

# **‘Understudied’ relationships’ ‘electronic’ friendships (e.g. relationships formed on the Internet).**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This is clearly a fascinating new area of research for social psychologists where study can be carried out through participant observation and on-line questionnaires.

The concept of “electronic friendships” refers to all interpersonal contacts through the medium of the internet. The three main sources are email, usenets and chat rooms.

## **EMAIL**

Email, or electronic mail, is a way of writing a message and, instead of posting it, you send via the internet to another person’s postbox, where it awaits collection by the recipient. This means one can collect an email anywhere one has access to a computer.

How does email differ from other forms of communication? Prior to the age of electronic methods, communication was either:

- Face to face (corporeal)
- Phone to phone (voice only)
- Written word (“snail mail”)

When we speak with someone face to face there are a host of channels through which we are communicating aside from actual words. In fact the non-verbal signals or *paralanguage* may be more important than the words themselves, for example body posture and eye gaze express liking for someone else. On the telephone some of these nonverbal signals are still there, such as pauses and tone of voice. In letters, all such signals have been removed or, if they are included, it is done deliberately. The reason why nonverbal signals tend to have so much power is that many of them are not under conscious control. Certainly some people are able to monitor the way they present themselves and can learn to control nonverbal cues that indicate, for example, uncertainty or dishonesty. But most people don’t and therefore we use nonverbal signals as a means of knowing what someone really means, especially the emotional content of their message.

For business contacts the lack of paralanguage would appear to make email an ideal form of communication, though there is a difficulty of

misunderstandings. You may think you have expressed yourself clearly but another person may take a different meaning from your words. Had the words been spoken, you might have accompanied them with subtle cues that aided interpretation.

New forms of email communication such as emoticons and fasmolia have developed in electronic communications so that the messages can have an emotional content and also as a means of creating a social group identity, (for examples of these see your textbook on page 89).

## **USENETS**

“Usenet” is an umbrella term for more than 14000 forums or newsgroups, each related to a specific topic. It is an ongoing discussion that you can join and leave and come back to any time you like. You just read what’s been posted, post your comment and come back and see what others say.

Such groups are open to abuse either from individuals offering help who are not qualified to do so, or from anti-social individuals who take advantage of the medium. Many people derive great satisfaction from usegroups but it has been questioned whether such relationships are shallow or genuine.

Research suggests that many relationships formed in this way lead on to more personal contact.

## **CHAT ROOMS**

A Chat Room is actually a channel over which people can meet and exchange messages in real time. The word “room” is used to promote the metaphor that you are actually speaking with someone as if in the same room.

Chats can take place among a large group, or individuals can go off on their own for private chats. Much of the focus is ultimately on romantic relationships and erotic encounters. Branwyn (1993) quoted by Deuel (1996) explains that “Compu-sex enthusiasts say it’s the ultimate safe sex for the 1990’s, with no exchange of bodily fluids, no loud smoke-filled clubs, and no morning after. People often continue real-time relationships when face to face contact is not possible.

The appealing nature of such relationships can be explained in terms of the ACE model (anonymity, convenience and escape). The danger is that affairs may be founded on untruths and vulnerable individuals may be seduced emotionally and sexually.