

## INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE INTERNET

Celalettin Aktaş\*

### ABSTRACT

*The Internet has become a social environment where a large number of people all over world are connected to each other regardless of differing locations and timetables. Thus, this technology provides a place where people can meet to do business, to collaborate on a task, to solve problems, to organize a project, and to engage in personal conversation.*

*The development of computers and telecommunication technologies has also influenced the social life of individuals. Through the Internet people can engage in personal conversation and create close relationships. Such relationships even can end in marriage. Especially match making and chat sites provided by the Internet transform interpersonal relationships into a new social place. Therefore, this article focuses on how the internet technologies have changed relationships in the society and considers the characteristics of the resulting relationships, in comparison with face-to-face relationships.*

*Key words: Internet, interpersonal relationships, technology*

### ÖZET

*Teknolojik alanda yaşanan gelişmeler bireylerin sosyal hayatını etkilemektedir. Günümüzde internetin çok sayıda insan tarafından kullanılması, kişilerarası iletişimin yeni bir platforma taşınmasına neden olmuştur. İnternet zaman ve mekan kavramı gözetmeksizin, dünyanın her tarafından çok sayıda insanın bir araya gelebildiği bir sosyal çevre meydana getirmiştir. Kişiler Networks sistemleri sayesinde dostluklar, arkadaşlıklar ve romantik ilişkiler kurabilmekte; bunları evlilikle bile sonuçlandırabilmektedirler.*

*İnternet ortamında hizmet sunan eş bulma (match-making) siteleri ve muhabbet sunucuları (IRC) kişilerarası iletişimi sanal dünyaya taşımıştır. Bu bağlamda, internetin kişilerarası iletişimi ne yönde etkilediği ve internet üzerinden kişilerarası iletişim ile yüz yüze kişilerarası iletişim arasındaki farklılıklara değinilmiştir.*

*Ahahtar sözcükler: internet, kişilerarası iletişim, teknoloji*

### INTRODUCTION

The development of computers and telecommunication technologies over the past twenty years has created a worldwide web of computer networks. These networks were initially established for the purpose of transferring important data, based upon the need of researchers and scientists at military research institutions and universities throughout the United States of America, to share information in a timely manner. During the course of their studies, researchers realized that they could not only share data with their colleagues, but also communicate with each other personally by electronic mail (Engelman 1996: 3). In this way, the evolution of online communication began with the transition to civil usage of Internet technology. Person-to-person communication has turned out to be the primary use of computer networks and has transformed them into a

social space where people connect with one another (Harasim 1994: 15).

The Internet and its communication standards and protocols have rapidly become a viable technology used by a large number of people all over the world for a variety of communication and information-sharing tasks. These users connect to the system through terminals, networks, and home computers logged in over telephone lines to a great number of commercial and institutional computers. At this point, it would be helpful to provide some definitions of the Internet, in order to have better understanding of this technology. The Internet is most accurately described as a worldwide, self-governed network connecting thousands of smaller networks, and millions of computers and people, to megasources of information (Engelman 1996: 3). The Internet is a global news and information medium (Alexander 1999: 30-33). The Internet is a network, link-

---

\* Dr., İstanbul Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi

ing people across space and time, not a 'thing' or a set of computers communicating autonomously without human actors (Shields 1996: 9). The Internet is at once a worldwide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers, regardless of geographic location (Leiner & et. all 2003).

The Internet technology has reduced the constraints of time and distance in human interaction. This technology also increases the range of human interaction and the number of ways in which people are able to contact others. Today, tools such as bulletin boards, electronic mail, and computer conferencing facilitate group communication across time and space. Groups can now socialize and work together, regardless of differing locations and timetables. Nowadays, worldwide communication is as simple, flexible, and low-cost as talks among neighbors (Koku & et. al. 2001: 1752-1774). Internet technologies have helped organizations to develop communication via intranets and have been applied to develop online communities and cultures (Flanagin and Metzger 2000: 515-540). It is estimated that one billion users may be online by 2005 (McMillan 2000: 80-98). The Internet has become a social environment where people are connected to each other, sharing a common experience. Thus, this technology provides a place where people can meet to do business, to collaborate on a task, to solve problems, to organize a project, and to engage in personal conversation.

The purpose of this article is to examine how technological changes have affected interpersonal communication and to consider the characteristics of the resulting relationships, in comparison with face-to-face relationships.

### **COMPUTER-MEDIATED RELATIONSHIPS**

The advent of the Internet technology, like that of the telephone and television in modern society, has had a dramatic effect on social life. The Internet is altering patterns of social communication and interpersonal relationships. As Merkle & Richardson (2000: 187-192) state, technological innovations have frequently

served as the impetus that can alter a society's lifestyle. According to Rheingold (2001: 277), previous generations of communications technologies changed the way people lived. In this way, interpersonal relationships have experienced a transformation through new technologies, such as the Internet. Relationships that previously were established and sustained mainly through face-to-face interaction have come to be complemented by a social technology that is creating a new type of interpersonal relationship (Merkle and Richardson, 2000). Increasing numbers of Internet users in virtual communities are getting to know each other, to engage in intellectual discourse, to exchange knowledge, to share emotional support, to establish friendships, and to develop romantic relationships known as 'computer-mediated relationships' (CMR). Wildermuth (2001: 89-95) states that an "online close relationship" should refer to a relationship that is initiated over a computer and that is predominantly maintained through 'computer-mediated communication' (CMC). Griffiths (2001: 333-343) also defines an online relationship as a romantic and/or sexual relationship that is initiated via online contact and maintained mainly through electronic conversations that take place through e-mail and in virtual communities, such as chat rooms, interactive games, and newsgroups. Thus, computer-mediated communication has become an entertaining medium through which numerous individuals interact with others for friendship, games, chat, and to pursue hobbies and romance (Dennis and Douglass 1997: 375-398).

These days, Internet users can extend their social networks, create virtual online communities, and find prospective marital partners. There are now many recorded instances of the most deeply personal relationships being formed on the Internet, relationships which have led to marriages between people who had never encountered each other physically up to that point (Graham 1999: 23). Research (Scramaglia 2002: 317-337) carried out in Great Britain on 2000 navigators whose average age was approximately 27 proved that one fourth of them had started a romantic relationship on the Net. Six out of ten then met their online contacts in person, and one out of ten

had sexual relations with them. These percentages were even higher for residents of London.

In the developmental sequence of a face-to-face relationship, after two individuals spatially interact, physical attractiveness and attitudinal similarity are important factors contributing to the possibility of an initial interaction developing into a relationship. In contrast, most Internet romantic relationships progress through an inverted developmental sequence. Two individuals first get to know one another through the course of capricious discussion on the Internet, using Internet chat applications, chat web pages, and/or e-mails (Cooper and Spertolari 1997: 7-17). Computer-mediated communication environments restrict physical presence and related social cues. One of the most popular and growing forms of CMC is e-mail. E-mail is a text-based medium, like writing, but it is more flexibly used for both spontaneous and complicated task-oriented communication (Pratt & et. al: 1999: 46-66).

Text-based communication offers important benefits for establishing meaningful and effective conversation. Text-based messaging creates a new form of interpersonal interaction with advantages over postal mail, telephone calls, and even face-to-face encounters (Harism 1993: 25). For example, an e-mail can serve exactly the same purpose as a letter, without the necessity of finding a stamp and a mailbox. Text-based communication on the Internet with any part of the world is also exponentially faster than the time the transmission of a letter would take.

In order to achieve successful communication by the telephone, both sides must be at a certain place at a certain time. Otherwise, communication cannot take place. For text-based communication, sender and receiver are not required to be at a specific time and place. Both parties can write and respond to each other over a period of time, so they are not forced into giving unconsidered responses to each other. Text-based communication can free people from the initial importance placed upon physical appearance, as well.

Individuals involved in creating relationships through computer-mediated communication

initially find mutually interesting topics to discuss, without the constraints of spatial proximity and concerns over physical attractiveness. In time, the topics of discussion can turn to personal and intimate matters, and both sides can establish a powerful rapport. In contrast to CMR, in face-to-face relationships, physical attractiveness is often what sparks initial interest in another person and leads each side to want to continue interacting. Conversely, the importance of physical attractiveness in CMR is minimized by the ability to get to know someone through intense mutual self-disclosure and intimate sharing of private worldviews (Merkle and Richardson 2000: 187-192).

Griffiths (2001) outlines basic types of online relationships, in relation to actual online behavior. One of these types is a virtual online relationship, involving people who never actually meet. They usually engage in sexually explicit text exchanges and may swap gender roles. The second type is a developmental online relationship, involving people meeting online, but eventually wanting the relationship to move from online to offline after they have become emotionally intimate with each other. The last type of online relationship is a maintaining online relationship, involving people who first meet offline, but then maintain their relationship online for the majority of the time. This is usually because they are geographically distant.

According to data from a national survey of adolescent Internet users on the subject of initial encounters, 59% of close online relationships originated in chat rooms, 30% through instant messages or e-mail, 5% in gaming sites, and 6% some other way. Thirty-two percent of youths were introduced to their online friends by a face-to-face friend or family member. The characteristics of close online relationships are as follows: 75% were identified as close friendships, 41% included face-to-face meetings, and 7% were described as romantic relationships (Wolak & et.all. 2002: 441-456).

Computer-mediated relationships give the involved parties the ability to control relational distance. Participants in this kind of relationship are aware of that they can easily revert back to a medium that provides more control if, at any time, an online partner turns out to be

unpleasant. This element of control over the progress of the online close relationship differs from face-to-face ones. In face-to-face relationships, the interaction often starts within a low-control setting. Thus, it is more difficult for partners to have a high level of control over relational distance (Wildermuth 2001: 89-95). CMC, however, enables both sides within the relationship to exercise control over relational distance. The anonymity of electronic transmissions provides users with a greater sense of perceived control over the content and nature of the online relationship experience.

In addition to this, in cyberspace, physical appearance does not factor into initiating relationships. According to Globus (2002: 13-15), getting to know someone by words and ideas lets the individual feel closer than when he or she meets with someone in person. It is easier to be open and honest. In CMC, participants can choose to share only the things about themselves that they assume are flattering. Nevertheless, the author mentions in the same article, "you can't hug or hold hands in cyberspace. On-line relationships are no substitute for face-to-face interaction." On the other hand, survey research suggests (Jackson & et. al. 2001: 363-379) that people feel more socially connected and engage in more communications with more people as a consequence of Internet use. In contrast, there are arguments that Internet use is isolating, that social relationships on the Internet are impoverished and fleeting, and that information on the Internet is difficult to find, overwhelming, and unreliable (Jackson & et. al. 2001: 363-379).

Internet users appear to open up more quickly online and reveal themselves emotionally much faster than in the offline world. What may take a long time in a face-to-face relationship may only take days or weeks through computer-mediated communication. As Cooper and Sportolari (1997) have pointed out, the perception of trust, intimacy, and acceptance has the potential to encourage online users to use these relationships as a primary source of companionship and comfort.

Merkle and Richardson (2000) state in their article that the result of the qualitative research on CMR done by Wysocki is that "Internet

users came to personally know one another more quickly and intimately than in face-to-face relationships." Individuals in a face-to-face relationship are inclined to reveal only a little information about themselves, and only at a time when they feel safe. Conversely, CMR self-disclosure is richer and progresses more quickly, since the Internet affords a level of anonymity that can decrease feelings of discomfort that a person may experience in a face-to-face relationship (Merkle and Richardson). Online relationships are dynamic, growing, and changing. Besides, if the online relationship is successful, it can eventually be transformed into a face-to-face relationship (Wildermuth 2001: 89-95).

## CONCLUSION

Technological changes have influenced daily life. Since the Internet technology has been adapted to use in civil life, many things have changed. The Internet has been applied in various areas, such as education, commerce, and social life. In this article, the ways in which the Internet has affected interpersonal communication are outlined, and some pros and cons of this technology with respect to interpersonal relationships are noted. It seems that society may increasingly take advantage of the Internet as a medium for engaging in interpersonal and romantic relationships. Nowadays, it is not unusual to come across couples that have married after getting to know each other in cyberspace. The most important influence on the success of online relationships may be the kinds of people who tend to use the Internet (Gavin 2002: A35).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander M J (1999), *Armchair Activists: The News Journalism on the Internet*, *Vital Speeches*, 66(1), pp. 30-33.
- Cooper A and Sportolari L (1997), *Romance in Cyberspace: Understanding Online Attraction*, *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, 24, pp. 7-17.
- Engelman J L (1996), *Interacting on the Internet*, Times Mirror Higher Education Group, USA.
- Flanagin J A and Metzger, J M (2000), *Perceptions of Internet Information Credibility*, *Jour-*

- nalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 77 (3) pp. 515-540.
- Gavin J (2002), Romances that Start on the Internet May Last Longer, Researcher Says, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 48 (33), p. A35.
- Globus S (2002), The Good the Bad and the Internet, *Current Health* 2, 28 (6), pp. 13-15.
- Graham G (1999), *The Internet: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Routledge, London.
- Griffiths M (2001), Sex on the Internet: Observations and Implications for Internet Sex Addiction, *Journal of Sex Research*, 38 (4), pp. 333-343.
- Harasim M L (1994), *Global Networks: Computers and International Communication*, MIT Press, USA.
- Jackson A L & et. al. (2001), Gender and the Internet: Women Communicating and Men Searching, *Sex Roles*, 44 (5/6), pp. 363-379.
- Koku A & et. all. (2001), Netting Scholars: Online and Offline, *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 44 (10), pp. 1752-1774.
- Leiner M B & et. al (2003) All About the Internet: A Brief History of the Internet, *Internet Society*, (Online) <http://www.isoc.org/interact-history/brief.html>, (February 23, 2003).
- McMillan J S (2000), The Microscope and the Moving Target: The Challenge of Applying Content Analysis to the World Wide Web, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77 (1), pp. 80-98.
- Merkle R E and Richardson A R (2000), Digital Dating and Virtual Relating: Conceptualizing Computer Mediated Romantic Relationships, *Family Relations*, 49 (2), pp. 187-192.
- Prat L & et. al. (1999), Interrogative Strategies and Information Exchange in Computer-Mediated Communication, *Communication Quarterly*, 47 (1), pp. 46-66.
- Rheingold H (2001), *The Virtual Community*, David Trend (ed), *Reading Digital Cultures*, Blackwell Publishers, Great Britain.
- Scramaglia R (2002), Love and the Web, *Interdisciplinary Journal of Academia Europea*, Cambridge University Press, 10 (3), pp. 317-337.
- Shields R (1996), *Culture of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*, Sage Publications, London.
- Waskul D and Douglass M (1997), Cyberself: The Emergence of Self in On-line Chat, *Information Society*, 13 (4), pp. 375-398.
- Wildermuth M S (2001), Love on the Line: Participants' Descriptions of Computer-Mediated Close Relationships, *Communication Quarterly*, 49 (2), pp. 89-95.
- Wolak J & et. all (2002), Close Online Relationships in a National Sample of Adolescents, *Adolescence*, 37 (147), pp. 441-456.