

## 2 The paradoxical nature of online relationships

I date this girl for two years – and then the nagging starts: "I wanna know your name ..."

Mike Binder

After discussing some of the novel aspects of cyberspace in the previous chapter, I turn now to discuss the nature of online relationships. I will show that such novelty, and in particular the interactive nature of virtual reality, offers us a new type of personal relationship. Such relationships characteristically have features typical of both close and remote offline relationships. The coexistence of these opposing features cannot be found in offline relationships. Although my discussion is focused upon heterosexual relationships, most of the claims are valid for homosexual or bisexual relationships as well.

### Detached attachment

If it weren't for the fact that the TV set and the refrigerator are so far apart, some of us wouldn't get any exercise at all.

Joey Adams

A friend of mine told me that when he was married to his second wife, he met a wonderful woman and fell deeply in love with her. He did not know how to solve his difficult situation and after long deliberations he came up with the following brilliant idea: their relationship, he suggested, would be that of detached attachment. The woman replied that this was not close enough for her. He then got divorced and married this woman, with whom he still lives happily.

Detached attachment (or "detachment") is indeed difficult to conduct offline, as a romantic relationship is typically characterized by direct,

continuous contact – settling for less is painful. However, what seems to be an obvious paradox in actual-space – that is, intimate closeness at a distance – can prevail in cyberspace. Sometimes an intense online romantic attachment is between people who are physically separated and who are committed in some way or another to a different romantic relationship. The other commitment and physical separation make the relationship detached, but the intense emotions sustain the great attachment.

Human beings have never before had access to such an ambivalent type of romantic relationship. This possibility presents an entirely different ball game in the field of personal interactions. In this exciting, novel game, the rules and consequences are also different.

The following are major opposing aspects of online romantic relationships:

1. distance and immediacy;
2. lean and rich communication;
3. anonymity and self-disclosure;
4. sincerity and deception;
5. continuity and discontinuity;
6. marginal physical investment and considerable mental investment.

### Distance and immediacy

One of the advantages of living alone is that you don't have to wake up in the arms of a loved one.

Marrion Smith

In typical, offline relationships, two intimate friends are geographically close, and, when they are not together, they are generally aware of each other's approximate location. Online relationships exist between people who are spatially separated. This separation can consist of great physical distance, and the two online friends may not even know each other's exact geographical location. Physical distance becomes irrelevant in cyberspace; some people even speak about the death of (physical) distance. Although each person uses the Internet from different locales, while they are in cyberspace they are actually in the same space.<sup>1</sup>

Online personal relationships are immediate in a temporal sense – two lovers can communicate with no significant time delay – and in the sense that there is no human third party that mediates the conversation. In cyberspace, physical location is of less importance – we could say that this

space enables a person to be in two places at the same time, or at least to be detached from her physical context. Despite the spatial separation, everything is close in cyberspace: everywhere is just a typing distance away if you have a modem or high-speed Internet access. Although your lover may be 3,000 miles away, it feels to you as if he or she is just next door, or even inside the room. As one married woman testifies: "We also have a very wonderful time when we chat, so wonderful that it actually feels like we are in the same room doing the things we are typing."<sup>2</sup>

In light of the temporal immediacy, emotional immediacy is present as well: people can express their spontaneous, authentic emotional reactions, as is done in offline relationships. However, in online relationships, people also have the choice of postponing their reaction, in order to allow time to moderate their response. This option seldom exists in offline relationships where the person is in front of you and you are expected to respond at once.

Together with its temporal immediacy and speed, cyberspace enables people to lose track of time and space and to be drawn into an alternative, imaginary environment where the speed of time and the spatial location are more malleable. On the one hand, in this alternative world, time may slow down in the sense that people do not rush to do things; they take their time. On the other hand, while chatting online, time goes by at an amazing pace. In such experiences time seems to pass differently to the way it usually does.<sup>3</sup>

The anonymity and safety of cyberspace enable netizens to be more explicit and direct than they are in offline situations. An online affair is not only shaped by our own fantasies and is therefore less likely to disappoint us, but it is also free from criticism of a third party. While in the actual world our attraction to another person is altered by the way other people view this person, in cyberspace we do not see them through the critical eyes of other people and this allows a more direct interaction.

The direct manner of interaction is evident concerning sexual relations and other intimate matters – such as whether they have children, their marital status, or drinking habits – that many people consider significant but that are usually not explicitly discussed in initial face-to-face meetings. Such anonymity is particularly valuable for shy people or for social groups (such as women) who are expected, according to social norms, to display shyness or modesty.<sup>4</sup>

Further technological inventions may be able to offer online relationships some features of offline relationships that are currently not available online. Thus, whereas nowadays cybersex consists of written messages,

future developments may enable people to transmit tactile sensations. There is already a cybersex suit, which interacts with a DVD recording, and can deliver sensations to various parts of the body at the command of specially adapted adult movies. It is plausible to assume that further developments may enable such sensations in one-to-one interactions. NASA has actually developed a similar system in order to enable astronauts in space to conduct virtual sexual relationships with their partners.

Online relationships can be considered direct in another important sense: the participants are engaged in a direct, intimate conversation about issues they care about. They do not have to beat around the bush. Accordingly, superficial politeness is less common on the Net; emotional sincerity is more important. It is not necessary to be polite and respond to every message that is sent; if you do not want to pursue a particular online relationship, you can simply not respond to the writer. No excuses or avoiding strategies are required: you can just say "No" or say nothing. An online romantic relationship is direct because it is more to the point; in this sense, it is emotionally purer, having less "noise" stemming from traditional norms or practical constraints. Indeed, people often consider online sexual relationships as "just pure pleasure."

Imagination enables people to perceive themselves as detached from their body and this sets them free to perform activities they would not do if they were in the actual physical vicinity of their online partner. A great emotional intimacy is achieved since the body, which is the source of moral and mental constraints in personal relationships, does not interfere; the possibility of leaving their bodies at home makes it easier for correspondents to reveal their thoughts and minds. The lack of any physical contact has certain purifying aspects – it appears as though pure spirit travels faster through the modem.

Cyberspace allows each person more breathing space. However, this space still allows two lovers to feel as if they are directly connected – as if their bodies do not interfere, allowing their minds to be in direct communication; they feel as if their minds are melting. As one woman writes: "I don't know what it's like to touch this man, yet he has touched me a thousand times in my dreams." Accordingly, the two partners often describe each other as part of their soul, as "soul mates." Thus, one woman says: "I believe he is my soul mate, even though I can't see him. I feel him near me." Getting to know each other online is considered to be an almost spiritual enterprise in which a deeper and purer kind of interaction takes place: "You don't have all the distractions of how someone looks. It's mind to mind and spirit to spirit talking." Accordingly, cybersex may not seem

pure enough: "We started to engage in cybersex, but he stopped it saying that he sensed something special beginning and didn't want to ruin it."<sup>5</sup> The physical separation forces the online relationship to maintain its freshness and spirituality; in this sense, it is like a continuous period of courtship. Hence, online affairs may keep their high intensity even if they persevere over a long time.

### Lean and rich communication

Your mind is what interests me the most.

Bumper sticker

Face-to-face communication relies on many sources of information in addition to the verbal one: facial expressions, voice, posture, hands, gaze, focus, and so on. Such sources provide crucial signals for communicating our emotions and understanding the other person's attitudes. Online communication relies on fewer sources and is often based merely on written messages. The lack of visual content seems to be a particularly significant deficiency. Our eyes are of central importance in revealing our emotional attitudes. Sometimes, one look in the eyes conveys more profound information than many words. We say, "A picture is worth a thousand words."

Some online communications use icons — termed "emoticons" or "smilies" — to signify the emotional state of the sender. Although these icons may substitute detailed descriptions of present emotions, they still constitute information which senders are aware of and deliberately convey. Nonverbal communication often involves information that the subject is not fully aware of and does not always want to convey to other people.

The lack of nonverbal information in text-based online communication led some researchers to claim that such communication is leaner and hence online relationships are less involving, less rich, and less personal than offline relationships.<sup>6</sup> It is true that not all types of information available in face-to-face communication are also available in online communication; in this sense, the latter is leaner. However, this does not mean that online relationships are necessarily less involving, less rich, or less personal than offline relationships.

Fewer vehicles of communication can provide richer information than a greater number of communicative vehicles; in this sense, less can mean more. Quality does not merely derive from quantity. In a certain type of

communication, people may be ready to provide more profound information than they would in communication based on a greater number of communicative vehicles (which is thus potentially richer). Text-based communication with a sincere person may provide richer information than a face-to-face meeting with another person. Indeed, as compared to face-to-face communication, online communication involves higher proportions of more intimate questions and lower proportions of peripheral questions. Online interactants seem to make more attributions from fewer cues.<sup>7</sup> Although in some cases online impressions of the other, and hence romantic relationships, may take longer to develop, over time they can become as profound and as intimate as in offline circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Although involving fewer communicative vehicles, online communication has one feature that is absent from offline communication: multi-conversing, that is, the ability to conduct a conversation simultaneously, but nevertheless privately, with a few people at the same time.<sup>9</sup> This type of communication, which prevails in chat rooms and instant messaging, further increases the ability to conduct several romantic relationships at the same time.

In both offline and online romantic relationships, understanding your partner's mind is complex and involves much more than merely reading faces or messages; it involves paying attention to many subtle cues. This is especially true in online communication, where there are fewer sources of information. Reading your partner's mind in online communication consists of reading both the lines and between the lines. The kinds of words chosen, the speed of the response, the length and frequency of messages are all cues to your partner's perception of the type and quality of the relationship. Thus, a fast response indicates great interest, whereas a slow response suggests lack of enthusiasm.

This kind of reading sensitivity is so developed in online communication that people often say that their online lovers can read their mind better than their spouses can. Detecting, for example, that someone had a difficult day at work is often easier for an offline partner than an online partner. This is so since in offline relationships people must communicate with each other even if they have had a difficult day. However, the online lover, lacking many types of sensory information, must be sensitive to every signal conveyed by the other person — otherwise, their relationship cannot develop further. We may say then that, whereas in offline marital relationships seeing one another daily may make each spouse take the other for granted — and hence become blind to the other — in online

relationships the inability to see the other prevents both partners from taking the other for granted and this enables each to perceive the other more clearly.

Online communication is often so profound that people maintain that it almost feels unnecessary since the correspondents seem to have the same thoughts, feelings, and dreams. Thus, a married woman writes about her communication with a married man: "We both knew what our hearts were feeling at the time without having to say a word. I feel like I've known Rob all of my life." Another married woman testifies about her online affair: "We knew what we thought before we spoke it." Maggie, an Argentinean woman having an online affair with Walt, an American man, writes: "We know what each other is going to type before the other has the chance to. We even argue like an old married couple." Ruth writes: "Many times we had written the same ideas at the same time. He was even able to know the perfume I wore without me saying a word about it to him, and it is not a usual fragrance either!"<sup>10</sup> Hence, people sometimes say that they feel as if the words on the screen actually touch them.

The different types of communication typical of offline and online romantic relationships influence the type of information conveyed. In face-to-face meetings, people have little control over a large portion of the conveyed information. This is particularly true concerning the physical aspect that is a significant part of it. In online relationships, self-presentation is carefully chosen and the physical aspect is considerably less significant.

The reliance of online relationships on one type of communication may sometimes lead to negative emotions due to misunderstanding. Thus, something that is intended ironically may cause the other person to feel insulted and angry. In offline relationships, other cues carried by eye contact, facial expression, or tone of voice may clarify and contextualize the irony or humor, so that the intention behind the words becomes obvious; in online communication, such balancing factors are absent. The lean communication of online relationships may also generate intense positive emotions because the negative aspects of the correspondent tend to remain concealed.

Brenda Danet suggests considering online typed communication as being both an attenuated and an enhanced means of communication in comparison to speech and writing. It is attenuated writing because the text is no longer a tangible physical object; it is enhanced writing since it is more immediate, interactive, and dynamic than ordinary writing. Online communication can also be viewed as attenuated speech, because

it is a kind of attenuated conversation; it is enhanced speech since, unlike ordinary speech, it leaves traces, and can therefore be re-examined for a long time afterwards. Email communication is characterized by a distinctive combination of oral and written styles. The new medium invites informality even in business or official contexts. It is a kind of "interactive written discourse."<sup>11</sup>

The different mediums of communication online give rise to different depths in online relationships. Some of these relationships are highly random, shallow, and last less than a few minutes; others are serious, intensive, and last for months or years. It is not the case, however, that a leaner medium is also associated with a shallower relationship. Despite the usually lean nature of online communication, it gives rise to profound personal relationships. What is important in this regard is the nature of connectivity rather than the content.

A means of communication that enables richer content to be sent is not necessarily preferable to a leaner means of communication. Thus, when videophones eventually become as cheap as telephones, they will not necessarily become more popular than phones are. Similarly, email is the most popular online communication despite the presence of other richer means of online communication. In certain circumstances, people prefer the use of leaner types of communication. Such circumstances include instances when richer communication might threaten the impression that the agent wishes to give or when a leaner type of communication might enhance that impression. Thus, the leaner nature of communication might be preferred when one's external appearance could be an obstacle to forming a meaningful relationship or when one's sense of humor can be more readily demonstrated.<sup>12</sup>

So far, online relationships have mainly been based upon text-based communication. However, it is already possible to add visual and audible information to such relationships. In the future, it is likely that other sensory information, such as tactile and olfactory information, will be included as well, thus closing the gap between offline and online relationships. Such developments will make online relationships more attractive, but will also eliminate their advantages. In order to avoid losing these advantages, people will need to be able to introduce various types of sensory information at their own pace, according to their own choice. For some people, introducing visual information at the beginning of the relationship may be suitable, while others may prefer to continue the relationship via written messages alone, until the relationship has matured.

## Anonymity and self-disclosure

Women might be able to fake orgasms. But men can fake whole relationships.

Sharon Stone

Two seemingly contrasting features of online relationships are: greater anonymity and greater self-disclosure. Anonymity is associated with concealment, which is contradictory to self-disclosure. However, greater anonymity typically facilitates greater self-disclosure, and in turn increases familiarity and intimacy.

Self-disclosure is significant in online relationships. As one man said: "when you're on a one-on-one with somebody, people really reveal a lot of their soul to you. And you are entrusted to keep what you have there as sacred property, because they share a piece of themselves with you."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, several studies have found that there is faster and more profound self-disclosure in online communication than in face-to-face meetings.<sup>14</sup> This may be attributed to several major reasons: (a) greater anonymity and reduced vulnerability, (b) lack of "gating features," (c) lack of other means to know each other, and (d) greater ease in finding similar others.

### (a) Greater anonymity and reduced vulnerability

In online relationships people can be partially or fully anonymous: people can conceal their true identity or important aspects of it. Anonymity in online relationships facilitates self-disclosure as it reduces the risks involved in disclosing intimate information about oneself. People can express themselves more freely since they are more anonymous, less accountable, and hence less vulnerable. Because of our sensitivity regarding our loved ones, the person closest to us may never know our deepest secrets or desires.<sup>15</sup> A woman may be nervous about telling her spouse her sexual fantasies — for fear it may ruin their relationship. However, she may readily tell her online lover about such fantasies without fear of repercussions. A 33-year-old married woman, who loves to cyber, writes: "Sometimes there are things you like to fantasize about that you can share online and don't feel comfortable sharing with your significant other."<sup>16</sup>

In offline personal relationships, such as marriage, there is less room for mistakes: one or several significant mistakes may wound the spouse in a way that will terminate the relationship or severely harm its quality. Although marriage vows state "for better or for worse," and marriage is held to be a life-long commitment, a few mistakes — or even a single

significant mistake — may still jeopardize the whole relationship. You risk profoundly insulting your spouse if you describe your fantasies of having an extramarital affair or if you reveal your dislike of some elements in the spouse's external appearance. Indeed, the perceived threat to an intimate relationship is the most commonly cited reason for not discussing one's sexual needs and preferences with one's partner.<sup>17</sup>

Such great vulnerability, which stems from sincere self-disclosure, is less typical of online relationships for various reasons. First, there are fewer practical ways in which the online partner can actually harm you: the fear of actual retaliation or mental disapproval is not significant. Second, it is less likely that the online partner will be insulted by fantasies, as the whole relationship consists of fantasies. Third, even if the online partner is insulted and consequently terminates the relationship, the harm can often be undone, as there are many other available partners. No wonder many participants in online affairs often declare that they have told each other "absolutely everything": they speak about things online that they have never revealed to anyone else, including their spouses. It is often just like talking to a best friend. As Ruth, a single mother of four daughters, writes: "In this man, I found not only romance and love, but also a best friend."<sup>18</sup>

The conflict between openness and closedness (revealing-concealing, expressiveness-protectiveness) is typical of offline personal relationships, especially for stigmatized groups, such as those involving homosexuality, HIV-positive status, AIDS, sexual abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism, mental illness, and epilepsy. This conflict is considerably reduced in cyberspace. Take, for example, homosexuals who may experience anxiety in disclosing their sexual orientation, and yet for whom failure to disclose this endangers their true self.<sup>19</sup> In the anonymity of cyberspace, disclosing one's true feelings is much easier. Accordingly, it is more likely that in cyberspace the process of self-disclosure will be linear, moving in a unidirectional and cumulative fashion from nondisclosure to near full disclosure. In offline circumstances, the opposing urges to reveal and to conceal makes people oscillate between guarded self-concealment and candid self-disclosure.<sup>20</sup>

Writing to a stranger is in a sense similar to writing in a diary.<sup>21</sup> In both cases, you can freely express your thoughts and such self-disclosure does not make you vulnerable. The advantage of online relationships over writing in a diary is their interactive nature: your thoughts will be read by a real human being, who is ready to offer some comfort or advice for coping with difficult circumstances.

Online self-disclosure also resembles the "strangers on a train" phenomenon, where people sometimes share intimate information with their



anonymous seatmate.<sup>22</sup> Since anonymity in cyberspace is greater than on a train, revealing intimate personal details is more common in cyberspace. Online relationships enable people to hide behind a form of communication that is somewhat "removed from life." It is easier to open up to a faceless stranger that you do not have to look at while revealing your secret or to see the next morning. For similar reasons, priests remain concealed when they hear confessions. All these cases support the notion that fear of being embarrassed or being the object of contempt is considerably reduced when the listener is not present or is not seen, or is unlikely to be seen again.

In other circumstances, the listener can be present and seen, but he or she is in a position that cannot hurt you. This is the case, for example, of a therapist, lawyer, or a priest. In the professional presence of such functionaries, you can freely express your emotions and whatever is on your mind without risking hurt. Hence, standard offline rules that guard and limit your behavior and emotional expression are suspended. This freedom enables you to open up and become closer to these functionaries. It is not surprising that people often fall in love with their therapist, lawyer, or priest. Online relations are similar in this regard: people can freely express their emotions and become emotionally close without being vulnerable. Accordingly, it is also easier to fall in love on the Net.

The connection between anonymity and vulnerability also explains why voicing your honest negative opinion about a certain person is easier when you do not have a personal relationship with that person or when he or she is not in your physical vicinity and therefore is unable to harm you. Anonymity and lack of practical implications greatly facilitate the sincere expression of attitudes.

Despite the reduced vulnerability in cyberspace, the online agent can be hurt as well. In this regard, two major aspects are significant: (a) most of the many high hopes that cyberspace generates are not fulfilled – thereby causing frequent and profound disappointments; and (b) profound self-disclosure leaves the agent's mind naked, without any masks to protect her – and this is a highly vulnerable position for anyone.

In online communication, people can disappear the moment they so wish. This ability facilitates the disclosure of intimate information. Online relationships enable people to disclose personal information when they feel ready to do so and in the manner in which they choose. In offline relationships, the manner and pace of self-disclosure are, to a great extent, less voluntary and hence are associated with greater emotional and social tension.

Online relationships typically have fewer practical implications than have offline relationships; hence, participants in these relationships are less vulnerable. Indeed, in offline relationships, people tend not to reveal much intimate information until they feel safe. In cyberspace, people are ready to disclose more intimate information since they assume that anonymity and spatial distance reduce the risk of harmful consequences. Sex in cyberspace is safe not only in the physical sense, since viruses cannot travel in that space, but also in the psychological sense that is provided by being anonymous. Since feeling safe is a major precondition for sexual arousal, the safety provided by cyberspace may explain the vast interest in cybersex.<sup>23</sup>

Cyberspace also provides the opposite conditions that are often involved in sexual arousal: novelty, risk, and unpredictability. In this sense, the great excitement of cybersex may be connected to the not-so-unusual desire to have sex in strange or public places, such as a park, public toilet, spa, parked car, office, or airplanes. Both cybersex and public sex involve these features of novelty, risk, and unpredictability. Having cybersex in a workplace or at your home while your partner is around may also be considered as public in a sense, and it involves the above features that increase sexual excitement.

The impression of reduced vulnerability may be illusory, as online communication often leaves more traces than offline communication: the written messages can be retrieved and become public, whereas spoken conversations cannot (unless they are being tapped). Sitting alone in front of the computer enhances the illusion of being completely alone and hence there is a tendency to underestimate the risk of revealing confidential, personal information.

Anonymity in cyberspace can be compared to wearing a mask: in both cases, the sense of anonymity is powerful and makes you feel different.<sup>24</sup> Great anonymity, however, often prevents closeness and the feeling of authenticity. Accordingly, as an online relationship develops, participants take off some elements of their online masks and reveal more of their true identities. This act of trust in turn further facilitates self-disclosure, but at the same time increases vulnerability.

#### (b) Lack of "gating features"

The greater tendencies toward self-disclosure in cyberspace can also be explained by a lack of the usual "gating features" – easily discernible features such as unattractive external appearance, stereotypic characteristics, visible shyness, or social anxiety – which might be an

obstacle to the establishment of any close relationship. These gates often prevent people from developing relationships to the stage at which disclosure of intimate information could begin. Such barriers are typically absent in cyberspace and hence do not obstruct the early stages of potentially rewarding relationships.<sup>25</sup> As one woman wrote about her online affair: "The best part of meeting someone this way, is there is nothing between you but personality. No physical, cosmetic or material barriers. And after all, aren't those things honestly unimportant?"<sup>26</sup>

We may also speak about internal gates. Whereas external gating features, such as external appearance, prevent *others* from initiating romantic relationships with an individual who possesses these features, internal gating features, such as shyness or traditional norms, prevent *the agent* from initiating romantic relationships with someone else. Cyberspace is useful in overcoming these gates as well. Online anonymity gives these internal gating features lesser weight. Moreover, many people may not have the courage to initiate a romantic relationship, but they can maintain such a relationship once they are more familiar with the other person. Cyberspace provides the opportunity to get to know each other without having to deal directly with such gates.

#### (c) *Lack of other means to know each other*

Another reason for the greater self-disclosure in online relationships is that this is the only way in which the correspondents can get to know each other. In offline relationships, people know a lot about each other from their actual meetings and interaction, as well as possibly from their circle of acquaintances, family, neighbors, or friends. This information is absent in online relationships. Moreover, since conversations are at the heart of online affairs, it is essential that they be frequent and cover a large range of topics – some of them profoundly personal, such as the correspondents' feelings about themselves and each other, and some of them more trivial, such as describing the writers' neighborhoods, families, jobs, travels, and day-to-day activities. Both personal and trivial topics serve to increase intimacy. Knowing about each other is essential for intimate relationships, but, in online relationships, this information can be provided only through self-disclosure. Although Miss Manners (Judith Martin) tells us that it is far more impressive when others discover your good qualities without your help, such help is necessary in online relationships. It may make the relationship less polite, but far more sincere.

In an online relationship, it is not merely permitted to articulate personal and intimate issues, it is an expected norm. Indeed, most people testify that they are more direct when flirting online than in person.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, many people claim that they know their online partner better than they know some of their oldest and best friends. Thus, Wendy, who has had a few online affairs, says: "I don't think people can 'hide' [in online relationships] the real self for very long at all. I know a lot of people online better than I've known almost anybody offline. I know more about their inner lives and their thoughts and dreams and fears."<sup>28</sup> It is also worth noting that, despite the anonymity offered by the Web, people often tend to reveal intimate details about themselves on home Web pages.<sup>29</sup>

#### (d) *Greater ease in finding similar others*

People who share similar backgrounds, attitudes, and interests are more likely to establish romantic relationships and to remain together.<sup>30</sup> Finding similar others is not easy in offline circumstances where the availability of such people is limited to your local arena. Even within this arena, detecting such people is difficult. Finding others similar to oneself in cyberspace is much easier as they are more available and one is able to detect such similarity, as well as other desirable characteristics, more rapidly than in offline circumstances. Since we feel closer to similar others, it is easier and more natural to disclose intimate information about ourselves when we engage with such people.

The above considerations indicate why many people are more comfortable about revealing whatever is on their mind when their exchange is typed than when it is spoken. In this sense, online conversations involve the art of seeing things that are invisible. It is no wonder, therefore, that a 42-year-old woman writes: "What I dislike about online dating is the lack of mystery."<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that a newly developed software program can extrapolate the underlying emotional feel of a piece of text as it passes through a mail server. Individual words are tagged such as "happy," "sad," "nice," or "nasty," and it searches for telltale punctuation, such as exclamation marks. When it has decided on the overall mood of the message being sent, it will insert what it feels as the definitive icon.<sup>32</sup> As the process of self-disclosure is significant online, such software is not so useful in this domain – and, of course, it can be fooled.

The greater opportunities for self-disclosure in cyberspace are part of the so-called "disinhibition effect," which makes people online feel more uninhibited and express themselves more openly. Accordingly, people

say and do things in cyberspace that they would not ordinarily say and do in offline circumstances. John Suler indicates that this is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, people reveal intimate information and show unusual acts of kindness. On the other hand, the disinhibition effect may lead people to use rude language and openly express anger, hatred, even threats; they may also explore places that they would never visit in the actual world, such as online sites offering pornography or violence. Accordingly to Suler, the characteristics responsible for this effect are anonymity ("you don't know me"), invisibility ("you can't see me"), asynchronicity ("see you later"), solipsistic introjection ("it's all in my head"), dissociation ("it's just a game"), and neutralizing of status ("we're equals"). All these characteristics enable people to protect themselves better from the possible harmful consequences of being more open than usual. Anonymity and invisibility provide a hiding place. Asynchronicity helps one to avoid dealing with one's correspondent's immediate reaction and hence enables one to formulate a careful response, to be delivered when one wants. Solipsistic introjection, in which people assume that the whole event is merely in their heads, decreases the reality of the interaction and hence its emotional intensity. Considering the interaction to be merely a game has a similar effect of decreasing the degree of reality. Neutralizing status enhances people's ability to cope with other people.<sup>33</sup>

**Intimacy.** The disinhibition effect, and in particular the greater tendency toward self-disclosure online, can lead to a profound sense of intimacy online. Consider, for instance, the following message, which was sent by a woman to her online lover after just a few email exchanges: "I just LOVE talking to you. You are so funny, and you always seem to know exactly what I am thinking. It is as though your words were happening inside my HEART, and they ring so true, they make me feel like you and I are SOULMATES." A similar attitude is expressed by Sara, a married woman in Toronto, who is conducting an online affair with Edward in Australia: "I feel so close to you. I feel as though we have reached an intimacy that can only increase as time goes by. This relationship has made me feel more alive than I ever thought possible. When we're together, we are alone, safe, and excited! I love it!" Another person writes: "It is embarrassing how easily and quickly you can start dealing with very intimate matters. People start writing about things which couldn't be handled even within a year if they communicated all the time face-to-face."<sup>34</sup> Profound online intimacy seems to compensate for the physical distance; people report that they feel as if the great emotional heat between them melts the physical distance.

It has been claimed that the faster and more profound nature of online self-disclosure leads to faster and more profound intimacy. Profound intimacy that might take months or years to appear in offline relationships may only take days or weeks online. In online relationships, people usually get to know each other more quickly and more intimately. In online relationships, the information may arrive at a slower pace – although sometimes it may even arrive faster – but it has a potential to reach a greater variety and deeper aspects of the partner's life and to do it at a faster pace.<sup>35</sup>

Profound intimacy is not easy to achieve, as it may increase the vulnerability of the agent, and hence people are cautious about becoming too intimate when the risk of being hurt is significant. This is a major reason why in cyberspace, where vulnerability is low, intimacy may be more quickly achieved. The need for such quick intimacy is due to the more dynamic nature of cyberspace: it is easier to find an alternative partner and hence people can signoff or change their screenname at any time. The greater intimacy online is also due to the ability to lose track of current time and space and to be drawn into an alternative, imaginary world where only the two lovers exist and where they may feel very close to each other.

The increased level of intimacy often leads to extraordinarily intense emotional experiences. Thus, a woman whose handle name is Lady Shelby writes that "I didn't realize that you could fall so deep and so quickly to someone who was just a name and typed sentences on a computer." Another woman describes her feelings for her online lover: "I know that I care far more than I have been able to confess to him. It scares me to let someone have that much of me in so short a period of time."<sup>36</sup>

The initial development of relations in offline interactions is characterized by uncertainty reduction behavior. The more information one gets about the other person, the less uncertainty one experiences. Even greater uncertainty prevails in online relationships as the written medium precludes the exchange of nonverbal cues typical of face-to-face interaction. Furthermore, many offline strategies for reducing uncertainty are not available in online relationships. For example, one is unable to observe the partner while he or she interacts with other people, and one cannot garner information about the partner from mutual acquaintances.<sup>37</sup>

Self-disclosure is the major means for reducing uncertainty in online relationships. Such a reduction can be done directly, when the partner offers details about herself, or indirectly, by using strategies such as verbal interrogation, deception detection, and analysis of the style and content



of the written messages. Many studies indicate the value of self-disclosure for the development of personal relationships — one reason being that people who disclose more intimately are often viewed by others as more trusting, friendly, and warm. However, self-disclosure may also be viewed as inappropriate. Thus, disclosing personal information in the earliest stages of a relationship may be too much, too soon. There appear to be fairly strict social rules governing what information is appropriate to reveal and in what contexts.<sup>38</sup> It seems that these rules are being altered in cyberspace, where revealing information at early stages of the relationship is regarded as more appropriate.

Different types of information about the partner are revealed in the initial stages of online and offline romantic affairs. In online affairs, much intimate information about the partner is revealed, but the partner's real identity and certain external characteristics may remain hidden. When people are certain that they are anonymous, they can reveal everything else without becoming vulnerable. In face-to-face affairs, the identity is evident, but intimate information is withheld — it is not revealed until further trust is established and vulnerability is considerably reduced. However, since self-disclosure facilitates the development of personal relationships, its slower pace in offline relationships will result in a slower pace in the development of the whole relationship.

### Sincerity and deception

Q. — Dr. CyberLove, I met a great woman online and I'm crazy about her. I'm wondering though — she sent me a picture of herself, and she looks just like Cindy Crawford. Do you think she sent me a fake picture?

A. — Of course not! You'd be surprised how many people look just like Cindy Crawford. In fact, that's why she's so successful. She has that familiar, girl-next-door look.<sup>39</sup>

Romantic relationships have traditionally involved deceptive elements; these are supposed to increase the romantic attraction and to decrease the risk of ending the relationship. Cyberspace provides more means to improve the deception. The more voluntary nature of online self-presentation involves the risk of being more susceptible to manipulations; in such controlled exposure, there is much room for deception and misrepresentation. As one woman remarked: "It's harder to lie when you live 3 blocks away than 500 miles away."<sup>40</sup>

Netizens are often dishonest about their identifying features, such as age, race, height, weight, gender, or employment. When it comes to

interests and background, there are no significant differences between offline and online relationships. In the latter, false claims concerning age and external appearance are difficult to detect; false claims concerning interests, occupation, education, and other background characteristics are easier to refute, as those issues become the topic of conversations between the two online partners. Indeed, in one survey, 48% of users reported that they changed their age "occasionally," and 23% reported they did so "often." Furthermore, 38% changed their race while online, and 5% admitted to changing their gender occasionally. In both offline and online relationships, when the level of commitment is high, misrepresentation is low.<sup>41</sup>

It is interesting to note that, in chat rooms, men are more likely to lie than women. Men are more likely to lie about their socio-economic status; women are more likely to lie for safety reasons. Both often believe that by disguising their identity, they can be more emotionally honest and open. Lying in this case signifies a desire to reveal a deeper level of truth about the self, while avoiding the risk involved in reducing privacy.<sup>42</sup>

Online relationships, however, encourage many people to present a more accurate picture of their true self, which is characterized as that version of self that a person believes she actually is, but is unable to present, or is prevented from presenting, to others in most situations. This is especially true for people whose immediate apparent characteristics are not perceived in the most favorable light. These people are motivated to deepen their new relationships further by transforming them into offline relationships as well. Indeed, a sizeable proportion of such relationships leads to engagement or marriage. The stability of these online relationships compares quite favorably to that of offline relationships.<sup>43</sup>

Greater control over the aspects people are ready to conceal or reveal puts less strain on online relationships and reduces the conflict between emotional disclosure and privacy. Although cyberspace provides opportunities for individuals to present themselves as someone else, many people present themselves honestly online. This is especially true if the relationship continues and develops further. The more time people spend in chatting with each other, the more open they are about themselves and the less likely they are to lie.

At the beginning of online relationships, people may lie about external identifying features, such as age, race, marital status, number of children, or employment; however, they cannot lie about constitutive personal features, such as kindness, a sense of humor, witiness, and personal interests, all of which emerge during lengthy online conversations. While

Like self-disclosure, sincerity can also be painful. Sometimes we do not want to know all the other person's secrets. When we are more sincere, though, the less vulnerable nature of cyberspace reduces the risks of hurting other people.

In light of the above considerations, I would say that dreams, rather than deception, characterize online relationships. Such dreams are often accompanied by a profound knowledge of reality.

### Continuity and discontinuity

Let there be spaces in your togetherness.

Khalil Gibran

In an important sense, offline romantic relationships can be regarded as continuous. The two lovers may not be together all the time, but they typically have an idea of each other's whereabouts. This idea may be wrong in some of its details, but the general picture is usually accurate. In offline relationships, people typically do not suddenly disappear from each other's view. They gradually leave the room, they often say good-bye, and they usually return. In offline relationships, discontinuity – such as sudden disappearance or sudden return – requires an explanation.

Such continuity is often absent in online romantic relationships where people can simply disappear, not because they have died, but because they have suddenly decided not to communicate (temporarily or permanently) or because matters in their offline environment have become more important to them. Sudden disappearance in cyberspace is easy – it merely requires not pressing a certain button; hence, it is common and needs no explanation. As one person puts it: "The cool thing about cybersex is you never have to talk to the other person again if you don't want to. It is a lot harder to do that in real life."<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the tactic of avoidance and escape is likely to prevail in online relationships more than in offline relationships.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, the termination of online affairs can be of a more unexpected and sudden nature. The termination can be unexpected since people are not aware of most of their partners' actual circumstances. It may also be sudden since it is easy to terminate online relationships – there are almost no practical matters one needs to take care of. The great online spiritual match between the two partners does not mean that the partners have similar expectations of pursuing that match offline: this discrepancy

may lead to a sudden termination of the online relationship. Such a sudden termination is clearly expressed in the following description: "I knew we were too different, but things didn't even GRADUALLY get worse. They just stopped."<sup>52</sup>

In another way, however, online romantic relationships can be regarded as more continuous than offline relationships. They are continuous in the sense that they can be conducted at any time; accordingly, people anticipate them and think about them all the time. Online relationships have scarcely any barriers: they can take place twenty-four hours, seven days a week, in the comfort of your house or office – regardless of bad weather, having "nothing" to wear, the children playing around you, catching a cold, or having a plain bad hair day! Having an online affair is like going to a party whenever you want to, without having to leave your home.

The following are a few authentic descriptions of this continuous aspect of online affairs. Heidi is a married woman having an online affair with Todd, who has a girlfriend; she writes: "I can't seem to be away from him for a minute! He is in my EVERY thought! Everything I say, everything I do, it's all him!" Another married woman describes her online affair: "We could not stop thinking about each other every moment of the day and night." Another woman says: "I missed not talking to him throughout the day." A 27-year-old woman having an online affair with an 18-year-old man writes: "I spend every waking hour thinking about him. I can't get him out of my mind and it's driving me crazy. I can't wait to get home everyday just to see if he has mailed me any letters." Another woman testifies: "I couldn't eat, sleep, or think about anything but him. No man had ever made me feel this way." A married woman who is conducting a cyberaffair with a married man – even though she testifies that she loves her husband – notes: "If I don't see him online or we miss a scheduled chat, I feel depressed for days. I just can't stop looking for him online."<sup>53</sup>

We can say that online romantic relationships may be discontinuous in a physical, temporal sense because online communication is not continuous; nevertheless, these relationships are continuous in an emotional sense, in that the online lovers are always on each other's mind. This continuous, yet distanced, aspect of online relationships can be problematic, as it creates expectations that are not always fulfilled. Email exchange can occur many times a day, and since people are constantly waiting for these messages to arrive, the relationship and the beloved is always on the mind of the lover. As Belle, a married woman for twelve years, reports: "When I would shut my eyes, read a book or poem, listen to music, watch a

movie, drive my car, anything, he was there with me, inside my mind leading my life on, like a dog leading a blind man."<sup>54</sup>

A related cause of this type of online continuity is the lack of minimum time limitations upon online "meeting": email messages can be very brief, consisting of one sentence or even one word. This enables sending and receiving messages many times a day. Take, for example, the following description by Kari: "I usually picked up her messages in the morning, and when I didn't get mail from her, I really felt let down. I worried about her and wondered if she was safe. I'd log on every hour to see if she was just sending me mail late that day." One woman writes: "For me cybering caused me numerous sleepless nights, tons of tears, day after day of 'will he be online.' Do I advise it for others????? NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO." <sup>55</sup>

In offline relationships, practical constraints, such as one's work, determine to a large extent people's schedule and hence their separation from their intimates. In such relationships, you cannot meet a person for thirty seconds, say that you love her, and then go about your business. You can, of course, call your lover twenty times a day and tell her that you love her, but this may ruin her schedule since the call may come at an inconvenient time for her. In online communication, sending twenty messages is common and not intrusive since people are sending and receiving these messages at their own convenience. There is no need to coordinate schedules and venues.

The continuous aspect of online romantic relationships indicates the continuous emotional effect on the participants. Take, for example, an unfriendly dispute stemming from a misunderstanding or insult. In offline relationships, the two people have to face the dispute and solve it one way or another. In online relationships, one person can just disappear for a while without any explanation. This sudden discontinuity does not prevent each of them from ruminating about the relationship and experiencing various emotions toward the other person. However, significant discontinuity reduces, and sometimes even eliminates, the extent of concentration on the other person.

In both offline and online romantic relationships, external factors influence the continuity, or lack of it, of the relationship. In online relationships, it is the actual, different physical environment of each participant that underlies the discontinuous aspect: each is living in a different environment — including sometimes having a different partner — and the separation is overcome by a sophisticated type of communication. In offline relationships, the physical environment of the two lovers is essentially similar, but there are practical constraints upon their communication, such as busy schedules or too much familiarity.

## Physical and mental investment

He must have made that before he died.

Yogi Berra, referring to Steve McQueen while watching one of his movies

Face-to-face romantic relationships are characterized by significant investment in the relationship by both partners. The investment can be physical — involving, for example, money, time, and obligations to do various activities that one does not typically want to do — or mental, which can include intense emotions and mental effort.

Cyberspace seems to be a perfect world — by investing minimum physical resources, people can do almost anything they wish to do. Finding the right online partner and maintaining the relationship with this partner often require fewer resources than finding a suitable offline partner. Paying attention to incoming emails costs much less than paying for a dinner or a movie. No one is so poor that he is unable even to pay attention. Jackie Kennedy once said that sex is a bad thing because it rumples the clothes. Well, cybersex, which some people may consider as not much more than one-hand typing, overcomes this problem, as it never rumples clothes.

People often justify their online sexual affairs by mentioning that they had very little time in their busy schedules to pursue sexual contacts on a face-to-face basis. In contrast to enduring romantic relationships online, cybersex does not necessarily require a lot of preparatory, nonsexual small talk; it can skip this stage. As one woman wrote: "During my separation and into my divorce, I found cyber and phone sex to be relatively satisfying. I had a non-cyber relationship for a year, but found the demands on my time to be excessive and the paycheck too small. I work in the type of job that sucks a hundred percent out of you."<sup>56</sup> Using imagination requires fewer resources — especially physical ones — than those required for real actions. Emotional imagination enables us to accrue various affective benefits, such as feeling better, without carrying out the relevant tasks required in offline relationships for obtaining such benefits. For example, in sexual fantasies one may simulate the pleasure of intercourse with an attractive person without finding such a willing person, without investing in building an actual relationship with this person, and without carrying the burden associated with it.

Online emotional experiences may be compared to receiving a salary without earning it by hard work. Needless to say, there is no free lunch and there is a price people must pay for their online, unearned emotional salary. The price is related to their actual partners, who suffer most from

the occupation with online affairs. Based on her experience, a married woman writes: "cyber affairs create unhappiness in the home; even when the innocent spouse knows nothing of the affair. Women become emotionally detached from their husbands and depend more on the cyber lover to give them their fix."<sup>57</sup> The cost of the unearned emotional salary is also expressed in the agent's ability to function. Thus, one woman writes: "I get up every morning and I can't function till I check my email. I feel the rush each time I receive one. The times there is no mail, I walk around like the world has just ended."<sup>58</sup> Unlike with a one-night cyberstand, people invest a lot of mental energy and time in long-term romantic online relationships.

Modern society promotes the value of efficiency – and hence speed. Through the Internet, and other modern types of communication, we acquire needed information in a speedy and efficient manner, thereby saving a lot of resources. Time has become one of the precious commodities we most like to save. Indeed, by pressing a button, we can immediately know the weather in the country we are going to visit next week, or acquire personal information about someone whom we are going to meet or write about. Greater pace at a lower cost has become the hallmark of modern society.

The need to be efficient – that is, to save resources, and particularly time – is also evident in the realm of romantic relationships: we do not have enough resources to meet all available partners before deciding who would be our best soul mate. However, romantic relationships are also characterized by an opposing need: getting to know each other is a time-consuming activity that should not be done too quickly. Cyberspace is useful in dealing with these opposing trends. It provides a most efficient way to meet the maximum number of desirable people. Accordingly, not only "losers" take advantage of online dating, but also those who are searching for better choices in the limited time they have. Cyberspace, however, also fulfills the need to get to know the other person well – to have information not merely about external appearance, but also about basic characteristics, values, attitudes, and desires, which are so crucial for long-term relationships. The greater tendency toward self-disclosure online facilitates such knowledge. There is, of course, certain information that is missing from online communication and is significant for its future prospects. However, this information is easy to reveal in a subsequent face-to-face meeting.

The above considerations concerning the paradoxical nature of cyberlove clearly pertain to cybersex as well. In the same manner that cyberlove occupies a middle position between private fantasies and actual

romance with another person – and hence it may have features of both – cybersex occupies a middle position between masturbation, which is a solo activity, and actual sex, which involves another person. Both kinds of online affairs are neither completely private, nor fully public – they are based upon private fantasies, but the interaction is with real people in a medium that can become public. The other person is both an imaginary actor in our private fantasies and a real partner in actual interactions. The virtual reality that is constructed is built upon actual raw materials. It is like play and art, both of which comprise a blend of fact and fiction.<sup>59</sup>

## Distant relationships

Relationship at a distance can do things for the heart that a closer, day-to-day companionship cannot.

Thomas Moore

Closeness is a crucial element determining emotional significance and hence emotional intensity. Because emotions are highly personal, they are usually elicited by those who are relevant or close to us. When someone is too detached from us, we are unlikely to have any emotional attitude toward her.

Distance typically decreases emotional intensity, as it is contrary to the involved and intimate perspective typical of emotions. Love, which incorporates a profoundly positive evaluation of the other person, includes the wish to become as close as possible to that person. The intensity of hate can often be decreased by increasing the subject-object distance. Hate is not directed at those who are completely strangers to us and who have no contact with us whatsoever. When the object of hate is no longer close or relevant, hatred is very likely to diminish or fade completely. In marital relationships, hate is usually expressed by evading the situation and acting coldly, as if the close relationship that is supposed to prevail in marriage no longer existed. Hate is then directed at people whom we perceive to be too close to us. Laughing at ourselves serves to distance us from the shameful situation, as we join others in taking a fresh view of our circumstances. This humorous perspective also helps to reduce the significance of the shaming situation. Temporal distance, like other types of distance, decreases emotional intensity. Thus, in hope and fear a temporal distance between the agent and the emotional object will reduce emotional intensity. At a distance, events often seem less significant than they are when

they are nearer. Accordingly, as the saying goes, sometimes time can heal a wounded heart.

Physical proximity is usually emotionally significant because it is often relevant to our well-being. Emotions are often directed at our neighbors. Envy is notorious in this regard: our neighbor's grass seems greener than ours. As one proverb puts it: "The envious man thinks that he will be able to walk better if his neighbor breaks a leg." However, not everyone who lives in our neighborhood is of great emotional significance to us. Some people may be sadder when their favorite football team loses than when they hear that a person in their neighborhood has died. Physical proximity does not always lead to emotional significance.

Although distance typically decreases emotional intensity, there are circumstances in which distance increases it. Diderot argued that "distance is a great promoter of admiration." Indeed, a typical difference between envy and admiration is that, in envy, the subject-object gap is much smaller. Admiration is different from love in that it implies distance and hence a lack of reciprocity. There are also circumstances in which temporal distance may amplify the event. In these cases, the time that separates us from the event is used for incessant rumination upon it; this makes the event more central for us and hence our emotions intensify.

Contemporary personal relationships among primary groups, such as friends, family, and partners, are different from such classical relationships in the sense that the physical distance among individuals has increased — thus, individuals no longer live together from birth to death.<sup>60</sup> Whereas the Internet offers a vital way to bridge that distance, online relationships create a type of personal relationship in which such distance is further increased.

Physical proximity has long been considered a positive factor in both initiating and maintaining romantic bonds. Indeed, romantic relationships are partially differentiated from mere friendships by involving behaviors (such as fondling, caressing, kissing, and making love) that necessitate physical proximity.<sup>61</sup> The chances were good that the seeker's "one and only" would be found not far from where the seeker lived.<sup>62</sup> The resources and effort required in this case are considerably less than in the case of distant relationships. Accordingly, distance is often considered a negative factor in maintaining romantic bonds, because, at great distances, it is much more difficult to carry on the activities typical of such bonds. In the absence of physical proximity and the activities that it allows, it is doubtful whether romantic relationships can flourish. Distant

relationships often rely on either imagining physical proximity or expecting that proximity to be achieved in the future.

Online personal relationships are characterized by physical distance and emotional closeness. Other relationships may involve physical closeness and emotional distance. An example of the latter is a forced relationship with a disliked partner. Although personal relationships are typically characterized by voluntary choice associated with affection and respect, many intimate relationships are not voluntary: people may dislike their partner, but feel that they must maintain the relationships whether or not they wish to. Such relationships can be maintained by increasing the emotional distance between the two partners.<sup>63</sup> This type of situation is rare in online relationships, which involve less commitment and fewer practical limitations on terminating the relationship.

The increasing number of distant relationships is associated with the fact that more women are pursuing goals independent of their male partners. This increases the mobility of women and hence the prevalence of distant relationships. However, whereas offline distant relationships cost money to maintain, online relationships are cheap to maintain. Moreover, cyberspace offers the chance of distant relationships not merely to mobile people, but to everyone. Another commonly reported difficulty in distant relationships, such as commuter marriages, is that couples miss the luxury of daily discussions of "trivial" matters with their spouses — the sharing of little things.<sup>64</sup> This difficulty, too, does not appear in online relationships, which entirely consist of conversations about everything, be it large or small.

The Buddhist state of neutral feeling, which is an attitude of even-mindedness and impartiality toward all people, is a radical state of physical closeness and emotional distance. In such a state, emotions are eliminated — even toward those who are physically close to us — by eliminating sensitivity to our surroundings. Whereas online relationships have been characterized as "detached attachment" — that is, physically remote, but emotionally close — the relationship associated with this Buddhist state may be characterized as "attached detachment" — that is, physically close, but emotionally detached.

Distance is important for gaining an adequate perspective. Thus, when we look at something from very close up, our vision is fragmented and often distorted. In the extreme case where there is no distance at all, that is, when we place the object right next to the eye itself, we do not see it for what it actually is. We need some distance in order to achieve a perspective that encompasses multiple aspects of the object and thereby makes the perspective less fragmented.



In a similar manner, some kind of distance is important for personal relationships. Significant and temporally extended physical distance may harm them, but more limited distance may be beneficial. As the saying goes: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Several studies indicate that long-distance couples are more satisfied with their relationships and with their communication and more in love than are geographically close couples; accordingly, the former relationships enjoy a higher rate of survival.<sup>65</sup> It seems that the distance may focus the partners' attention on profound aspects of their relationships and help them to disregard the superficial ones. These people are likely to value their relationships even more, and, at the same time, the distance enhances the likelihood that they will idealize their partners.

In itself, distance is not necessarily harmful to romantic relationships. Finding the right measure and nature of physical and emotional distance is crucial for a satisfactory romantic relationship. Distance may have its own costs, but an appropriate distance can minimize the impact of those costs.

Online relationships are a unique type of distant relationship that seems to overcome some of the main problems of other types of distant relationships. The Internet enables a constant flow of communication that can become profound and intimate. Love becomes intense, and the participants feel close to each other. Nevertheless, online relationships cannot overcome the desire for physical closeness. Accordingly, online romantic relationships can typically complement, but not completely substitute for, offline relationships. Consider the following confession of a married woman about her online romance with a married man:

It started out with very innocent conversation. As time went on, we discussed our families and how happily married we were with our spouses. Before we knew it, we had fallen deeply in love with each other. Even though we both knew in our hearts that we loved our spouses, we cannot resist these feelings we have for each other. We are closer with each other than with our spouses. I have never loved a man as I do this one. I feel more for him than I ever have for my husband. This may sound odd, but we believe you can love two people at one time.<sup>66</sup>

Online distant relationships are often associated with nostalgia. Nostalgia is a longing for circumstances that no longer exist or have never existed. Nostalgia has a utopian dimension stemming from the considerable role imagination plays in it. Hence, nostalgia is often about virtual reality that cannot be actualized. In this sense, nostalgia is not always about

the past; it can also be directed toward the future or the present.<sup>67</sup> Like nostalgia, online romantic relationships often involve yearning for virtual circumstances that cannot exist. In both cases, the moment we try to actualize longing by transferring it to belonging, longing often disappears. In this sense, by actualizing nostalgia or actualizing an online affair, we may kill the thing we love.

### Summary

Letter writing is the only device for combining solitude with good company.

Lord Byron

Online communication involves a new type of romantic relationship in which features of close and remote relationships are combined. In online relationships, people are neither close, intimate friends nor complete strangers. Online relationships constitute a unique kind of relationship – termed “detached attachment,” or, in short, “detachment” – that includes opposing features whose presence in offline relationships would be paradoxical. The major opposing aspects of online romantic relationships are as follows: (1) distance and immediacy; (2) lean and rich communication; (3) anonymity and self-disclosure; (4) sincerity and deception; (5) continuity and discontinuity; (6) marginal physical investment and considerable mental investment.

Online romantic relationships are distant in a spatial sense, but are immediate in a temporal sense – the two lovers can communicate with no significant time delay and there is no human third party that mediates the conversation. Online communication relies on fewer sources of information and is often based merely on written messages. However, this communication provides richer and more intimate information than that typical of offline romantic communication. Online relationships are characterized by both greater anonymity and greater self-disclosure. Anonymity is associated with concealment, which runs counter to self-disclosure. However, greater anonymity typically facilitates greater self-disclosure, and in turn increases intimacy.

Online relationships involve a greater degree of both deception and sincerity. It is easier to present deceptive information in cyberspace, as it is more difficult to check the accuracy of such information. However, the greater online self-disclosure is associated with more profound sincerity. The development of online relationships is characterized by the

urge to dream or fantasize, rather than to deceive. Unlike offline relationships, an online communication can become sporadic when matters in people's offline environment become more important to them. Online romantic relationships are continuous in the sense that they can be conducted at any time; accordingly, people may anticipate the next contact and think about it more frequently than in offline affairs. Online relationships involve less investment of physical resources, but greater investment of mental resources, as these relationships are emotionally highly intense.

People participating in online relationships may be strangers to each other in the sense that they have never actually met. However, they are also close to each other since they share intimate information and common desires.

In online relationships, people try to enjoy the benefits of both close and remote relationships, while avoiding their flaws. People enjoy the highly valued products of close relationships while paying the low cost of remote relationships. Thus, they are able to get away from people when they want to, and be instantly close to them, if they so desire. In this sense, online relationships help promote social relationships as they reduce the price of such relationships.

Online relationships are a type of distant relationship characterized by physical separation and emotional closeness. Like other types of distant relationships, online relationships can be quite satisfactory, although they do have their own particular shortcomings. Appropriate distance, which is combined with a type of closeness, may be useful for romantic purposes.

A distant online relationship seems to be paradoxical in a few related senses: (a) it involves detached attachment – physical distance with emotional closeness; (b) it is a social activity that is done alone – interacting with another person from the privacy of your personal computer; (c) it is a form of personal communication that uses features of mass communication – being able to communicate personally with many people at the same time. The unique nature of cyberspace, which can sustain such paradoxical features, has facilitated the development of a new type of romantic relationship not so far known.

People know what to expect from a close relationship; they know what to expect from remote relationships. They do not know what to expect from relationships characterized as detached attachment. Our emotional system is not (yet?) structured to deal with such opposing features. It seems that the new technology has not been accompanied

by a corresponding mental change. In particular, we may not be ready to face living with seemingly highly available and desired romantic alternatives that cannot be actualized. The contradictions and uncertainty associated with online romantic relationships make them less stable and more intense. Emotions play a much greater role in these relationships.