

# INTERNET – THE VIRTUAL MATCHMAKER<sup>1</sup>

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*One of internet aims is to connect people worldwide, regardless of their geographical position. Communication possibilities of the internet are endless and can be examined from various aspects. This paper deals with the role of internet communication (chat and email) in interpersonal relationships. We analyze different web sites in order to learn more about this type of communication and its role in love affairs/relationships.*

*Keywords: internet communication, cyberspace, chat, email, dating, marriage.*

*Število obiskovalcev interneta, konkretno klepetalnic, iz dneva v dan narašča. Mnogi se zatekajo vanje z željo, da bi spoznali fanta ali dekle, vendar pa je število zakonskih zvez, v katerih sta se partnerja spoznala prek interneta, v primerjavi s številom obiskovalcev zelo majhno. Raziskovanja internetne komunikacije sem se lotila, da bi ugotovila, zakaj prihaja do takšnega nesorazmerja. V prispevku govorim o internetu, konkretno o klepetalnicah in elektronski pošti kot online posrednikoma pri spoznavanju partnerjev za ljubezensko zvezo, in pokažem, kakšna je perspektiva 'virtualnih' poznanstev in ljubezni.*

*Ključne besede: internetna komunikacija, kiberprostor, klepetalnica, elektronska pošta, poroka.*

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Having in mind all possibilities that the internet can provide in interpersonal communication I have decided to research the phenomenon of chat.<sup>2</sup> Actually, the usage of internet and chat in searching for a suitable marriage partner has become widespread and popular.<sup>3</sup> Considering the popularity of the internet and chat in public, one would expect them to be successful in connecting people and steer them towards relationship or marriage. However, based on my own research, it is just the opposite - there are very few couples that got married after being introduced through the internet.<sup>4</sup> I was therefore curious about

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<sup>2</sup> Chat is an abbreviation for System of real-time (synchronous) communication, through which users can talk to others who are logged on at the time [Bell 200: 217].

<sup>3</sup> From articles published in various Serbian journals and daily papers at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries it is evident that the internet and chat have gained a considerable amount of popularity [Šibalić 2004: 20–21]. Other media, especially the movies, played an equally important role in the promotion of the possibility of finding a partner through chat (the most popular being “You’ve Got Mail” from 1998).

<sup>4</sup> In the course of my research, I have come across only four of such cases. For the sake of comparison,

the role of chat from an ethnological perspective.<sup>5</sup> My main questions relate to ways of communication between individuals in ‘virtual’ space, their content, and perspectives of successful romantic relationships (premarital and marital).

Research in cyberspace includes an analysis of concepts and contents of the internet web sites that contain chat modules.<sup>6</sup> There are numerous foreign and local web sites that can fulfill every desire and taste. Besides the general ones, there are some that are “specialized” in matchmaking: *online matchmaking and community service, specially created to facilitate easy access to its members - to meet other members and couples on the internet.*<sup>7</sup>

My choice of web sites was their popularity on the local level, which also made them the most interesting to research.<sup>8</sup> In addition, when drawing a conclusion, eventual conceptual differences between the sites are not indicative as much as the classification of the sites by their visitors. Users recognize the sites as “serious” or “less serious”, based on the content of a particular web page. This, however, does not imply that “less serious” internet web pages are not visited by people with “very serious” intentions, and *vice versa*. People with “serious intentions” are the ones who use the internet in order to meet others to discuss music, film, theatre, cultural events, etc., meaning that they want to discuss a broad range of subjects and rarely, but especially not in the beginning, their sexual experiences. “Less serious” visitors are the ones who visit an internet site with the intention to find a partner for fun and flirt.

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it is worth citing the fact that on one of the observed sites, membership expanded to 10.000, with the number constantly on the rise (noted down on September 28, 2005, at: <http://www.romance-cafe.com>).

- <sup>5</sup> There are almost no papers or the research of cyberspace and the internet in Serbian ethnology/anthropology. An exception is the work of Ljiljana Gavrilović [2004] and Ivan Djordjević [2005]. In this sense, my research is a pioneer undertake. In this paper, I present only preliminary results since the research is still in its beginning phase; a complete analysis shall follow upon the completion of the research.
- <sup>6</sup> The empirical research on the internet, and chat in particular, took place in 2004 and 2005. During that time, I visited the following web sites: <http://www.ICQ.com> (meaning: “I seek you”, relating to the system that *permits chat users to see who else is logged on at any given time. Logged-on users congregate in a virtual space called a chat-room* [Bell 2001: 217]; <http://www.odigo.com>; <http://www.LoveDelux.com>; <http://www.romance-cafe.com>. In order to communicate better with the chat users, I also used messengers accessible at <http://www.krstarica.com/lat/pricaonica>, <http://www2.serbiancafe.com/lat/chat>
- <sup>7</sup> Cited from: <http://www.romance-cafe.com/info/privacy>, as a privacy policy. Throughout the paper, I cite the data noted down on this particular internet web page. One of the most popular ‘local’ sites, it provides information through statistical analysis on structures that enable the researcher to gather basic information on the topic of interest, such as age, gender, occupation, frequency of visits, interests, and aspirations of chartroom visitors. – As an example, let me cite the comment made by one of the visitors, signed as the “Old Hunter”: *I’ve become your member not so long ago, after being a member at many places. But I have never found something so good as your site. I congratulate you, and I am proud that even our people here know how to use the internet. I wish you all the best, and continue running this super site* (noted down on the front page on <http://www.romance-cafe.com> (July 29, 2005).
- <sup>8</sup> The popularity of a particular site is determined by visitor accounts. The basic parameters indicating that a visitor values a site are the following: speed needed to exchange messages between visitors using chat; possibility of conversation with multiple visitors at the same site; and free access (no payment required for registration and additional services such as conversation with multiple visitors at the same time or sending more than four messages in the same day).

Email is another way of communication in cyberspace. Sometimes both options, chat and email, are used at the same time, depending on the type of computer. Many people use email as an internet option of communication, some for personal (they do not want to chat) or technical reasons (they do not own a computer at home, or have only one phone line). Many acquired email accounts at different internet pages and thus enhanced the possibilities to maintain and establish new connections (relationships).<sup>9</sup>

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There are many methodological questions raised in internet research, in the first place the method of research. I agree with the argument that holds that problems arising with internet research are due to the methods a researcher employs: material space is separated from the digital; the relationship between cyberspace partners tends to be underestimated, their differences emphasized, and their similarities neglected [Wittel 2001]. Because of this, research of the internet and its various uses should be directed toward finding the most adequate methodological solutions.<sup>10</sup>

I am well aware that the study of internet communication is a relatively new topic and hence requires especial efforts in conducting research and drawing conclusions from it.<sup>11</sup> In order to collect verifiable data I had decided to become an “undercover observer” [Bell 2001: 198–200], to actively participate in chat without disclosing my research purposes to internet users.<sup>12</sup> The choice of method was determined by my understanding that communication between individuals in a ‘virtual’ reality creates a ‘virtual’ community, and therefore becomes a subject of ethnographic research. This is the reason why we can apply *the same methods of data gathering as in the research of any other type of community* [Gavrilović 2004: 11] that becomes an object of ethnographic inquiries.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> I have not performed a quantitative analysis since I do not believe that a statistical analysis of data is the only indicator of the accuracy of the conclusions arrived at by the researcher. This is the reason why I mostly use descriptive terms for numeric situations found during my fieldwork survey. I hold that this kind of data interpretation is sufficient for a report, which this paper aims to be. It is my opinion that this kind of approach satisfies the basic scientific postulates to the given problem.

<sup>10</sup> In order to find the most adequate methods researchers of various backgrounds worldwide have tried to solve the problems by organizing scientific conferences and discussions on the subject. I am referring only to those references that I do not cite elsewhere in the paper: Escobar 1994: 211–231; Marcus 1995: 95–117; Mann and Fiona 2001.

<sup>11</sup> A researcher of the internet and chat is faced with a specific problem: the verification of the data given by visitors (informants). The guaranteed anonymity that protects users of the internet and facilitates obtaining the data also makes it difficult to determine age, gender, and occupational status of informants [Gavrilović 2004: 12].

<sup>12</sup> This denotes that I have posted my own profile on the internet web sites that I have analyzed. In doing so, I became an active participant in communication (chat and email), a researcher who uses the method of participation.

<sup>13</sup> Methodology of data gathering included the application of standard methods and techniques of ethnographic research, adapted to serve the needs of the topic in question. Fieldwork included participation in communication, therefore chatting, and conducting interviews with informants offline. I conducted interviews with both male and female informants from Serbia and Monte Negro, and with immigrants of Serbian origin; they were aged between 20 and 45, some married, others unmarried or divorced.

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Cyberspace communication allows “surfing” through different sites at the same time. Many people use this advantage. If they are disappointed by services of a particular site, or by its visitors, they switch sites. They believe that they will find whatever they are looking for (new people to talk to, for instance) at the next one, and so on. This broadens the search for “the right one”, and the possibility to choose from a wide range of people is one of the main reasons why those who want to meet a potential partner for relationship or marriage use internet and chat in the first place.

Based on the time spent on the internet, its users can be divided into those who chat for several hours every day and those who do it occasionally, for instance two or three times a week, or several times a month. The intensity of chatting depends on the availability of a personal computer and an individual’s leisure time. It is interesting to note that some users actually bought a computer with the intention to chat or play games. There are also cases in which people have an option to chat because they own a computer, but do not use it for establishing ‘virtual’ love relationships. They have an aversion toward chat and do not believe in the possibility of meeting a partner through the internet or in chatrooms.<sup>14</sup>

It has been established that men are the most frequent visitors, and women are the most sought after.<sup>15</sup> In general, men are more frequent visitors regardless of the time of day.<sup>16</sup> Their presence is less frequent during sports competitions. The domination of men in chat rooms may be examined from different aspects. There is a correlation between men’s visits on the internet and their place of work.<sup>17</sup> The reason is in the nature of men’s line of work

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During offline as well as online communications I have asked questions about the reasons for using chat and mail; the frequency of using both; visits to particular chat rooms; the criteria of singling out one person and not another; and about the informants’ experiences in using chat and email. In addition to oral and written sources (internet communication, on-chat and offline-email, all of which use an exchange of written words), I have also used relevant Serbian and foreign literature.

<sup>14</sup> According to the informants’ accounts, the aversion comes from their fear that they might become “hooked up” on chat. The informants cited many examples of this, for instance how their friends or colleagues “do not sign off from the internet and spend all of their leisure time chatting. In addition, the informants disliked chat because they had witnessed difficulties and experienced its negative sides (false introduction, disrespect of conditions on meeting a person in “real” life, their chatroom partner did not show up, etc.) that they or their friends have had with persons they had met through the internet.

<sup>15</sup> The conclusions about gender and frequency of internet and chat visits, which have been based my own observations, closely correspond to the arguments of other authors who had researched the internet in other cultures. D. Ditrih is one of the authors who deal with gender relations in cyberspace. He concluded that the *climate on the internet can exclude women and minorities from participation in conversation* [Ditrih 2001: 241]. Referring to the same phenomenon, Poster stated the following: *On such electronic sites women are underrepresented and subject to harassment of all kinds, including sexual* [Poster 2001].

<sup>16</sup> According to Brosnan, overrepresentation of male gender in the usage of computers and the internet is omnipresent worldwide [Brosnan 2004: 99–118].

<sup>17</sup> Many men surf/chat from their place of work, while only some women do so. These men chat during their working hours “to kill boredom” and to have some fun; many chat from their offices because they do not have their own computer at home, and their work involves the use of computer and the internet.

- it seems that working women have access to a personal computer, and thus the internet, less often than men do. There is also a connection between chat and marital status. The most frequent visitors are unmarried, both male and female, followed by the divorced ones, then by married men; married women are at the very end of the list.<sup>18</sup>

Internet sites are visited for a number of reasons. Some people are just curios and want to *try something new*; others are bored: *I'm on a lunch break and bored*. Still others are lonely. There is no doubt that there is a connection between loneliness and chatting. In most cases, people who hope to overcome their loneliness with the help of the internet do not have many friends offline. It may be that those friends are married and have family obligations, and therefore have little time to spare. This is why unmarried people chat and search for a conversation partner, and why there are so many lonely people in chat rooms (being alone and lonely is certainly not always a cause-consequence of a marriage status. Some informants argue they have no other possibility for meeting their soul mate.

Daily usage of the internet, be it chat or email, for lengthy periods, takes up all the spare time and leads to neglect of other daily tasks. By doing this, a person may become addicted to the internet and alienated from others.<sup>19</sup> It is therefore possible to ask this question: is the internet really the most adequate solution in overcoming personal and social problems, and what happens when its usage becomes an “overdose”?

Closely correlated with the reasons for chatting or using email are actual aspirations of chat room visitors. Some just want to have fun, or to “kill” the time, while others search for a “soul mate”. Nevertheless, all share the same wish - to meet a potential partner.

Serbian immigrants abroad, on the other hand, chats with girls from their native country, determined to find “a suitable girl for marriage”.<sup>20</sup> For these immigrants, internet communication also represents a contact with their homeland. This is why they have no reason not to state clearly their wishes and intentions. The situation can be reversed as well. The unstable economic, social, and political situation in Serbia induces women to leave their country to marry a foreigner with Serbian roots. For them, the internet and chatting is one of the ways to find a spouse abroad, where economic and political circumstances are

<sup>18</sup> I agree with Poster's statement that the *problems that women in our society have to suffer is just being transferred into 'virtual communities' on the internet* [Poster 2001].

<sup>19</sup> Interaction: loneliness – internet - alienation is documented in other studies of internet communications as well. This problem is present not only in Serbia, but throughout Europe as well. This is supported by the fact that at the 2005 BELEF, a theatre show named “Nickname” tried to portray the troubles arising from the needs of those who search for solutions to some of their problems (loneliness, for example) and try to satisfy their personal needs on the internet (see: <http://www.belef.org/05/pozoriste/nadimak.html>).

<sup>20</sup> The role of the internet in marriage arrangements in the chatters' country of birth can be seen from examples of entered marriages; I have obtained this information primarily from my colleagues at the Institute of Ethnography in Belgrade and at the National Museum in Zrenjanin. My colleagues have told me about their friends or acquaintances living abroad who had found their spouses through the internet. I draw my conclusions on the role of internet in searching for a partner in one's native land from the statements of informants who live abroad and chat in order to find a “marriageable girl”.

presumably much better. This implies a connection between internet communication and a political system, and with the socio-economic situation in either country.<sup>21</sup>

Many users have a strong wish to turn a virtual contact into an actual one in the real world. Yet the visitors who consider the internet as a marriage matchmaker are in the minority. This is only partially due to the virtual nature of possible relationships and disbelief that such a relationship can be formed, but more to the fact that most visitors want to experience merely fun and adventures. It was very difficult to determine the actual number of the “less serious” and of the “more serious” visitors. In order to establish this I used statistics from one of the local web sites. Its members are divided into groups, formed according to their interests and wishes. Out of 10.596 people (who had visited the site in one day) there were 117 members who stated that they had joined the site in order to look for a spouse. Most (6.698), however, belonged to those who felt that “whatever comes, comes”.<sup>22</sup> These figures change daily, but not in all groups. Most often, the membership rises in the “whatever comes, comes” group, while the number of visitors in the “marriage” group may not change for months. Membership in one group does not prevent members to chat with members of another group. Since they represent an indicator of those who search for a partner the actual number of members and their profiles are important. Besides, many members of the “whatever comes, comes” group, although having a desire to meet a partner for a love relationship or marriage, sometimes conceal their real intention out of fear they will be misunderstood and deprived hence to “choose” or to be “chosen”.

It is obvious that mistrust in chatting represents one of the reasons of the numerical difference between the visitors of chat rooms and marriages initiated through the internet. One of the female visitors argues:

*While I have no prejudice toward meeting people in this manner our culture is still, unfortunately, reserved towards everything new. Yes, we met here, it was more of a friendly discussion, and soon we exchanged phone numbers. Since we do not live far apart, only about a hundred kilometers, we met for the first time after only fifteen days. I think that at that moment we both knew that we would spend the rest of our lives together. First, we went on a vacation together. Our parents have already met, and our wedding is scheduled for October. If I can persuade others I will gladly invite you to our wedding because I know many would like to read about it and cast their prejudice away [signed: ex member].<sup>23</sup>*

Nevertheless, this is a rare example. Many more are distrustful even of the possibility of

<sup>21</sup> The issue of economic and political influence of the internet as a marriage matchmaker can be found in Constable 2002.

<sup>22</sup> The rest of the categories are as follows: *fun* (cited by 731 registered members); *friendship* (599 members); *sex* (529 members); *chat* (510 members); *affairs only* (404 members); *chat or email* (308 members); *long-term relationship* (302 members); *a date partner* (89 members); *swingers* (51 members) and *the rest* (251 members). Noted down on September 28 2005 at: <http://www.romance-cafe.com>.

<sup>23</sup> Noted down on July 27, 2005 on the opening page of: <http://www.romance-cafe.com>.

establishing friendships and partnerships through the internet. The distrust in the power of chat as a matchmaker is enhanced by negative experiences while meeting a virtual partner in the real, offline, world. Many were namely disappointed at their first meeting outside the virtual space, at the behavior or physical outlook of their virtual friends. It had turned out that they were very different from their description of themselves on the internet. This was reason enough to cut off all further communication and have considerable doubt about meeting a partner through chat or email in the future. Some of them have stopped, after their first or second attempt, to use chat. Others, though, come back after a month or two, to continue their search for a “normal” man or woman in the virtual world.

Despite the small number of online relationships with a happy conclusion the role and importance of the internet as a virtual matchmaker is considerable. The internet is a mediator in establishing relationships regardless of their quality and duration. The internet namely functions as a particular online agency whose services are provided in its own reality, within its borders. In this virtual reality, there are no direct contacts between the users and the providers. The internet can be therefore considered a “true” mediator. I assume that for this reason chatting is relatively more popular than offline marriage agencies.<sup>24</sup>

One of internet’s communication advantages, particular in chatting, over communication “in person”, is the absence of physical context. There is also the advantage of guaranteed discretion. The users of internet sites agree that it is much easier to establish a contact in virtual reality than in the offline world. One user stated: *You are much more relaxed on the internet, there you can say all you want because others don’t know you. The internet is like a hole in which you unearth all of your secrets.*

I feel that the fact that these people appear more relaxed in communication, that they do not have to worry about their physical appearance, or about making a good impression, should not be viewed as the hiding of their identity. If we are to accept that this is, in fact, a false portrayal of themselves, then we should bear in mind that the same often happens offline. Yet it is possible that online some people behave in the way that they would never behave in offline communication because they *believe that they would not be socially accepted otherwise* [Gavrilović 2004: 13]. The absence of physical contact can then be looked upon as just another peculiarity of internet communication. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the “invisibility” *per se* initiates the hiding of one’s true identity or of creating a new one.

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<sup>24</sup> Based on the statements of those who use this kind of internet service it can be said that a direct contact between individuals who want to meet one another is the main advantage of chat over offline marriage agencies. When it comes to offline agencies, a third party must act as a go-between. It is precisely for this reason that some people do not want to use offline agencies even though they also guarantee discretion. Employees of the *Fortuna*, the first and the best-known agency for marriage matchmaking in Serbia, stated that they were not popular due to the distrust among people. That is why Tamindžić tried to persuade the public and break negative stereotypes about these agencies and about meeting a potential partner in this manner [Tamindžić 2005]. It would be interesting to compare offline marriage agencies and the internet and chat. Since this would be beyond the scope of this paper I will probably write more on this topic some time in the future.

This, of course, does not mean that we will not meet on the internet those who create their own false identity to hide their age, marital status, address, occupation, and so on.

Because of such an experience some people insist on meeting offline. This is because, as a female visitor of a chat room argued,

*until you have met the person you cannot know what they are like; the meeting outside the net is important not just because of the other person's physical appearance, which most of the time is the decisive factor, but also because it is important to see how they behave, talk, and dress.*

In view of all this, it is necessary to examine the contraindications in the case of misuse of identity flexibility.<sup>25</sup> According to my knowledge, those who have no real intention of extending their virtual friendships into the offline sphere use false identity. When meeting in “real life” it is namely impossible to hide the features that are very important to online partners.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the hiding of one's true identity and the creation of an invented one could become contra productive. I assume that this is why people - those who want to meet someone online to flirt with, or to marry, or to start a serious relationship with - do not misuse the absence of physical contact. Having in mind the conclusions of the authors cited here, and based on the informants' statements, the possibility of falsifying data in virtual space is not of key importance in establishing the validity of the internet and chat as marriage and relationship matchmaker.

Photography has an important role in internet communication [Moličnik 2001: 313–324]. I emphasized the absence of the physical component in virtual reality, which stimulates imagination and makes it possible to form wrong assumptions about the person on the other end of the line. Such wrong impressions about such a “chat buddy” may lead to disappointment when the two meet offline. I therefore assume that web masters of such sites post an option known as the “gallery”, which contains photographs of the members of their web page. This enables chatters to actually see the participants in the chat room and to submit their own photo. Yet in spite of this option, many do not wish to post their photographs. Some are embarrassed of their physical appearance; others fear harassment from the visitors with which they want no contact. It is not impossible that some fear that a colleague, a friend, or a relative might recognize them. Many chatroom visitors namely hide their internet activities, especially from their friends, relatives, and colleagues, who might look upon this type of communication with scorn. It may also be possible to submit

<sup>25</sup> The problem of individual identity is impossible to ignore when it comes to research on cyberspace. Many authors who have researched this topic have come across the issue of identity. An example is the following collection of papers dedicated to solely this subject: *Virtuelna kultura. Identitet i komunikacija u kiber društvu (Virtual Culture. Identity and communication in cybersociety)* [Džouns /Jones/ (ed.) 2001]. In this collection of papers, authors discuss not only advantages but also consequences of information development and communication technology.

<sup>26</sup> The researchers who studied the problem of identity flexibility concluded that technology of informational systems cannot easily erase personal characteristics an individual had acquired in the offline world [Votson 2001: 169–172].



a fake photograph depicting a person who is more handsome and attractive than the actual sender. Regardless of their intentions, very few people do this because a fake identity or lies about one's physical appearance are not very helpful in the long run. Many of those who want to check out the physical appearance of their "chat buddy" namely want to see two or three photographs, taken from different angles and in different situations, just to make sure the other side is not cheating.

This confirms my earlier statement that in 'virtual' friendships and love affairs happy endings do not depend on the content and structure of a particular site, but on the actual meeting outside cyberspace. The meeting in the real, offline world is decisive.

Despite that fact that cyberspace is a reality *per se* there is an interconnection of cyberspace and the 'real' world. This is probably because one does not exclude the other. Rather than that, they exist parallel to each other.<sup>27</sup> Cyberspace represents an *integral part of our social world*, and it *transforms the reality of everyday life* [Džouns 2001: 55]. Hence, the relationship between the online and the offline should be more determined.<sup>28</sup> It is my opinion, however, that it is precisely this interconnection that confuses some people; in addition, it also helps to create a dichotomy in understanding the relationship between the online-offline spheres. We cannot assume that the dichotomy is justified, but it certainly shows how we observe the relationship between the two realities.<sup>29</sup> This confusion is probably because *a priori*, the cyberspace is marked as something imaginative and in contrast with the reality offline.

In view of the above, it can be said that people find it difficult to accept that there is another place that exists parallel to ours, and is no less real than the one in which we actually live.

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<sup>27</sup> The association of online-offline spheres cannot be observed in some other versions of internet communications that easily, and therefore is not of such importance as the chat. I refer primarily to MUD (Multi-User Domain/Dungeon) and forums as a means of internet communications [Djordjević 2005: 263–277].

<sup>28</sup> Wittel [2001] is one of the authors who argue that the *virtual, online world should not be separated from the real, offline world*.

<sup>29</sup> Wittel [2001] sees the problem of separation of the 'virtual' from the offline world in the postulation that 'virtual' communities are being observed as counterparts to traditional communities, that is the ones that exist offline.

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## INTERNET - ŽENITNI POSREDNIK

*Popularnost internetne komunikacije, konkretno klepetalnic, iz dneva v dan narašča. Ljudje se množično zatekajo h klepetalnicam v upanju, da bodo na ta način spoznali partnerja za ljubezensko zvezo. Kljub temu je število zakonskih zvez, v katerih sta se partnerja spoznala prek interneta, v primerjavi s številom obiskovalcev zelo majhno.*

*Raziskovanja internetne komunikacije (klepetalnic in elektronske pošte) sem se lotila, da bi ugotovila, zakaj prihaja do takšnega nesorazmerja. Zanimalo me je, zakaj se posamezniki vključujejo v klepetalnice in kakšne so perspektive virtualnih poznanstev in ljubezni. Analizirala sem strukturo in vsebinske značilnosti najpopularnejših domačih in tujih internetnih strani. Ob tem sem se aktivno vključila v pogovore z obiskovalci opazovanih spletnih strani. Pogovarjala sem se s posamezniki obeh spolov, različnih starosti (20–45 let), s tistimi, ki so neporočeni, s poročenimi in ločenimi. Informatorji so bili prebivalci državne skupnosti Srbije in Črne Gore.*

*Število spletnih strani z moduli za klepete je veliko. To pomeni, da je možnost izbire internetnih strani tako rekoč neomejena. V klepetalnicah se istočasno lahko pogovarjamo z dvema, tremi ali več osebami hkrati. Nekateri so »na chatu« zato, ker so osamljeni, drugi, ker jim je dolgčas, tretji spet, ker so radovedni. Velika večina obiskovalcev želi navezati nova poznanstva in nekateri upajo, da bodo »tam«, v virtualnem svetu spoznali partnerja za takšno ali drugačno ljubezensko zvezo.*

*Zakaj prav internet, oziroma klepetalnica in elektronska pošta? V kiberprostoru ni fizičnega stika med obiskovalci, posamezniki so zato sproščeni in lažje navežejo stike z drugimi obiskovalci. Ta značilnost internetne komunikacije skupaj z možnostjo prikrivanja identitete predstavlja prednost v primerjavi s komunikacijo v prostoru, v katerem živimo. Vendar se je pokazalo, da posamezniki, ki nameravajo spoznati partnerja za flirt ali pa za zakonsko zvezo, ne zlorabljajo možnosti lažnega predstavljanja. Za končen izid virtualnih ljubezni je odločilno srečanje zunaj kiberprostora, kjer se prej ali slej razkrijejo osebnostne lastnosti posameznika.*

*Nezaupanje v internet kot ženitnega posrednika je dokaj veliko. Redki so posamezniki, ki verjamejo v možnost, da bi partnerja za dolgotrajnejšo ljubezensko zvezo ali zakon spoznali na spletu. Menim, da je število zakonskih zvez, ki so začete na spletu, prav zato majhno. Mnogi obiskovalci obenem »vidijo« internet samo kot posrednika pri spoznavanju partnerja za flirt. Internet je, kljub nesorazmerju med številom obiskovalcev in številom uresničenih zvez, le online agencija za posredovanje pri spoznavanju ljubezenskih partnerjev. Ob tem pa tudi ne smemo pozabiti, da so njegove usluge omejene na kiberprostor.*

*Virtualni svet in svet, v katerem živimo, sta povezana in soodvisna. Mnogim pa, po vsem sodeč, ni enostavno sprejeti dejstva, da kiberprostor ni nič manj stvaren od prostora, v katerem živimo.*

*Predvidevam, da je tako zato, ker kiberprostor mnogi opazujejo in označujejo kot nekaj imaginarnega, ob tem pa skoraj nikoli ne dvomijo o realnosti, v kateri živimo.*

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