

# Unintentional Online Meeting of Partners: Specific Features, Attitudes, Experiences – Case Study in Serbia<sup>1</sup>

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**Unintentional Online Meeting of Partners: Specific Features, Attitudes, Experiences – Case Study in Serbia.** This study presents results of exploration study on the specific features involved in the process of unintentional meeting partners via Internet in Serbia. The research was conducted using the method of focus groups, consisting of 28 people, who have had personal experience of meeting and communicating with their partners online, and successful continuing of the relationship in the offline world. They perceive more advantages than disadvantages in using the Internet as a means of communication with other people, assessing online space as a suitable environment for communication in which emotional intimacy can be achieved, despite the absence of social cues.  
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## Study purpose

The purpose of this study is to shed some light on the specific features of communicating and meeting of future spouses partners via Internet, by using the method of a focus group. This paper challenges the 'reduced-cues' hypothesis of (especially early) Internet communication in the specific case of intimate communication. There is dilemma if absence of social signals (facial expression, vocal tone, body language, personal space, gestures, and proximity) is making private communication harder, slower, more superficial, or on the contrary is opening new channels of closeness. Question we are asking is: can computer mediated communication (CMC) lead to the highest level of closeness – which we defined as an intimate relationship developing into marriage, and in which cases? Our starting hypothesis is that private computer mediated communication can be deep and personal, and not only superficial and distant – attributes often assigned to communication via this medium. We also consider that reduced social cues (RSC) do not have to make interaction between people harder and less fluid, but that it is simply different communication channel which also enabled people to express their thoughts and feeling and connect on deeper level. As a confirmation of this deeper

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communication and establishing relations we see successful offline relations and marriages which they developed into. Having in mind positive outcome of relations that we are researching and the fact that they have not been established with the idea to seek a partner, starting hypothesis is that closeness via CMC must have been established, and done so in conditions of reduced social cues.

The peculiarity of this study is that is exclusively concerned with the possibilities of meeting, communicating and connecting of individuals on an intimate level apart from the dating sites, i.e. it aspires to enlighten some of the significant features of online communication and meeting when active search for a potential soul mate isn't the guiding motive for interaction. The research has been conducted by examining the attitudes of those persons who had experience in all stages of the process; starting with meeting and communicating online, meeting in person, dating and forming a marriage alliance.

Partly due to our operational definition of successful connections (partners firstly met in the online space, then moved to offline space, and are married / in cohabitation for at least one year), our research has also taken on historical context. We believe that the importance of this work lies also in the fact that it deals with computer mediated communication during one of the Internet developmental stage, which is necessarily followed by unique features. The emergence of Internet has introduced a new way of communication, but this communication is by no means uniform and has passed through different phases, depending on technological progress – the development of hardware and its prevalence in the population, Internet access and its speed, software development that is different service for communication, prices, etc. The period we are dealing with when the communication on the Internet is concerned, was marked by chatting on forums and in chat rooms, that is before the expansion of Facebook and other massive social networks. Introducing and online communication of the participants took place when Internet use was still not widespread as today, and when the Internet still represented a new medium. In this case it was the period encompassing the end of 90s and the beginning of 2000s. The last decade of the 20th century in Serbia was marked by a crisis of enormous proportions characterized as the devastation of the society. Possessing a PC and Internet wasn't common at the period. Such social surroundings indirectly influenced the choice and attitudes of the participants and hinted that online communication could be a special form of escapism and the activity of 'open minded' persons.

The research is predominantly qualitative, since one of the goals is precisely getting an insight into the personal experiences of the people who share positive experiences of communicating and meeting online, in order to shed

some light on intimate computer mediated communication and bonding of individuals in environment of reduced social cues, as well as to recognize and identify the eventual specific features of this phenomenon in Serbia in relation to some already established patterns and hypothesis, regarding the fact that the social environment is more traditional and patriarchal than most other social surroundings in which similar researches were conducted. Quantitative study of this kind in Serbia is not possible, due to the unavailability and a relatively small number of people who fit the criteria of sampling.

Likewise, the research tends to ascertain evaluative attitudes of the participants on the question of differences in the psychological and social surroundings present on the Internet in comparison to the offline space, of quality of communication on Internet as well as the kind of intimacy that may arise from it, as well as which specific features are perceived as advantages or disadvantages of this manner of acquaintance.

The work consists of the following sections: a brief review of previous research on the topic, followed by a description of the methodology and results of the study divided into two chapters that summarize the views and experiences of participants in focus groups on quality of communication in the online space, the intimacy level that may develop from them, advantages and disadvantages of CMC and other specifics. The paper ends with conclusions and a review of the bibliography.

### **Former research**

Online communication of people is subject of research for many years. Initial research where dominantly focused on task-related (business) CMC, concluding that Internet is shortening time required to acquire information and make decisions and enables coordination of work between geographically distant people and groups. (Liu 2002) With ongoing advancement of computers and Internet, CMC has become more widespread channel for private and even intimate communication. One of basic research question which surfaced is if absence of social signals makes this communication harder, slower, more superficial, or opens new channels of closeness.

The reduced social cues that are present in CMC are viewed as a “diminished form of Face-to-Face conversation” (Baym 2010) which leads to losing individuality (Kiesler – Sproull 1986), making interactions between people much more difficult to manage and less fluid. (Thurlow et al. 2005) Walther (1992b, according to Liu 2002) states that CMC’s limited cues cause the medium to be unable to convey all task-related and the social-emotion-related information within as little time as multichannel Face-to-Face (FtF) environments.

Yet there are studies that support the quality of CMC. Pascoe (2000) states that electronic communication, hiding one's identity among other things, ensures that attention is directed strictly to the content of the message and gives greater freedom to interlocutors. (Pascoe 2000, according to Giddens 2001). Walther (1992a) found that CMC groups showed greater intimacy and social-orientation than FtF groups over time, as well as that CMC groups achieved higher levels on several dimensions of interpersonal communication than FtF groups. (Walther 1995, according to Liu)

Part of that research, which has the most significance for this paper and on which we will focus from now on, is dealing with private and intimate communication which has moved from online to offline world. In a number of studies it has been established that the romantic relationships which start in online space can be successfully transferred to the offline sphere and continue their development effectively in it. (Baker 1998, 2002, 2005; Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Joinson 2001a; McKenna et al. 2002; McKenna – Bargh 2000; Merkle – Richardson 2000; Parks – Floyd 1996; Whitty 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Whitty – Carr 2006; Whitty – Gavin 2001) This type of communication and relations developed from it are characterized by many specificities. Apart from an obvious difference in the manner in which these relationships started compared to those which are formed offline, there is also a series of specific features distinguishing those relationships. Primarily, they can be divided based on whether they were formed as a result of interactions between persons whose purpose wasn't aimed at finding an emotional partner on the Internet, or by an active search of potential partners on dating sites or social networks. The first ones, named 'naturally formed relationships' by McKenna (2007) are different to the latter ones in regard to the manner and motivation involved in the commencement of interaction, as well as their development both in the cyber space as in the offline sphere. By 'naturally formed relationships', communication was not initiated with “dramatic model” (Giddens 2001) together with discomfort and expectations which go along it.

A number of studies showed that the process of relationship development is faster with online relationships in spite of absence of social cues, the cause of which is thought to be the safer environment in which people are ready to reveal more easily and more quickly their personal information. (Cooper – Sportolari 1997; Joinson 2001b; Levine 2000; Merkle – Richardson 2000; Walther 1995; Whitty 2003; Wysocki 1998; Wright 2004) In addition to the fact that communication can be more frequent, Baker (2008) points out an interesting fact that by using exclusively textual communication on the Internet, people exchange 4 times larger amount of information compared to the meeting in person or using a camera. In the communication via the Net

people are focused much more on one another than in communication taking place in the traditional surroundings.

Just like people in offline world who are acting their roles, trying to leave the best impression while “on stage” (Goffman 1971), Internet is also seen as a sort of stage with specific rules and challenges, as well as means and tools. Research shows that individuals are highly systematically and strategically oriented in representation in the online world, especially in making their profiles on dating sites, but apart from dating sites as well. (Bargh et al. 2002; Ellison et al. 2006; McKenna et al. 2002; Whitty 2007) According to Liu et al. (2001), CMC users can maintain a high frequency or long duration of messaging to achieve positive images of one another. It is precisely the possibility of managing the impression one has on others, along with aforementioned anonymity and the existence of a great number of potential interlocutors, that make the Internet an alluring alternative to the traditional social surroundings. (Merkle – Richardson 2000) It has also been pointed out that one can manage more easily the impression on others in a certain degree in the online world than in the offline one, and people are also more prone to idealizing their virtual partners in online communication, seeing in them what they are looking for. (Walther et al. 2001) Giddens’ claim that, by forging of self-identities, no matter how local their contexts of action, individuals contribute to influences that may have huge consequences, is especially important considering online space, since individual’s words and “acts” may have much wider reach. (Giddens 1991)

In the classical theory of social penetration presented by Altman and Taylor (1973), the process of meeting of the two people is represented through a comparison with a structure of a bow – communication starts with less personal choice of subjects, and, as the process of meeting unfolds, it goes deeper and deeper, towards more private issues of persons involved. In accordance, they also point out that the speed and order in which an individual reveals information about himself or herself is of crucial importance in the relationship development. Premature revelation of private details can be considered as an unnatural, aggressive and even desperate move, and it can bring the relationship to a halt, causing a break in further communication and relationship progress. On the other hand, in Internet communication many of these steps are omitted or one can pass more quickly through the stages of self-disclosure or meeting others. Internet users get to know each other in a faster and more personal way, because they have anonymity and psychological comfort issuing from anonymity, as opposed to the traditional communication. (Montgomery 1994; Walther 1996; Wysocki 1998) Social constraints affect communication of the virtual world in a much lesser degree, which gives interlocutors courage to have unconventional conversations and state their

attitudes with more clarity and freedom. McKenna (2007) also emphasizes that anonymity combined with finding the persons of similar interests and absence of physical component raises the tendency towards self-disclosure. It was precisely anonymity as one of the three items of the triple AAA model (accessibility, affordability and anonymity), responsible for the popularity of communication via Internet, that Al Cooper (1999) isolated. Besides the possibility to approach to a person investing a slighter psychological effort, the interruption of communication in the virtual world is also considerably devoid of the embarrassment of the traditional surrounding. Schnarch (1997) points out the possibility of making an emotional contact without risk, exposure or recognition as one of the powerful enticements of the Internet.

Certain differences in the course, mode and the speed of the relationship development in offline and online world were observed in former studies. In the development of the offline romantic relationships two basic factors leading to the establishing and development of a relationship were singled out: spatial closeness and physical attraction. For an initial contact to happen and to start a relationship at all the existence of spatial closeness is a necessary condition, while is the initial sparkle which makes two persons interested in one another, and provides interest to continue the interaction on both sides, is in fact physical attraction. On the contrary, precisely these two, one would say, most important dimension of dating, lose their significance in the cyber space. From the earliest till the latest papers devoted to this phenomenon, there is consensus of researchers that in the online world the space distance is not an obstacle to communication, and the importance of physical attractiveness is significantly lower. (Baker 1998, 2005; Cooper – Sportolari 1997; McKenna – Bargh 2000) Whitty (2004) points out in her studies that people are much less occupied with physical appearances when communicating on the Internet in comparison to 'the real world', even when love conversations are concerned. This certainly doesn't signify that the dimension of the physical attraction is irrelevant. More researches proved that in its absence the relationship terminates in most cases.

Also, a significant number of studies pointed out different stages of the relationship development in the online and offline worlds. In traditional relationships the relation develops from physical to emotional intimacy that is the progress of face-to-face relationships starts from an initial encounter in physical space, towards resemblance discovery and self-disclosure. (Baker 2008; Brehm 1992; Cooper 1999; Montgomery 1994) Contrary to this, most romantic relationships on the Internet undergo a reversed process, where the persons are connected on the basis of other criteria, most notably through communication, stating opinions and attitudes. (McKenna 2007; Baker 2008; Levine 2000; Pilkington – Lydon 1997)

## **Methodology**

As a method of exploratory studying this subject matter, we opted for the focus groups. Choosing this as the most adequate method is based on a fact that focus groups are confirmed as an exceptionally suitable and valuable means to explore and obtain attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions and to gain a larger amount of information in a shorter period of time. (Gibbs 1997; Kitzinger 2005; Liamputtong 2011; Morgan 1997) Focus groups are seen as valuable tools for exploring the degree of consensus on a given topic (Morgan – Kreuger 1993, according to Gibbs 1997) and exploring how points of view are constructed as well as how they are expressed. (Kitzinger – Barbour 1999) Focus group data can explain how stories, ideas and experiences function within a certain cultural setting. (Barnett 2002) Of great importance for our work is also the fact that focus groups, if well guided, promotes self-disclosure among participants and yields personalized rich, detailed descriptions. Likewise, taking into consideration that it is based on discussion of people with a specific shared experience, it enables the exchange and enlightening of the personal experiences and opinions in a safe surrounding. Also, the studied phenomenon is not well explored, and through guided and focused group discussions common facts and impressions can be identified, and generate fruitful hypotheses for further research.

The target group in the study was exclusively individuals with positive experience concerning encounters with emotional partners in the online space. As a positive experience we defined meeting on the Internet, following a period of chatting or mail correspondence, ensuing a meeting in person, entering an emotional relationship and finally a marriage alliance. In addition to these, two more criteria had to be fulfilled in order for a person to enter in our focus group. One of the criteria for the entrance of an individual into a focus group was his or her being in a marriage or an informal marriage alliance with their partners for at least a year. We opted for a period of at least one year in union as the “proof / guarantee” of the union’ stability, mostly related to cohabitations (which generally were found to be less stable than marriage unions). This was important for us as we defined marriages / cohabitations as the “highest level of intimacy and closeness” which is expected to last. Still, nobody was rejected due to being in the marriage shorter, since all of participants were in the marriage / cohabitation longer than one year. Also, it's important to mention second important criteria – our sample was formed solely by participants who met their partners randomly on the Internet, i.e. those who met apart from dating sites and other sites specialized for meeting emotional and conjugal partners. The choice for this sample was made in order to get an insight into the specific features of this process precisely at the time when individuals aren't

actively searching for a partner, but an emotional relationship is developed through interaction started due to some other reasons.

The study included three focus groups (with 11, 9 and 8 participants) consisted of persons ranging from 27 to 39 years of age. The age structure of the group was under the influence of the defined criteria for taking part in the research. Given that one of the basic conditions was that the participants are married, and taking into consideration that the Internet in Serbia became popular in the latter years of the 20th century, this resulted in the greatest incidence of people in 30s and late 20s of age. The participants of this age group precisely were those who accepted new technology and, through its mediation, were enabled to communicate. Most of the participants of the study belongs to a highly educated people, and none of them had less than high school. This educational profile of the group is the result of a fact that at the time when the participants met their partners on the Internet, possessing a computer and using the Internet were characteristics of educated and progressive people. However, the participants of the research originate from various social surroundings, from families differing in education, means and status profiles, and also from various-sized settlements. At the time of meeting all of them were staying in Serbia, and, apart from three participants, all of them live in Serbia at the present moment.

The study was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the focus groups were recruited from 11 participants, who were intended for preliminary exploration, and in which there were only two men. In order to test the significance of results from the work with the first group, two more focus groups were formed after months of animating and contacts on several Internet forums.

While first focus group was partially created with people who were acquired through our personal contacts, for other two groups we found participants fully via online forum where people are discussing their experiences. During preparation for our research, as we talked about it, it turned out that several people in our surrounding had this experience and were willing to share it with us. Some others on the other hand, told us that they knew somebody (friends, family members) who have had such experiences so they gave us their contacts. We contacted potential research participants via e-mails (or we talked in person – with ones we already knew) explaining them the purpose and methods of research. Probably due to the fact they knew us already in person, or their friends / family connected us to them, all people contacted this way had agreed to participate in the survey. Those who met our criteria, entered in the sample. In order to find people with this kind of experiences, we did research on Internet on this subject, which led us (beside online dating websites) to online forums on which people are discussing this topic and sharing

experiences. The most active forum we discovered on this topic is ana.rs, which is a well-known website in Serbia where people (mostly women) gather to discuss different topics, like fashion, going out, cooking, family, home, travel, beauty, health, love, etc. There are more than 24.000 active topics divided into different sections, and few of them is dedicated to meeting and dating via Internet. This topics have subjects like “Net love”, “Meeting on Internet”, “Falling in love via Internet”, on which more than 300 members are engaged in conversations. Everyone who registers on this forum can read all discussions and send private messages to other members. So in the first phase, by registering on this forum and reading multiple discussions and topics, we have identified potential participants (around 80 of them) on this subject. In the second phase we have sent them private messages via ana.rs website, explaining the details of our research (the topic, the aim, why we are contacting them, the methodology, etc.) and asking them if they would be interested to participate. We have guaranteed them utmost privacy, stating that collected data will be used only for science research. In the third phase, we continue our communication with the people who replied to our messages, explaining some additional details of the research, our expectations of them and took the basic demographic info about them as well as checked again if they match all the sample criteria. Large number of contacted people was initially interested and willing to share their story with us, but significant number of them backed off when they realized that they need to meet us (and other people) in person. Also some did not respond to initial message, we presume for some of them due to lack of interest and for other due to inactivity on forum. We also met some of the participants before the focus group meeting in order to explain details in person, ensure them about the research aims and privacy, and convince them to take the part in the research. The next step was to find date, time and place, that would be suitable for the most of them. In the fourth phase, the focus groups were prepared and held. As expected, some of the people who have said that were coming, finally didn't appear, but we still were satisfied with the number of the people gathered this way. At the end, 22% of initially contacted people took part in focus groups. We believe that most of people who accepted to meet us in person were motivated by the fact that they had very positive experience with phenomenon we are researching (we knew that by reading their posts in forum), leading to willingness to share their “unusual and unique” love story with us. Both focus groups were organized and held in University venue, which had additional positive impact on them, ensuring them that this research is serious. Focus groups lasted between 1 and 1,5 hours. All responses were collected during the course of the focus groups by taking notes, and arranged according to key questions and recorded in original.

Although pursued gender balance of respondents, and including another 8 men in the survey, the sample was dominated by women. This gender structure is consequential of a greater interest, openness and willingness of women to participate in the study and share their experiences and attitudes with the researchers as well as with the other participants in the discussion. The degree of openness of the men was significantly lower, and increased with the number of males in the group. The final number of study participants (28) who meet the required criteria, were made by almost everyone who responded to the invitation, and who could be gathered due to organizational reasons. The survey was conducted from December 2011th until March 2013th.

### **Study results**

The participants of the study were asked to discuss the specific features of online communicating and meeting and which of them they perceive as advantages or disadvantages compared to the classical ways of meeting, the differences in the psychological and social surroundings present on the Internet in comparison to the offline space, the quality of communication on Internet as well as a level of intimacy that may develop from it as well as the construction of self-image in the online world in the absence of social cues.

They perceive more advantages than disadvantages in using the Internet as a means of communication with other people, assessing online space as a suitable environment for communication in which emotional intimacy can be achieved despite of reduced social cues. These results were to be expected considering their positive experience.

### **From mystical to realistic world – emotional bonding in reduced social cues' environment**

Our research has shown that in the environment of reduced social cues, the trigger for the start of communication were sharing similar interests and the further closeness is achieved through conversation and share similar attitudes and opinions. Precisely as one of the most important and greatest specific features of meeting on the Internet, participants of the discussion singled out the possibility to meet a person exclusively through verbal communication, that is, without physical presence. The statements of the participants confirmed that people can grow strong feelings for one another in cyber space in a relatively short period and have a 'feeling of knowing someone very well' before they meet offline. (Baker 1998, 2000; Walther – Parks 2002) One of the statement is: 'I felt I knew him extremely well before we met in person. We had become immensely close, and I fully trusted him. A lot of people didn't quite understand this, and they showed great skepticism, but, for me, at that moment

he was one of the closest people in my life. We were able to talk the whole night through and wait for the dawn. This happened several times a week. The days gradually turned into expectation to talk with him.' According to the opinion of some participants, their online communication resembled conversations with 'their other self', similar to "writing a diary". The degree of intimacy established in this manner was crucial for communication to last, and also for the establishment of a partnership and living together to follow. The significance of 'the quality of communication' is therefore increased, since the participants of this research met their partners out of dating sites and social networks where individuals already provide a great amount of personal details.

Expressions of focus group participants confirmed Cooper et al. (2000) claim that online relations "stem from emotional intimacy rather than lustful attraction". According to presented, it is clear that both relationships started on the Internet and those which started out of it, develop from less intimate to more and more intimate in time. At first, individuals discuss different subjects, and then, if they become interested in each other, subjects change and become more intimate and more personal, which can result in establishing profound intimacy between people. Most participants of the discussion consider that the process of meeting and developing of intimacy in a relationship may be fast in online relationships, despite the reduced social cues. Using the channels of communication that are available, along with anonymity or safer surroundings where people are ready to reveal information about themselves faster and easier, individuals can achieve a very close relationship and deep communication, as evidenced by the stories of our patients. Experiences and statements of the participants of our focus group corroborate this and they also add the possibility of a more frequent communication. Since the online communication was only verbal and took place in absence of social cues, it was of great importance to keep – as Giddens would call it – the "narrative going" and to have the "on going story" (Giddens 1991), in order to maintain the other person's interest.

Participants stated that they could have interesting, relaxed and unconventional conversations with their interlocutors, which didn't match the topics and course of usual conversations with the real life persons. The general conclusion is that the Internet communication has enabled shortening of the usual social procedure of meeting and bonding, present in the offline space. Moving to certain subjects is faster and expressing of attitudes is easier. There is an interesting position, confirmed in a focus group that internet communication with the appropriate person could fulfill the need for intimacy and spiritual wealth. Therefore, one female participant says: 'With him I quickly moved to some of the substantive topics which I usually need much more time to address when talking to people in person. For example, we talked

immediately about religion and politics. Otherwise, those are the topics I don't discuss with anyone, and of course I never immediately tell anyone that I am an atheist, since it may not be well accepted by others. However, in our conversations on the Internet, I was much more open and direct, and I didn't hesitate to move on to topics and questions I was really interested in. Somehow, there (on the Internet) you don't have to think so much about whether you should or shouldn't discuss something. It's more relaxed.'

This kind of "atmosphere" incites conversation about different, often quite personal subjects which are much easier to discuss with people who aren't directly involved in our lives. A female participant says: 'The persons who you know in person are more likely to be judgmental and interfering. And on the Internet, someone may simply listen to your story without hidden intentions.' This fact can be accounted for by the phenomenon of 'strangers on the train', which McKenna (2007) renamed into 'Strangers on the Internet'.

In their answer to the question what it is like to communicate through writing – by chatting with a person who isn't geographically close and you don't know how that person looks like – most participants say that it is an unusual and in a way mystical experience, which can have a quite releasing and relaxing effect. One of the participants says: 'Conversation on the Internet breeds intimacy; you can talk in personal terms, because people are partly unaware of their own words, as if they forget that a real person is present on the other side.'

All the interviewees declared that they started communication without taking into consideration the physical appearance. Many of them didn't even have a photo of the other person at the beginning, and the pictures exchange took place after a shorter or longer period. This shows that the emotional intimacy was achieved despite not having a clear idea about the appearance of a person. All interviewees stated that the physical appearance of a person wasn't of crucial importance to them. This was especially emphasized by those who communicated with their partners for a longer period of time. A female participant of the group says: 'I was completely fascinated by him! I wasn't thinking at all if he was the same man in real life because I was totally in love. Physical appearance didn't matter at all to me. It was enough that his looks were average.' This certainly isn't to say that the dimension of the physical attraction is irrelevant. Some former works have showed that instead of absence of the body on Internet, the body and physical appearing in cyberspace is actually reconstructed in different ways. (Whitty 2004) Also, the participants of this study emphasized the importance of physical attraction at the first meeting. All participants of the focus group agreed that physical appearance wasn't crucial for the starting or continuing of online communication. However, they also point out that a certain dose of attraction is necessary when

two people meet in person, and if that is missing, there would be a weak chance to start emotional relationship. Some of them pointed out the possible disappointment if two people who achieved emotional closeness online do not attract each other physically, and saw this as potential drawback of online meeting. Still, this isn't stressed too hard, till they believed there is little chance for that to happen if the couple communicated for a longer time and established an emotional closeness and trust. Since all the participants had positive experiences, we may conclude that the mutual attraction did happen when they met in person.

Despite their positive experiences, respondents felt that it would be incorrect to form a completely idealistic picture of online meeting, which presumes that people always become fully close on the psychological level and build a mutually profound and honest relation based on complete trust. This is certainly a possible outcome and our study deals precisely with people who had this kind of experience, with no attention to make widespread conclusions from the experience of such a unique sample. Within all the members of the focus group, closeness and trust, as the desirable characteristics of potential partnerships, were established before introducing physical. Still, in many cases, even though the individuals hold very personal conversations, which took place faster than in the traditional surroundings, wherein they reveal very personal attitudes and experiences, a meeting can still remain a lonely fragment not leading to intimate relationships among interlocutors. This is how one of the participants defined it: 'Yes, you can start talking about some personal subjects more quickly. It's easier to strike up a conversation about topics you don't discuss when meeting people in person. Still, these can remain solitary islands, without making closer contacts. Sometimes it is more to do with seeing your own opinions and problems from different aspects. There should be more those solitary islands which can connect, to form a wider and a more complete picture, to build a mosaic. And finally, the meeting in person.'

### **Jumping over hurdles – specific features of private computer mediated communication**

One of the most significant advantages of computer mediated communication pointed out by the participants of the focus groups is the existence of fewer obstacles hindering start of communication and meeting, which is, they consider, mostly the result of anonymity provided by the Internet. Those obstacles are of psychological and social nature, and the possibility of neglecting geographical barriers and communication with spatially distant people.

The possibility of overcoming spatial barriers was extremely important for almost all the participants of the study. One should also bear in mind that at the

time when most participants met their spouses on the Internet (the end of 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century), due to the political and economic isolation of the country and enormous standard decline, the chances of travelling and making acquaintances with people outside the country borders were considerably diminished. A great majority of the young people of that period never gone out of Serbia, and many of them due to the difficult economic situation, never left their home regions. The focus group participants had a great interest in all the alternative ways that would allow introduction of something new and different. A lot of them perceived the Internet and online communication as one, or the only, way to connect with other and different people apart from their place of residence, apart from their city, country and habitual moving circles. For many of them the Internet represented a medium offering a glance into a different, interesting world, but, also, a chance to keep up with the same distant world.

One of the participants said: 'I have never really liked people in my surrounding, because I have always disliked the mentality and the way of thinking. I have always been attracted to something like Vojvodina (Serbian north province), what the people are like there, the way they think, behave and what their taste is like. And so, that was one of the things I immediately liked about her. Of course, not only that . . . but that among other things.' And a similar statement: 'It was a way to leave this town, and everyday society which surrounded me. I hoped to find some interesting content here and meet some interesting people. It wasn't how I had defined it in my mind back then, but now I am completely aware that it was my way of opening the door to something new and interesting, which I couldn't find in my surroundings.'

In the discussion which issued in the frame of the group, the participants almost nominally agreed on the statement that an outstanding advantage of Internet communication lies in its ability to enable meeting between people who wouldn't get into a contact otherwise, due to the lack of intertwining of circles depending on various social, educational and age categories. Great homogeneity of educational and age composition of the participants is the result of selective "Internet literacy" in Serbia at the end of last century, not the elimination of other educational and age groups in communication. Opinion is that Internet contacts can bring down prejudices about the "others" and bring a chance to communicate with them. Although this possibility to reach out to people from other social, cultural and educational circles have been already recorded in the literature as one of the great Internet benefits (Merkle – Richardson 2000), in Serbia at the time of the studied subjects, it had the additional "liberating" dimension. It was a kind of reaction to the impoverishment of society, the diverse sanctioning of life possibilities in the real world, and the search for a new ones. More participants agree that this

form of communication in particular enables people to find resemblances with others which, at first glance, aren't that obvious. One of the participants in the discussion observed: 'In all probability we wouldn't have been together if we had met somewhere in person. I was still a kid, and she was already working as a businesswoman, that is, a manager. She had a totally different outfit. If we had met somewhere by accident in the real life world, I would never have asked her out, actually, I wouldn't even have approached her because she seemed more serious, business-like and a bit unattainable. We belonged to two different worlds. This way, on chat, we weren't conscious of it at all and we realized that we had so many things in common, and we didn't even know about the things which would bring us apart in personal contact. Internet made it possible for us to get to know each other and see how similar we actually are.'

Some of the participants met their partners on forums, in groups and chat rooms where people of similar hobbies, ways of living and interests gather. In addition to groups, forums and chat rooms dedicated to music, which stand out in comparison to others, there were also forums dedicated to other topics: to particular faculty, to history, to travelling, etc., as well as forums designed exclusively for chatting of young people from all over the world. In addition to domestic forums, significant number of respondents were visiting the international (foreign) forums and chat rooms in order to communicate with people from other countries.

Although some of them met their future partners through forums and discussions where more people discussed the same time, they all move to the synchronous 1-to-1 communication (chat), which they consider very important for the further development of their relation due to the possibility to concentrate on the interlocutor. The attitude of the group is that the Internet is an excellent place where people who share the same affinities can meet, and who would be more difficult to approach in the physical space. According to the opinion of the participants of our focus group, it often occurs that the people gather on this specific Internet places almost every evening or more times a week, which would be impossible in a specific place in the physical space due to everyday obligations, spatial distance and impoverished Serbian society (low standard). In this manner the formation of 'specific Internet place societies' occurs, where people have feeling of knowing each other; they meet and spend time with each other regularly, and like Walther found out, this CMC groups may even show greater intimacy and social-orientation than FtF groups over time. (Walther 1992a) A few participants of our focus group had precisely this type of experience, and out of these Internet gatherings of an entire group of people ensued a more intimate acquaintance and, later, a deeper relation which grew into a relationship. The participants of the group who met their

partners by this manner of previous association on the Internet in the frames of 'online\_society' felt as they were already a part of a unique community existing as a counterpart of the real life society, and their knowing of others from the same society contributed to a more pleasant and relaxed feeling. First you find a "soul mate" and then establish an emotional relationship, as opposed to the process when in a potential partner try to find a soul mate. Participants in the discussion also considered that this method of bonding based on similar interests, is the advantage to the accidental introduction anywhere in the cyberspace, giving a better chance to get in (successful) emotional connection. These attitudes of the group speak in favor of former studies showing an immense diversification of online places, similar to the real world, so that the meeting place is of great importance. They also show a correlation between the meeting place and chances of successful relationship. (Baker 2008; Baker – Whitty 2007; McKenna 2007) Meeting in the frame of specific groups could provide a larger chance of success to these potential relationships, similar to the traditional meeting in which common interests and values make significant factors for a successful formation of relationship and its lasting. (Byrne et al. 1986)

It is significant to draw attention to another phenomenon crystalized during the discussion. Namely, according to most of our interlocutors, to have a computer and use the Internet at that period in Serbia already signified to belong to a certain circle of people – educated, modern, and alternative for that time and place. During that time desktop computers were primarily used in Serbia, and to purchase them one would need to pay multiple monthly salaries. Internet connection was dominantly made through public switched telephone network (PSTN) by using dial-up modems, and people would need to buy prepaid hours of Internet access from Internet Service Providers. Quality of connection was bad, and people often experienced low bandwidth issues. Additionally, connecting to Internet was often hard to achieve, due to technical problems and the fact that significant number of telephone lines in Serbia were implemented using Frequency Multiplexing or Time Division Multiplexing, meaning that multiple people with dedicated phone numbers could not use their phone lines at the same time. Also, after successfully connected to Internet, it would mean that other members of your household could not use the phone for calling people. That was the major issue, since mobile telephony was still emerging in Serbia at that time. In these circumstances, even if two people met on the Internet place which, at first glance, doesn't gather people of common interest but is of a general type, (such as, e.g. Chat room "Europe" on Yahoo.com), the bare fact of their presence on the site shows that they have something in common: they have a computer, they use the Internet and they feel the need to explore, at that moment, new and still less familiar types of

communication. These were mostly people who worked on computers, who belonged to the academic circles and or were young and curious. This is how one of the participants formulated his experience: 'Back then Internet was somewhat exotic. Only a few people used the Internet in Serbia, and that is why many of them roused interest. It was exciting to have an access to that specific group of people, if for no other qualities, then because of their possession Internet and its use for chatting.' The consent of participants is large about the attitude that nowadays there is a huge number of people on chat since 'today everyone in Serbia has a computer and access to the Internet', and that 'it is no longer a place as it used to be, consisting only of special and interesting people'. This transition of the Internet perceived by the sight of users in the light of possible contacts and meeting could also present a possible subject for some future research. One of the female participants in the discussion even stated: 'That was a romantic era of the Internet', referring to the time before social networks and abundance of information on every user. Instead, one could reach information on the interlocutor (including the picture) only by personal contact. The same participant continues: 'Now everything is too accessible. The spell that used to exist is lost, today the net is just like the real life. Everyone is there, you can see everything. There used to exist a true dose of mysticism!'

Participants of the research agreed that the Internet is especially suitable for naturally shy people, who find it difficult to make contacts and start communication, although most of them do not experience themselves as such.

All the participants of our focus group are of the opinion that communication over the Internet, its beginning as well as its end, means less psychological stress. Fear of rejection and failure and uncertainty are decreased due to the absence of an eye contact, as well as the chance to think over before writing an answer. As a great advantage of the Internet participants state a greater possibility of choice in comparison to the real life, i.e. a large number of people at one (Internet) place. This is how one of the participants of the focus group defines his attitude: 'There are more possibilities of meeting on the Internet than in the real life. If you go out and sit in a café, how many girls can you meet in one evening? Maybe one or two. On the Internet you can easily meet 10 girls in one evening. It's easier to approach girls (people) on the Internet. It's psychologically less difficult to make a move on someone on the Internet and be refused. In the real world, in the café for example, during a normal going out, to be refused is a highly embarrassing experience, not only because of the refusal but also because of the public. Such problems don't appear on the Internet. Even when I was refused, I wasn't discouraged to try again.'

Our participants of the focus group consider that it is easier to manage the impression of self on the Internet, to point good qualities and hide possible shortcomings even without lying. Bearing in mind Goffman's theory of Presentation of self (Goffman, 1959), we can notice that the respondents highlighted Internet space as a kind of "stage" too, where people are also trying to present themselves in the best light. But it is interesting that, since CMC takes place in a personal space where the communicators are physically alone and relaxed, it gave respondents the feeling of comfort and of being behind the scene that is "offstage". However, our respondents point out that in the online space there is a possibility of strong manipulation of self-impression. They pointed this out as one of the greatest drawbacks of the online communication, highlighting the possibility of relatively easy false representation and sharing of false information about selves, which they found as potentially dangerous. However, they believe that in deep, high-quality and long communication like they had, it is difficult for such misrepresentation to go unnoticed and to be long-term maintenance. Yet the participants highlighted the dangers existing on the Internet, noting that today the Internet is a much more dangerous place than it used to be in "their time".

When questioned to what extent have they consciously built the impression of themselves, the majority of them points out that the process was not strategic or calculated, because it was not directed towards seeking a potential partner, but that they were more or less careful about what kind of impression might leave what they "say". 'I didn't conceal anything. On the Internet one can easier insist on subjects about which people are comfortable, and neglect some others. This way people may create a non-false, but an improved image of themselves.' The experience of the focus group participants tell that certain facts which they pointed out were perceived as extremely favorable by their interlocutors and that a good story was being built. The possibility to easier manipulate the impression on others is mainly perceived negatively by participants, because they consider that it may lead to potentially dangerous situations. A female participant of the discussion says: 'People see what they wish to see on the Internet. Since that person is physically absent, thus relieving us of the menacing reality, people easily get carried away and imagine that they are talking to an ideal person. For this reason it can be very dangerous, both in terms of latter disappointment and getting hoodwinked by someone on purpose. If no other harm is done, you can spend a lot of time on wrong people.'

Apart from easier starting of communication, it's much easier to break communication on the Internet. Abrupt stop in communication doesn't have to imply psychological uneasiness and explanations expected in the 'real world', and as Tong – Walther (2011) state there is a wide diversity of verbal and non-verbal way of rejections in cyberspace. It suffices not to answer a person's

message, or put that person on the ignore status. Precisely this possibility of having control over communication, together with aforementioned 'wider pool of potential partners', make online communication quite attractive. (McKenna 2007) One of the group participants says: 'I highly recommend communication via Internet and meeting new people. It's totally great. On one hand, you are tucked in your room and your world, and on the other hand you communicate with someone outside of that world. It cannot be described. I'd even call it a bit mystic. It's feels great. You are safe, but you can satisfy your curiosity.' The majority of respondents said that they have chatted from their homes; in the afternoon, evening and / or night, that is at the time when the telephone line and the computer (which usually was the only one in the house and available to all members of the household) were free and when individuals could had their peace and privacy. The feeling of privacy and safety, many respondents singled out as an important part of the positive feeling that accompanied the process of rapprochement.

### **Final considerations**

This research was conducted in order to shed light on the specifics of intimate computer mediated communication, as well as to determine whether and under what conditions a quality intimate communication in the online space can be developed and can lead to maximum closeness. The research, conducted by focus group composed of individuals who have just had such a positive experience, gave a valuable insight into the specifics, advantages and disadvantages of this communication. It also confirmed that, in the reduced social cues environment, individuals can successfully overcome these constraints and establish a close personal relationship, using the channels and resources that are available. Moreover, the research has shown that the Internet communication has enabled shortening of the usual social procedures of approaching and bonding that are present in the offline space.

These conclusions and findings, which came from such a unique sample do not pretend to relate to the overall character of computer mediated communication. Answers, attitudes and experiences of participants would certainly differ if we also have testimonies from those whose online communication did not ended in a marriage or who did not have such a positive experience. Additional similar studies, in which the focus would be on individuals with different experiences, would definitely point out to other aspects of the CMC and led to other conclusions.

Characteristic features of this research are: online meeting and communicating in terms of the RSC, specific time when the contacts in the online world were established, i.e. early Internet communication in Serbia, specific social structure in Serbia for the same period of time, the absence of

intention to seek a partner, as a result of which signals that should attract the interlocutor were not dominant, but again an astonishingly high degree of closeness was achieved.

The respondents agree that the basic features of their communication on the Net were spontaneity, quality and freedom of communicating. According to their experiences, those were the crucial prerequisites for starting a successful relationship in both online and offline world. In addition, they find that online space, characterized by reduced social cues, has even encouraged the positive outcomes of direct and more honest communication. Although CMC certainly limits interlocutors in a certain way, it also provides the tools and features, so alienation cannot be attributed to it, emphasize our examinees. In the context of classical Goffman's researches (1971) on interpersonal communication, we believe that our study has found a strong, concentrated interaction, that is "a meeting has occurred". Since in this case the meeting took place in cyber space, the interaction was – despite or perhaps due to the RSC – even more concentrated, partly because of focusing only to one interlocutor during the chat, and partly because of using only the written words.

The highest degree of homogeneity in attitudes has been achieved on the ease of Internet communication at all stages of the process, as well as breaking the standard communication barriers. Respondents also agreed that, while chatting on the Internet, they had the feeling that they are in a protected, safe zone, and that they were feeling less as if they are on Goffman's "on stage". However, they add that online space is suitable for building a positive image and even for manipulating with these image, even though they haven't practiced it themselves, at least not intentionally, strategically and consciously, due to the absence of intention to seek a partner. Moreover, in spite of their positive experience, a fraction of participants opted for the common pattern and emphasized the drawbacks of the Internet when regarded as a place for establishing contact between potential partners. In certain attitudes one can recognize stereotypes about the dangers of the Internet communication. Where from does this domination of the pattern over the experience, 'negative collective' over 'positive collective' stem, considering that participants see themselves as somewhat avangard, at least when this phenomenon is considered as an object of research? The question was raised whether these attitudes issue rather from a more traditional surrounding in Serbia, that is, slower mind transition in comparison to the development of the Internet technology, or the maturity of the participants which increases the level of caution? The issues that have been raised on this occasion is that the participants of the focus group emphasized the changes which have taken place on the Internet since the time they met their partners until the present day. It is certain that the development of the social networks and profiles, which offer an

abundance of information on the users from the start, make the atmosphere on the Internet different from the one existing 10 years ago. Obviously, the speed in the development of the Internet technology conditions people to perceive the time lapse as faster than it actually is. Therefore, it is possible that in only about 15 years of Internet use, the participants recognize the 'romanticist' and 'massive' stage, whereas this type of labelling the manner of establishing partnership in the offline world takes significantly more time. Although the epithet of romance could be significantly related to the amount of successful Internet relationships incorporated in the study and the 'pioneer' experiences of the same type, the participants clearly emphasize the differences in Internet communication between 'now' and 'then'. The focus group participants showed relative resistance towards the 'Facebook stage of the Internet', which substituted the 'stage of romantism' which they experienced. Such transition of the Internet (in the light of possible contacts and introduction) is followed, according to the opinion of the focus group, by the transition from the feeling of safety and exclusivity to the feeling of insecurity and massiveness.

On the other hand, it is indicative that the basic sampling criterion (at least one year of marital experience after online acquaintances) unexpectedly resulted in emerging of some specific local environment' impacts in the final results. In fact, as mentioned criterion included a time-consuming process, it indirectly specified the timing of subjects' online communication. It happened that it mostly took place in the period of extreme political, social and economic crisis in Serbia, the period of low purchasing power, unavailability of PC, poor "internet literacy". Thus also defined other characteristics of our participants; they represented a minority in that moment – better educated and younger part of society. Research has shown that the outcome of this chain of causality was a kind of participants' elitism. Elitism wasn't neither explicitly stated nor named so in the talks, but it could be detected in the comments. The high educational level of the members of our focus groups formally confirmed it, since as many as 9 participants were on PhD studies or at the University. Therefore, a great eloquence of the participants of the focus groups wasn't a surprise – they were clearly expressing their views and connecting them with the situation in Serbia at that time. Thus our conclusion is even more logical – Internet communication had an additional "liberating" dimension regarding reduced possibilities in the real world caused by crisis period of Serbian society.

The study showed that in Serbia, despite specific social surrounding, there was not a significant clash between the results achieved in Serbia and those compiled abroad. The possibility of a successful personal bonding in the online space, as well as removing various barriers in communication is a global phenomenon. One gets an impression that certain findings on Internet relationships have a universal value, detached from the cultural environment,

social circumstances, duration of the relationship, but directly connected to the psychological elements of communication and establishing intimacy. The Internet can serve as a catalyst for positive emotions before physical contact takes place, coz even in the environment with reduced social cues, individuals can, by using the channels and resources that are available, find the way to each other.

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