones. It is also observed that people mention that socialities such as society, nation and class as the phenomena brought by modernity are coming to an end. Although the organized structure of the nation-state is still upright, the nation-community, which is the basis of legitimacy, has largely been dissolved. In other words, new social formations and calls for new communities exist together. The new forms of commitment, which are typical of the postmodern era, generally occur at the local level parallel to the process of globalization. This locality refers to an abstract space rather than a fixed space (land) emphasis. Nevertheless, this formation has the definitions of the community that is expressed as a network of social relations based on mutual and emotional ties (Bauman, 1998:173).

It is the product of the power of the new 'international' media system that is often overlooked. This power not only encourages people to buy products produced by their cultural industries, but also leads them to participate in the networks that provides forms of communities and alliances that transcend the boundaries of class, race, gender, region and national culture. Dick Hebdige (b.1951) calls them 'emotional communities'. Contrary to the communities of interests, some are usually utopian. The masses are now

being dissolved and replaced by forms of commitment with different dimensions that can change constantly. One of them is the ‘emotional communities’, which are considered to consist of communication systems. Contrary to the classical communities, which completely cover the life of the individual and which are connected to the land, blood, language, religion, ethnic and cultural structure, a new type of community that is formed in the latitude and longitude of the communication environment and whose coordinates constantly change by taking a piece from the elements mentioned above and by sometimes gathering in the rhythm of music or something else is in question. The starting point of this formation is the change of modern society (Hebdige 1995: 91).

Culture and Space in the Virtual Community

The culture of the virtual community, in other words, the virtual culture is a heterogeneous culture. It is a culture where everything and everyone can be there and on the agenda any time. The formation of this culture is not the product of a long process like the culture of the real community. The culture of the real community is based on the experience of past or present community members. This culture is the product of all past and present members of the community and is an element of the natural environment and relationships of all those members. However, the culture of the virtual community does not have a significant history; nor is it a factor that enables the solution of a systematic infiltration and the problems that arise in daily practice.

Virtual culture has no ‘the other’. As Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) puts it, virtual culture is the culture of the era in which ‘the other’ is eliminated (Baudrillard, 1998:128). In this culture, ‘loneliness’ is the most characteristic feature. Virtual communities fulfill the function of reducing the pain and severity of the feeling of loneliness, which is the most severe punishment that can be given to people, and reduce everything to instant emotions.

The essence of the traditional community is the feeling of 'space' and 'we'. The traditional community is located on a geography (home, village, neighborhood, country...) and has a physical space. There is a common way of life shared among the members of the community. The sharing of certain interests and values, the community members regarding one another valuable their ability to make sacrifices for one another, the domination of common moral values, cooperation, communication, continuity, stability and mutual responsibility are common and familiar features of the community. There is an underlying feeling of inadequacy in the community members (this feeling is the most important cause of solidarity. The feeling of inadequacy is compensated with the solidarity, and self-confidence is assured. Obedience, loyalty and love are values and criteria that shape the relationships among the community members. They overcome difficulties together; they share opportunities and risks. The feeling 'we', the desire to be together brought about by the common goals and problems and the feelings of living in solidarity originate from and are fed by the feeling of 'collective self' (Sennet, 2012:179).

The virtual community is an element of the virtual universe produced entirely by the internet technology. As it was stated in detail before, the term 'virtual' is generally used in the field of information technology and refers to things that are not completely present in the physical universe, and which are completely designed in the mind, such as concepts, thoughts and predictions. Bill Gates (b. 1955), one of the famous architects of the virtual world, also pointed out that the internet technology has the ability to bring people together without being limited by the factors of time and geography (Gates, 1998:139). The state of being 'unreal' included in virtuality is by no means a metaphysical situation that makes sense in philosophy. On the contrary, it is a state of simulation that is actually created in a highly mathematical description. However, the images it produces often place it in a position of higher

discourse. Whatever happens takes place entirely on the internet because now it is possible to establish the most realistic simulation environment in human perception mechanisms through computers and in the internet environment. In that case, however, 'virtual reality' inevitably acquires the function of intervening in cognitive processes, unlike the other areas of technology; it is even transformed into installed knowledge and a strategy (Ergur, 1998: 138–139).

Virtual communities do not have physical/geographic space like traditional ones. Virtual communities are located in 'cyberspace'. 'Cyberspace' was first included in science fiction novel. The inventor of the term is William Gibson (b. 1948), a science fiction novelist. William Gibson, coined the word 'cyberspace' to be a place for the phenomenon of virtual community in his novel as well as the state of 'disembodiment' related to the Internet. In real life, shortly after the novel in question, concerns about the loss of the body as an 'identity area' began to be expressed in the information age under the imagination of 'disembodiment' of internet users (Akkaş, 2015: 54,55). Gibson described 'cyberspace', which he invented as follows: 'A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts' (Gibson, 1998: 6). However, it is interesting that this hallucination has changed to a 'reality' that billions of users share and experience today.

Internet users are members of the cyber-society structure. They live in cyberspace. Cyber-society is nothing more than a network of electronic communications created by the worldwide network of the Internet users. The virtual reality that is built through the Internet and on the Internet, which is the new communication system, can embrace and integrate all forms of expressions, as well as differences of interests, values and imaginations, including the expression of social conflict, thanks to its diversity, multi-styles and efficiency. However, the price to be paid in order to be included in the

system is to act in accordance with its logic, language, participation conditions, coding and decoding. Just as the way in which the environment can express itself in the center is possible through passing from the mediation of the center so too is the phenomenon of communitization transformed through the mediation of electronic communication today. The phenomenon of the community is seen as an area where publicness can be recreated through the internet (Anderson, 2004: 21).

In the analysis of Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) (2003:283), who brought the term 'public sphere' to the agenda of social sciences and made it meaningful, 'public community' is the reasoning subject. Rational message exchange of individuals constitutes public opinion. Mutual understanding of individuals appears as the main goal. In this respect, the public sphere does not mark a limited physical space, but a system of rational communication functioning in compliance with certain purposes. Therefore, public sphere is formed in any place where rational communication occurs. The diameter of the public sphere is, in Habermas' conceptualization, 'the world of life' (Kırık, 2005: 74). The public space described by Habermas is losing its meaning for the Internet, according to Poster (1997: 209-210), who thinks that the era of public sphere in the form of face-to-face talk is clearly over. 'Virtual society' is produced in the world of virtual reality. The concept of virtual society, which is sometimes presented as a utopian project, is generally thought of as 'nowhere-anywhere' alternative to the difficult and dangerous conditions of today's social reality. There is no physical space for the virtual society; it is replaced by digital space, which covers the whole world, called cyberspace. Communication and information exchange in virtual societies are extremely fast and lossless. Thus, as long as we bury ourselves in the world of technological imagination, we can claim all the gratifications we have been deprived of in this world; we can reclaim the infantile illusion of magical

creative power. Finally, if we join a new world of fantasy and imagination, we can choose to present ourselves as anything we wish (Robins, 1999:148, 159).

Conclusion

Virtual communities, which are independent of the limitations of space, place and belongingness that the real/organic communities that exist physically have, are shaped via the internet and on the internet. Above all, the lack of physical space often allows the establishment of virtual identity only with linguistic practices. This may include expressing oneself in a fictitious form, in which one avoids expressing himself in physical space and which has no example even in the physical space. In its current form, the web is an almost unlimited environment of freedom. It is very easy to establish all kinds of virtual communities on the web. It is very easy to establish and hard to maintain a virtual community based on religion and ideology, and traditional or paranormal beliefs. Although there are rules and regulations concerning virtual environment, there is no problem of being 'netizen' in communities, the individuals are whether legal or illegal. It is possible to find all kinds of (both legal and illegal) security risks and threats in the virtual environment. As it is the case in hacker groups, some of them are illegal because it is not possible to mention a central authority on the Web. Although some arrangements have been made in every area, but it is still inadequate, except for child pornography. Cyberspace is thought as if an environment of complete freedom in its current form. On the other hand, it is possible to mention a partial inner control of the virtual communities that are entered with a certain password because the person who does not act in accordance with the rules of a virtual community and whose membership is canceled due to this reason can become a member of that community again with another nickname (a fake name). It does not seem possible to control this, even if the security conditions keep continue to improve. Virtual communities create social networks for their users in online (as an alternative space) to meet and interact with different

people who have similar interests. In fact, for many people, the virtual environment is a place to meet people that they want to meet in the physical world. In physical communities, people also have to interact socially with the people they want to avoid. The person whom one is unwilling to see and to contact is also a part of the community. It is not possible for the individual to organize the community as he wishes. This is one of the important costs of being a member of the real community and in real life. However, such reluctant group belonging is not valid in cyberspace. When a disagreement occurs or even when there is a simple, annoying issue, individuals can easily choose to leave and go to another virtual space. The ties between the individual and his community are seriously loose; so to speak, the individual is hung on his virtual community by a hair; it can break any moment without any difficulty because there are many more communities of which the individual can easily become a member when he leaves a community. However, that is not the case in real life in the physical community. It may not be always easy to join a new community when breaking away from the old community, because of familiarity sensation disappears by leaving the familiar environment. This situation may lead people to loneliness and may lead them not to feel comfortable in the social relations.

Internet network and social media channels are attractive to individuals with unlimited possibilities of self-expression and self-presentation. Someone who has a serious and cold look and attitude in his daily life can make his fellow internet users laugh with his jokes in the virtual community. Somebody who is unaware of the basic principles and criteria of science can very easily express opinions in scientific debates. Somebody who does not know the way the economic system works and who is not good at business can express his opinions about the professional administrations of big holding companies and somebody who is not good at politics can express his opinions about the new course of the country's politics. He falls in love

and declares his love. He makes friends, chats and plays games with them. He flirts. Nevertheless, human relations in Virtual Communities cannot be as sincere, strong and emotionally- affect as in social communities. Because, feelings such as fear, love and anger cannot be transmit via online.

In conclusion, Virtual Communities (computer-mediated communities) and Real Communities (face-to-face communities) each have their own advantages as well as their own weaknesses. On one hand, with the advancement of technology, internet allows people to build communities in cyberspace, based on common interests who are online across the globe. On the other hand, a real (face-to-face) community establishes a social interaction based on sense of unity and fellowship in a community, while they can also be parts of many different communities simultaneously. Moreover, a real community provides the sense worth, love and belonging which is challenging in virtual community. Thus, both virtual community and real community may provide different benefit for our lives with different methods of communications such as face-to-face and through computer-mediation.

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