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Swen Seebach

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IS BEING CONNECTED ENOUGH?

Electronic communication in contemporary love relationships

SWEN SEEBACH

Based on thoughts resulting from three years of empirical analysis and fieldwork, this article will give a reflection on the meaning of electronic communication within the weaving of our intimate love relationships. In a time of globalization and individualization love relationships have turned into the safe havens in which individuals are hoping to find protection, individual satisfaction and recognition for who they are. Electronic communication, as a relatively new, but however central form of communicating today, with its rather cold and technical aura seems to diametrically oppose the warmth, intimacy and intensity a love relationship stands for. However, despite seeming to oppose each other, electronic communication and love relationships have become increasingly weaved together. In fact, electronic communication has become an important part of intimate love relationships, helping couples to organize, share, and even to enchant each other. This article reflects on empirical findings concerning the discussion of whether electronic communication is an obstacle or a helpful tool for relating with each other in our love relationships. Building on the idea that electronic communication in love relationships (and in general) cannot be understood by itself but only interrelated with other forms of socially interrelating with each other, there is no simple answer but many clues about potential variables that shape the relationships of couples which mainly relate with each other via electronic communication.

1. Introduction

In current society, the demands, desires and needs of individuals, as much as the demands and needs of society for individuals have become flexible and changeable. A reason for these transformations can be found in the always quicker and more complex globalised processes of the economy, of politics and of society in general, and as a consequence the much more globally intertwined and complex bonds that we weave and have to weave as individuals with other individuals in society. Another reason is surely to be found in the processes of individualization, self-directedness, or like Sennett (2002, 262) said narcissism, and the focus on individual desires as driving forces throughout people's lifetime.

In such a society, social bonds that enduringly engage individuals with each other must themselves be flexible in two different ways:

They must give individuals a high amount of freedom to move, to do and to develop. This means they must be highly flexible regarding individuality and individual transformations. But these bonds must also give or at least promise durability and sustainability to individuals that are very different from each other, to individuals from different social spheres and with different ages.

In current society, such a highly flexible social bond is the love-based intimate relationship. It is within our intimate relationships, in "systems of interpersonal penetration" (Luhmann 1986, 13) wherein people are able to find a deeper meaning for their lives, an affirmation of what they are and what we do (Luhmann 1986, 14ff.), no matter how multi-faceted, transient, and ever changing their lives and the perception of themselves might become:

Rather, individual persons have to find affirmation at the level of their respective personality systems, i.e. in the difference between themselves and the environment and in the manner in which they deal with this difference - as opposed to the way others do... This is only possible if the manner in which one deals with highly personal inner experiences as well as one's inclinations to act in a particular way receive social affirmation and as long as the forms by which such affirmation can be achieved are approved by society. (Luhmann 1986, 15)

But this article does not want to discuss in how far love is the “social glue” of current society. It wants to deal with how individuals weave their bonds of love with each other when they use or even have to use means of electronic communication in order to create the invisible but however so important social bonds of love with each other. This article wants to shed light on the role of newest communication technologies within the processes of weaving bonds of love.

The focus on the interplay between electronic communication and love relationships is easy to justify. As much as love is the typical or better to say paradigmatic form to weave a durable social bond in current society, electronic communication is the paradigmatic form of late modern communication, allowing people to relate with others under conditions of highest individual flexibility from wherever they are, whenever they want to.

Being an important part of current society, it seems as if both, electronic communication and love, do not really fit to each other, as if both are extremes of a continuum that is current society. Sure, communication technologies like mobile phones, Email, and Facebook allow individuals being in touch with each other when they are away from those they want to talk to. However, electronic communication technologies seem to have something cold and impersonal that strongly contrasts with the warm and intimate aura of love.

These first thoughts lead to the following questions: Do love and electronic communication complement each other? Do they fit with each other and support each other or are they rather incompatible? Do newest communication technologies contribute to making our love relationships better? Could they even substitute other forms of intimately being and relating with each other? *Is being connected enough?*

In order to answer these questions this article will present, discuss and evaluate findings from over 60 qualitative interviews, carried out in the context of a research project whose aim was to analyse love relationships in times of electronic communication. The here presented reflection on the use and meaning of electronic communication in love relationships is based on the results of the analysis of those interviews, focusing especially on the interviews carried out with people living in a relationship of longer

distance, contrasted with results from those interviews with people living in relationships of cohabitation.

2. Methodology and fieldwork

For this article, interviews with men and women of different ages (18 – 60 years), from different class backgrounds, coming from two European countries (Spain and Germany) have been carried out and analysed. 40 of the 60 interviews have been collected for my doctoral thesis. 20 interviews have been gathered in the context of a larger research project held by the research group GRECS¹, funded by the Spanish Ministry for Science and Innovation, titled: “*Forms of Commitment in Love relationships and the Expression(s) of Emotions in Times of Electronic Communication*”. The fieldwork, the way to approach the field, to work in the field and to deal with occurring problems in the field was shaped by the Grounded Theory².

Working with the Grounded Theory has several advantages: It gives the researcher the necessary freedom to manoeuvre within rather difficult research fields. It allows and facilitates the exploration of scientifically uncharted territory. It furthermore demands from the researcher a readiness to be surprised, to be open for unexpected results. Furthermore it allows the transformation and improvement of interview questions, the application of different methods within the same research process, and, if necessary, the change of methods within the same research process.

All these advantages really are from importance in the research of intimate love relationships, a rather very little empirically researched topic, that confronts even the experienced researcher with always new, unexpected outcomes, with formerly false assumptions and with results that were not imaginable at the beginning of the research.

1. GRECS (Grup d’Estudis en Cultura i Societat [transl. Research Group of Culture and Society]) is a research grup at the Open University of Catalunya (UOC) that was given a research grant by the Spanish Ministry for Science and Innovation (I+D) for a research project on love and commitment in times of electronic communication.

2. (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Within this research, two different interview techniques (open interviews and semi-structured narrative interviews) have been used to gather data. The reason for working with two different interview types has been made after finding out that regarding that what this research tried to explore, that both interviews had very different dynamics. For their flexibility, open interviews allowed concretizing some of the questions that had been asked in semi-structured interviews. However, semi-structured interviews gave some very concrete outputs to topics that interviewees usually did not talk about in an open interview. As a consequence, inspired by results from former interviews and by results of the other interview type, some of the questions that were asked in the first interviews became transformed or left out in the course of this research.

Another important consequence of working with the Grounded Theory was the quick implication of and adaption to emerging research sub-fields: e.g. after an interview with an informant living in a long distance relationship, further interviews with people in long distance relationships were carried out because the results from interviews with individuals from this group added important parts and filled missing gaps of this research. They gave some very important clues about the meaning, usages advantages, limits and disadvantages of electronic communication (technologies).

3. About face-to-face and electronic communication in love relationships

Throughout the last decades, we have become witnesses of a boom of electronic communication, and of corresponding electronic communication technologies. A world without Email, SNS (Social Networking Sites), mobile phones and the Internet in general has become unthinkable. The developments of society leading to this boom and the developments being caused by the boom are doubtlessly related with and had consequences for how society defines and how individuals weave their most intimate social bonds:

The Internet has dramatically changed the romantic domain; this process will accelerate in the future. (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004, 247)

Latest communication technologies do not only allow the weaving of a bond of love with someone we have never seen before but it allows also

the communication and coordination with a partner when being away from him or her (be it miles or only the room next door). Furthermore, communication technologies have also contributed to create some completely new phenomena resulting from the possibility of immediate communication over long-distances. New virtual exchange practices, the creation of intimate spaces under new conditions, online sex/eroticism, or the joined participation in rituals of love in an online environment are only some of these new social phenomena that have facilitated the decision to live at least temporarily a long distance relationship.

With these partly new, partly transformed practices and interactions that can be performed via means of electronic communication people living within a partnership have started to expect different things from their partners. They expect them to be in touch, to be ready to read instantly a text message or email. They expect their partners to know about what they feel and think of, about all those things that might have been or will become important for them throughout the day. They want them to share, to receive and to respond wherever they are.

Consequently, at this historical moment, the time spent for and with a partner is not opposed by the time away from home but by the moments in which one of the two individuals in love decides (and sometimes has to decide) not to be in touch. According to the interviewees, this has contributed to many discussions and conflicts in partnership.

WhatsApp has really been a curse for many couples I know. I mean your partner cannot only see when you are online. She can also see whether you have read her messages. Ramón, 34 years, Barcelona

According to Ramón, as a consequence of using the Whatsapp mobile application, being ready to communicate with each other 24 hours a day has become something normal, taken for granted. Or how another interviewee put it:

*I mean I really expect him to be there when I write him. With WhatsApp I can even proof when he is online and when he reads my message. Sometimes he does not answer even if he has read my message. That really upsets me. I want him to be interested in what I say, I want him answering my questions as soon as he receives them.
Caroline, 35 years, Barcelona*

What is true for Caroline is true for many other couples: Electronic communication devices have become central to the weaving of their daily lives with their partners and it has confronted some of them with a demand for communication, for being in touch that seems to be impossible to be saturated. But there is much more to be found in these phrases than the simple expectation about a partner's behaviour and his readiness to take time. With this citation we have started to gain a first taste of a category that is a crucial for both love relationships and electronic communication, a connecting point between these two contradictory extremes: Desire. It is Caroline's desires that inspire what she writes to her partner and it is her desires that make her expecting a certain reaction. Caroline desires her partner to listen, to be there for her, and to be interested in what she does. For her, an important form through which he can express his interest in her and her desires is by reading, and answering her texts send via electronic communication, instantly. Her desire demands for continuous satisfaction. She does not want to wait until her husband comes back home to her. Interestingly, in many cases people reported about this impossibility to satisfy the desires of communication online, despite if communication took place without any breaks throughout the day. There is reportedly no end to the desire of being affirmed, and so to the use of electronic communication devices.

That desires play such an important role when people talk not only about electronic communication but also about their love relationships, in general, should not come as a surprise. In fact, many interviewees addressed the importance of desires in their interviews. In many narrations desires, love, and electronic communication create a triangle in which all three factors are in interrelational actions and effects with each other. Love as a place to live desires, and to make the satisfaction of most intimate desires possible, electronic communication as an important form to talk about desires and to make the realisation of desires possible.

In nearly all interviews that have been analysed for this research (about 60 interviews) desire was a topic to be mentioned without someone directly asking for it. Especially in those cases wherein the interviewed person lived in a long distance relationship the link between love, desires, and electronic communication became an explicit issue.

The link between love and desire has been explored since Plato. Simmel, Freud, Zizek and Badiou are not the only but surely some of the

most prominent authors also treating this link. However, the link between desires, love, and the love relationship has only slowly become reality. In fact, it is only the history of modern love that interweaves desire with the love relationship.

...in the last two hundred centuries,... did Europeans and Americans begin to see marriage as a personal and private relationship that should fulfil their emotional and sexual desires. Once that happened, free choice became the societal norm for mate selection, love became the main reason for marriage, and a successful marriage came to be defined as one that met the needs of its members. (Coontz, 2005, 306)³

From a social world in which love relationships and marriages were socially organized and a means to fulfil several social functions social functions which are not related to love, we have moved to a social world in which our individual desires and their satisfaction has become a central argument for creating and weaving a durable bond of love, and wherein love itself has become the end of the love relationship:

Of course it [love] still remains an aspect of life but in a special way: The real dynamic of life, the process of life as naturally propelled, now exists for its [love's] sake... The lover feels that now life has to serve love. (Simmel 1984, 167)

This transformation of the love relationship from a socially organised means, to an individuality-oriented end led on the one hand to a new freedom, a freedom from former rules and restrictions, that resulted from the social function and meaning of the love relationship for society. On the other hand this new liberalism in the matter of love led also to an increasing instability of partnerships. Without social constraints, why should people stay with someone that would not fulfil their desires, which would not give them what they needed and desired? It is here where new emotional phenomena in love relationships occurred, such as: insecurity about a shared future and fears about the durability and stability of the bond with the partner. The price for the new freedom of choice and of the new focus on desires in love relationships is a missing (at least guaranteed) durability and a higher instability of the love relationship.

3. (Compare with Turner 2008, 116-118).

Communication has played a crucial role on both sides of this transformation. On one side, communication, the ability to express what is desired, publically and in a love relationship has surely enforced the developments towards an ideal of love that promises the fulfilment of desires and the satisfaction of all dreams. On the other side, communication as a means to communicate desires, dreams and future plans has also played a role in overcoming the insecurities and instabilities deriving from the modern transformation of love, giving people hope for a durable love relationship. As a consequence not only love and desire but also communication and love have become deeply interrelated with each other. In fact, the sharing, the shared projection and the satisfaction of desires must be seen as key elements within today's discourses on love relationships. Consequently, many interviewees said that whether they were able to successfully share, project, and satisfy their desires and the desires of their partners decided whether their love relationship worked out or did not work out, whether their love endured or withered away.

It is easy to imagine the role of communication in all three dimensions. Communication allows sharing desires, to synchronise them and so to project them, together with a partner. Communication facilitates consequently to satisfy them. It is doubtlessly for this reason that communication has become such an important dimension for love relationships that hundreds of well-selling self-help books have dealt with communication in love relationships (Illouz 2012, 113).

Driven by a wish for recognition, individuals that engage in a love relationship work on creating a steadily growing knowledge about and synchronization of their inner universes with those of their partners: they create a shared knowledge and memory of emotions, desires and dreams. As it seems, communication fundamentally contributes to creating these shared emotions, desires, and dreams - a shared horizon for the future, and a shared memory of love⁴. It is this shared horizon for the future, and this shared memory of love that seems to help believing in the durability of the bond that seems so vulnerable. Communicating desires seems to be the key to successfully weaving a bond of love.

The supremacy of communication in a love relationship seems to be especially true in a time in which our desires are constantly stimulated and

4. Compare with Sternberg (1999, 21-25) and Seebach (2013, 248, 423).

changed into always-new directions. In this context electronic communication devices have come to play their role. Allowing the communication of (always new) desires, dreams and experiences 24 hours a day from any place in the world make the continuous assessment and assurance of the other, his desires, and the intimate bond possible. In this sense electronic communication seems to help couples to weave durable permeable social bonds despite their fragility caused by always-new impulses and choices that can be made. When desires change quicker and into always new directions, communication needs to become quicker and enable couples to communicate wherever they are and whenever they need, to either satisfy their desires or to ensure themselves of the durability of the bonds with their partners.

However, some informants reported that after a period of time, after going through a phase of coming and then of intensive being together, they expected a lessening need to communicate and to insist on one's desires:

Surely at the beginning of our relationship that was different. I used to say I like this, I don't like that. I told him about my favourite theatre play, about my favourite food. We used to spend a lot of time talking about what we wanted and expected from life. But now it is different rather than talking always about the same things we rather build on what we know from each other and we sometimes look back on this time when we still did not know, when we talked about these things for the first time. Sirah, 31 years, Berlin

Some of my informants even went so far to define their whole relationship as a failure if they did not enter into a phase in which the need to communicate becomes less:

What I mean is that at some point she should simply have known that I don't like this kind of books. I mean ES of Stephen King this is really not my kind of soup. This was one of the moments in which I realized that we were not made for each other. I told her so many times. She should have known me better. Roger, 36 years, Barcelona

In the words of Roger we find some of the underlying assumptions about love and its link with desire and communication, which, quite contradictory to the voices mentioned before, are also to be found in the statements of many interviewees. Does not communication usually

promise an improvement of what people communicate about? Should not the communication of what is wanted and needed by someone become decreasingly necessary, after having talked about it a few times? These questions again stimulate new thoughts about the meaning of electronic communication. If electronic communication allows communicating constantly, isn't it somehow psychologically fostering rather than diminishing fears about a probable instability of the bond of love? Is not electronic communication creating some kind of circular movement, contributing to create a fear of instability of bonds of love on the one hand and on the other hand promising to overcome this instability?

Things are more complex, when looking at a love relationship through the eyes of social scientists and not lovers. It is not easy to learn about the desires of the other. It is rather impossible to know all of them. For an individual it might seem as if his or her desires have mainly remained and will remain the same. But in fact, desires do not stop changing, as much as individuals do not stop developing and changing. This is even truer today in a world wherein change has become a key demand from many other social fields people are engaged in. In current society, individuals are confronted with always-new objects, that they feel the need to experience, following a strongly habitualised impulse. There is no end to the chain of overworking old and constructing new desires, to their continuous change and renewal.

Consequently, on the basis of desires and their simple communication it is difficult to arrive at that point that someone really knows all that his or her partner desires and that he or she furthermore knows how to satisfy these desires. Electronic communication does not make any difference to it. Couples could communicate throughout the whole day and still they would not be any closer to knowing all of their partner's desires. In fact, knowing someone else's desires and creating a homogenous stable field of shared desires is an, if not impossible, so at least a dream whose realization is difficult, and which if it would come true, would most probably turn into a nightmare. In this sense, communication, and electronic communication in love relationships focussed on desires cannot bestow the intimate bond of love with durability. On the contrary, as much as this communication seems to move individuals in a relationship closer to each other as much does it move them away from each other.

Electronic communication about desires, dreams and experiences is no exception but rather an extreme case of it.

How is it then that despite the impossibility of perfectly reading the other's desires, individuals continue believing in the perfect bond of love? How is it that individuals expect their love relationships to work out smoothly? How is it that they feel as if they move closer to their partners and to a better matching partnership? How is that they are able to experience in their relationship a perfect unity, that they have the feeling of becoming one with the other, that they are ready to oversee the little mistakes for the whole picture, that they still give a "primacy for the whole over its parts" (Kolakowski 2001, 47)? How is it that people do not only believe into the myth of love but that they also experience it, that they do not only expect but also experience their relationships of love to be a process of coming closer to each other, of becoming familiar or intimate with each other, of becoming one (Kolakowski 2001, 47, Simmel 1984, 161)? And why do they continue with using and believing into the advantages of newest communication technologies?

The impression or experience of a synchronization of two to one is not and cannot be based on desires and their communication. Desires do not tend to create unified and coherent outputs by themselves. Communicating about one's desires might help to make the listener believe that he or she will know better about one's desires tomorrow but this is a rather wrong or at least only true in a very limited way.

The reason why individuals have the experience of getting closer is rather related with their bodies. The body is a relatively stable, in some features rather static object. It is at least something that individuals can catch with their eyes, various times in nearly the same way. Consequently the body allows having an experience of getting closer, of knowing each other always better, even if this is not (or at least not completely) the case. It is the body that helps individuals to continue believing in the idea that in their love relationships they are growing together, that they know always a little bit more of each other. It is the familiarity with the big and little visual features of the body that helps them to suppress divergences and new differences.

Even if the body changes, ages and transforms throughout a lifetime it changes in a much more visible way than thoughts, desires and opinions

do, its changes are far easier for someone else to capture. The possibility to capture these little slow changes that our bodies undergo consequently foster a feeling of familiarity and intimacy instead of undermining it. Bodily changes usually happen so slowly that they themselves become part of a feeling of deeply knowing and understanding each other.

But there is even more to the body and its role as zone of familiarity and intimacy. Apart from its relative material stability the body has a, if we want to say so, own memory, a stock of information on which basis we use to act, interact, experience, feel and perform⁵ a carnal or physical wardrobe of gestures, expressions, and positions that individuals put on and pull of according to different situations, and that all together builds the, what Bourdieu (1984, 2000) called, habitus. As Bourdieu further explains, the habitus is something that changes very slowly, and is only partly in control of us and of our intentional acting.

Having this “rather fixed wardrobe” in mind, it is easy to understand why people experience similarities in acts and performances within those repeated actions and interactions that they perform with their partners, and why they even more meet them with an always-higher probability. Even if our desires might differ, the very basic elements of our corporal performances stay the same at least visually. By going together through experiences and by performing together rituals of love couples work on creating a similar or at least familiar body memory that again contributes to create a sensation of familiarity and intimacy in their partnership.

In both ways, as an only very slowly transforming part or aspect of human beings, as people’s materiality, as a memory stock that slows down and frames the transformations of how individuals behave, act and interact with each other, and as the location of the habitus, the body is important for the sensation of becoming continuously closer related with a partner. But what does that mean for electronic communication? What role can the body play in here?

5. Compare with Seebach (2013).

4. Desires and bodies in electronic communication

If really the communication of what individuals in partnerships desire is not what brings them closer together which role can then electronic communication and electronic communication technologies play in a love relationship? Why do many people consider it important for the weaving of their bonds of love? And why are there so many people sceptical after they have been forced to rely on electronic communication for being in touch with their partners?

Current literature that discusses the meaning and the impact of electronic communication and new media on our social relationships usually claims that one of the most important marks, frames or limits that electronic communication creates for individuals and their interactions concerns their bodies. According to them, electronic communication technologies exclude the body, because their frame cuts a part away from the body and so from the process of weaving intimate interrelationships. Despite some possible positive effects this annihilation of the body might have (like the creation of communicative contexts in which not physiological or corporal issues determine the meaning of what is communicated, and the minimization of physical criteria in decision making)⁶, electronic communication technologies are mainly discussed as an obstacle to deep and satisfactory moments or experiences, especially when it comes to intimate relationships and to romantically involved partners⁷.

Doubtlessly, electronic communication creates a limited field for intimate interactions. Our bodies can only pass in a very limited way through the channels of electronic communication. Only that what is visible, only what a camera lens, and what words can capture seems to have a chance of being transmitted.

Yet if this is the case from the standpoint of a sociology of emotions, this should pose a special problem because emotions in

6. (Ben-Ze'ev 2004, 16): *The ability to shape your virtual society eradicates many social constraints, particularly status differences. ... In cyberspace, gender differences are limited to the mental realm where boundaries are much more flexible. Age differences are also less important in cyberspace.*

7. Compare with Illouz (2007, 81ff. and 102 – 106).

general and romantic love in particular are grounded in the body. (Illouz, 2007, 75)

In accordance with this thought of Illouz, especially those couples who were forced to very often interact via these communication technologies, those living in long distance relationships, reported about the sensation that electronic communication technologies are an obstacle to them that allowed to talk and sometimes to see but hindered them from being close with each other.

There are so many things you don't have to say when you are face to face... Over email, texting... or even Skype... you have to be so careful... so explicit!!! No room can be left for misunderstandings... they are so dangerous!!! You can argue for a whole night because of a misunderstood facial expression, a silly joke... I always try to express everything I feel as explicitly as I can. (...) And when I don't feel like saying I love you, I say it all the same. Kathleen, 31 years, Leipzig

In a different way, another interviewee addressed communication via electronic communication as an unsatisfying experience:

I really did not know when to stop anymore and I did not want to. That is the curse of Skype. There is no limit to being online... We really had to force each other to stop. But even then... Often I was sitting in front of the screen, touching the screen long after he had turned the webcam off. Rebecca, 42 years, Berlin

Both citations tell us about the limit that electronic communication puts on the experience of being close with each other. Whilst for Kathleen the missing physical closeness lead to misunderstandings and additional pressures, for Rebecca the impossibility to touch, left her being unfulfilled with an always unsatisfied desire for more communication with her partner. For both, electronic communication neither calms their fears regarding their love relationships nor does it allow them to feel their bonds as something secure or durable. In fact, the act of communication seems to be unsatisfactory, demanding from them to communicate more, more than they want and more than they can. Both explain electronic communication is the only chance they have for being with their partners, but this chance is rather destructive. In this sense, Illouz seems to be right when she at least asks for the complications that the missing physical interaction might cause for a romantically involved couple.

On the other hand to simply assume that electronic communication has only limiting aspects to couples and the weaving of their bonds of love would be to deny the many other voices telling a different story. E.g. if someone has the possibility to share a song, or a movie, when he or she is not with his or her partner, it can create wonderful experiences, not only satisfying but also somehow very physical:

Sometimes she sent me these songs when I was on a trip. First, I did not like them but then I was listening to them anyway... and it was weird, I felt like... well, I don't know how... but it touched me whatsoever. And it really gave me something. It was like if she was creating my universe for this little moment. Thorsten, 30 years, Leipzig

Don't individuals share emotions, feelings and physical sensations that go far beyond words and what they can say when they share songs, pictures, or movies? Don't they involve their bodies in these processes of communication, whilst going together through shared (consumption) experiences? Indeed, following those people that have been interviewed for this research, they do. In fact, especially some of those informants being in a romantic relationship with someone living abroad talked about these moments of sharing as central, enchanting, physical.

In a completely different way some of those couples living in a relationship of cohabitation talked about the positive aspects of the limiting character of electronic communication. So did some couples decide e.g. to create rules for what they would never communicate via electronic communication, giving exactly those things that were not to be communicated via electronic communication technologies by the tabooisation an even more important sacred meaning.

At the beginning we had long arguments, until we decided to establish the Blackberry rule. No arguments until we see each other.
Andrea, 22 years, Barcelona

In contrast to the first citations, we can see that electronic communication can sometimes really create not only satisfactory moments but that it can imply the body, that it can create and involve a corporal dimension.

Consequently, we can say that electronic communication technologies do not determine the meaning for what is sent and how it is sent but that

the what and how depends on where and when we communicate, with who we communicate, on the wider web of social relations and the context within which communication is taking place. Knowing some of these parameters helps to guess with a certain probability whether online communication will be successful and satisfying, or whether it will not.

Analysing all the 60 interviews, it becomes evident that electronic communication does not lead always to the same outcomes. This is already well reflected in the chosen examples of Kathleen, Rebecca, Thorsten, and Andrea. In the same way it is wrong to simply compare face-to-face with electronic communication in a generic sense. Only the analysis of the wider context of the communication helps to understand the meaning of a conversation and its meaning for the romantically involved couple.

E.g. there are just a few situations in a love relationship of cohabitation in which individuals reportedly used electronic communication for something that they could have done face-to face, and if so, there was often a strong purpose behind doing so. Whilst in relationships of long distance it was often simply not a question of choice how and along which channels couples used to communicate with each other. It is especially in those cases in which couples willingly opted for using electronic communication rather than another forms of communication form that the barrier, which the medium creates, was experienced as much lower.

In conclusion, it can be said that as much as electronic communication can be seen as a limit to the body, and as much as this might impact the weaving of an intimate social bond, it can also become something rather positive, that might be part of enchanting a partnership, even, or especially because of its limiting character. The meaning and the limits of electronic communication in love relationships are relative to the users and the communication contexts in which electronic communication takes place. Electronic communication is not an obstacle for the successful weaving of our social bonds, it rather allows individuals talking, expressing, and sharing even if they are not physically together. It is not electronic communication but rather a missing ability to choose and to decide about the how of communication that is an obstacle to a successful weaving of a social bond of love with our partners. Despite all the limitations that means of electronic communication imply for people intimately relating with each other, they help them to overcome distances

at least verbally and visually. However, especially in the interviews with people in long distance relationships it becomes evident that it is not (electronic) communication, as a communicative act of expressing yourself, which creates a durable bond of love or the security about a bond, that has been weaved. Simple communication as an expression of desires rather fosters insecurity, and a sensation of instability and unfamiliarity.

5. Electronic communication of couples living together and of couples living in long distance relationships

5.1. Positive aspects of electronic communication of couples living together and of couples living in long distance relationships

But how is it then that despite all the positive effects that electronic communication can have and the fulfilling moments that it can make possible, that especially those relationships that are centrally based on electronic communication often do not work out? And why do those couples that live together but that communicate foremost via electronic communication technologies report similar problems to those living in a long distance relationship? Does the quantity of using electronic communication play role? Can there be a “too much” of electronic communication?

As has been already mentioned, electronic communication in love relationships helps couples to bridge distances. In relationships of cohabitation (or living nearby) these distance are often only temporarily existing and relatively small. Someone in a relationship with cohabitation usually meets his or her partner in the evening after work, when he or she comes back home, or in a bar or in a restaurant.

Being able to combine both face-to-face and electronic communication, electronic communication has in these relationships only a relative importance. It is only one form of communicating, interacting and experiencing, despite other forms of interacting, experiencing and communicating. Accordingly these couples can on the one hand avoid talking about certain topics that they only talk about face to face, and to which they can give an extra-meaning by not communicating these sacred, forbidden objects of communication online. On the other hand they can

use a mobile phone to do something so unromantic like telling their partner that he or she has to buy salad for dinner and they can relativize the missing romanticism of this message as soon as they are sitting with him or her partner together at the dinner table, eating the salad, whispering words of love into his/her ear. The amazing thing is that through the act of dining together, the organization of the dinner becomes somehow part of the romantic event. The unromantic message becomes its origin. As the origin of the event the demand for salad is turned into something deeply romantic, and into a necessary point of departure for the evening. Although being only from limited importance, through this effect electronic communication becomes sacralised.

If people feel relatively secure about what their others' feels, what they mean when they send a message, share a song or behave in a certain way, everything that can be communicated can be an affirmation of the impression of being close, intimate, familiar. If e.g. someone puts a song on Facebook that his or her partner (and only him or her) knows to interpret and contextualise, this can affirm in both partners their sensation of being close to each other, of having a strong bond of love. However, it is not communication or electronic communication that makes this sensation possible but it is the knowledge of the other, gained through shared experiences that allows couples to even experience these contexts as affirmations for their love bonds.

Electronic communication, its meaning, and the meaning of what is communicated cannot be understood by reading it as something by itself but only by reading it in interrelationship (a term translated from Georg Simmel's fantastic concept of "Wechselwirkung" that has influenced this research) with other forms of communicative, and not only communicative but all forms of social interaction that are performed with a partner. It is in this sense that the meaning of a message that is electronically communicated has to be understood contextual and it is also in this sense that it is possible to understand whether the limits that electronic communication creates can be really positively used or whether they cannot. Stimulating desires and imagination, sharing desires whilst being away from each other, and communicating about moving experiences this is what couples use electronic communication for.

For those interviewees living in a relationship of cohabitation this meanings of electronic communication are truly relative, balanced and

shaped by other moments and events. Many people reported that electronic communication is important but rather for its practical advantages. They use them to coordinate time, tasks and to share that information that was or could be relevant for them, their partners, and their partnership:

Well in fact we just talk about who is picking up the kids from school, who is buying the tomatoes, and so on.... Sometimes it is also just for asking: Where are you? Roger, 36, Barcelona

These rather very little affirmative and security spending moments are contrasted by their intimate moments when they are alone at how “having a glass of wine together and watching photos” (Horst, 30 years, Bielefeld).

However, many interviewees living in relationships of cohabitation talked also about a very special form of electronic communication: the sharing of relevant information and objects related to strong individual experiences, like songs, texts, poems, or news before physically meeting the next time. As has been said, for them sharing helped them simply to catch up, to find common topics as soon as they were meeting again. However, for couples in long distance relationships (or for those who just saw each other very seldom) this sharing was ‘it’, the shared experience, the magic moment itself. For the couples living in long distance relationships, the same process of sharing left them insecure and completely unsatisfied.

In conclusion it can be said that for many couples electronic communication had rather a relative and even subordinated role to face-to-face communication, helping them to organize their time efficiently and smoothly. For couples in cohabitation the organization of time and needs, and the communication of desires often led to positive outcomes (events or common topics) that then again bestowed the act of electronic communication with an “enchanted aura”.

5.2. Negative aspects of electronic communication of couples living together and of couples living in long distance relationships

A central negative effect that electronic communication devices reportedly had for many couples is the inability to ‘take a break’. The demand of being in touch 24 hours a day, and the sovereignty to decide

when to turn a mobile on or off, when to be online or not, was not experienced as something liberating by all the interviewees. In fact, some interviewees were really annoyed having to justify why they had not picked up the phone or replied to a message, leading couples into serious discussions.

Furthermore, the apparently neutral, helpful character of electronic communication (and communication technologies) in people's daily lives, the retrospective enchanting effect, from couple's magic moments backwards to when they communicated their demands to make these magic moments possible, and the general misconceptions regarding the importance of communicating desires for the functioning of a love relationship have negative consequences for how people understand the meaning of electronic communication in their intimate relationships. All these factors contribute to a miscalculation of what is necessary to successfully relate with each other in a love relationship. Here, we come to another "dark side of electronic communication".

When he left to X we continued talking everyday, using Skype or the phone. It is weird... we tried to continue with our old routines of communication, telling each other what had happened during the course of the day... We had usually done that when we lived close by...but now we always ended up arguing with each other. In fact, arguing has become somehow how we always start our conversation, and really in the end of the calls we sometimes find a certain normality.

Sarah, 27, Berlin

Sarah describes the problem clearly. She and her partner had gone from a relationship of living close by to a long distance relationship. Despite the changes that their relationship as such had gone through, they tried to continue with their old communication strategies and routines. They talked about what they had done during the day and what they hoped for the nearer future, what they wanted from each other and what would be nice to do the next time when they would see each other. They did everything that couples usually believe to be central to the functioning of their love relationship and to their intimate communication online. But this kind of communication did not work out as smoothly as before. The communication of what Sarah and her partner desired made everything worse. An important reason might be that now there was no romantic dinner that could save the day. There was no shared experience both could

go through together, giving their desires meaning, uniting both with each other. Continuing the old routines and patterns Sarah and her partner ended up in discussions and finally separated. It is the wrong assumptions about the importance of communicating desires, the failure to give much importance to the communication of desires that was a central failure of their distance relationship.

In another section, this text presented the example of the retrospective enchanting effect of electronic communication in the case of a romantic dinner. When couples start to retrospectively enchant the moment of communicating the needs and desires for a romantic dinner they turn communication (and electronic communication) into something that it in fact is not – the origin of the magic moment. Taking the communication of a desire, as the important part of the romantic event is a fallacy, nurturing the idea that communicating desires is the central activity to create a durable intimate bond with a beloved someone. However, reading through people's love stories one quickly realizes that some of the most romantic moments were often neither planned nor communicatively introduced but simply became important because of the shared physical, emotional and often also communicative experience itself. Electronic communication can contribute to make these spontaneous acts of enchantment possible and easier but they can also be a hindrance to it. How often does a perfectly planned dinner fail? But instead of blaming electronic communication and the communication of desires for these failures, in many cases people would insist that more communication would have made their failed romantic moments work out. Instead of seeing that electronic communication (of desires) itself neither creates a magic moment, nor a sensation of familiarity and intimacy, they prefer to believe into the need to communicate more and better.

People continue believing in the idea that the communication of desires is central to their love relationship, and that the body is a decorative but not necessary element to make an intimate relationship work. This impression is doubtlessly fostered by the format of some Social Networking Sites (SNS) that might s(t)imulate the impression that the communication of desires, interests and emotions would be enough in order to hold on to and renew the intimate bond weaved with another person. However, the reason why people usually talk intensively and reciprocally just with a very few people via Facebook (as one example for

these SNS), why the strong bonds they weave with people via Facebook is usually limited to the people they also weave strong bonds with in their daily lives tells something about why the communication of desires, interests and experiences is not enough. People do not have strong ties with a Facebook friend because they know about the music the other likes or the feelings that the other has but because they share these feelings or tastes, they can emotionally identify with them and they know or at least have the impression to know how to interpret them. The stability and durability of the bond that people weave with each other does not depend on their knowledge of each other's desires and experiences but on the experiences that makes the interpretation, understanding, and emotional identification with the meaning of these desires and experiences possible, on the quality of the time spend together and the experiences shared, rather than the quantity of the contacts made between two people.

The misconception about what our bonds of love are made of and what it is that gives us a fundamental feeling of getting closer (intimate and familiar) to each other becomes often revealed to those couples having to move temporarily away from each other. As has been explained with the example of Sarah, entering in a long distance relationship, many couples struggle with continuing of what they believed their relationship was. They struggle with their commitments, with a missing feeling of security, familiarity and intimacy with their partners, leading them to feel losing fear, anger and sadness, to increased controlling of partners' web activities (e.g. the checking of his/her Facebook activities) and to a missing ability to know when to begin and when to stop communicating with partners via means of electronic communication. The more couples rely on electronic communication the more they are missing out on other (shared) experiential contexts, the higher is the risk that they misunderstand each other. They consequently feel insecure, and this usually draws them deeper into using means of electronic communication – a somehow vicious cycle.

The reasons for the rise of negative emotions and of consequent insecure behaviour are evident. The focus on communicating, on talking about experiences, and on doing exactly those things that they had believed to be important for their partnership whilst they were living with their partners had never been the basis of their bonds of love (at least not exclusively). The legible contents of their communication had never been

enough to make their partnership satisfying and fulfilling. It is only in a web of interrelations between communication and other forms of reciprocal interaction, of being with each other, spending time with each other and experiencing together, that the communication of desires can play a role in the successful weaving of durable bonds of love. In fact, even the very act of communication is important not just for its contents but for its performative character, for its involvement of the body, of gestures, of habitus⁸.

It is because couples forget to give importance to the new roles of their bodies when they interact in an online environment, because they do not work on new collective performances, because they do not search for new possible places for shared experiences, and because they do not invent new online love rituals that they can not develop a shared habitus that could serve as the very basis for creating a feeling of familiarity. It is because they spend time to tell about themselves, about their desires, about their experiences, instead of spending time with each other that they lack closeness. The missing familiarity and intimacy concusses any security about the meaning of the other's action and interactions. Permanent communication via means of electronic communication is not enough to create stability and durable social bonds, only shared (physical) experiences do. As a result, couples start distrusting and doubting each other.

This problem is not just existent in long distance relationships, even if it becomes much more explicit here. In our individualized, and individuality-stressing world, these problems are also to be found in many other love relationships in which couples only rely on their communication of desires, wants and needs (mainly via electronic communication). In these cases, after the bond of love has been broken, both simply don't know why their relationship wouldn't have worked out.

We did not have much time. I had to work, she had to work. But we texted a lot. The whole day we were in touch, and then one day I came home and I realized I don't know her anymore.

Josep, 56 years, Manresa

8. Compare with Bourdieu (2000, 122 ff.)

Didn't they talk a lot? Didn't they communicate their desires and dreams? They did. But there was nothing that related them apart from this.

In most of these cases the couples didn't realize that it was not the perfect organization and communication of desires but their moments of togetherness that enabled them to feel close. Performing together special rituals, experiencing together special moments, and going through everyday life together are the very basis for creating a feeling of intimacy and familiarity. We do not feel united simply by talking about our individual desires and experiences.

For couples in long distance relationships the effect is often especially striking and a solution to the problem especially difficult to find because the channel transforms the conditions for sharing experiences and special moments with each other extremely. They need to reinvent themselves, to get to know each other a second time, and to invent new rituals of love by the help of which they gain a certain feeling and security for the other's (online) body and habitus. They must create situations that allow them to experience permanence, familiarity, intimacy and stability in a new context, which open both of them for the new online body.

Often this mission fails. Driven by fears, and insecurity those individuals in online relationships feel a need to stay online, to control, check, to ask again and again and thereby to increase their insecurities even more. Feeling the need of having to communicate more and more they start to doubt: Then it is only a question of time until the relationship breaks apart.

6. Conclusion

This article has shown that in order to understand the meaning of electronic communication in current intimate relationships it would be a mistake to simply reduce means of electronic communication to a problem for weaving durable social bonds. Means of electronic communication can be as much helpful tools for couples to overcome distances in a time of increasing flexibilisation, of global traveling and of global business, as they can be a source of misunderstandings about the fundamentals for weaving a bond of love. They can contribute to the a feeling of stability and durability of our intimate bonds, in a time where

this stability and durability seems to be called into question, as much as they can play into the hand of feelings of insecurity and losing fear.

In many intimate relationships electronic communication plays a crucial role inspiring couples, facilitating their lives, and allowing them to be in touch. However, feeling forced to be online and to respond takes a lot away from the feeling of freedom that electronic communication devices are able to give. Furthermore, somehow supporting or at least concealing false assumptions regarding the central pillars of love relationships, electronic communication technologies contribute to a deceit about the truth of our bonds of love. This false impression of what is important in order to weave durable social bonds is further fostered by pre-made formats of electronically socially interrelating with each other, like Facebook, where everything is simply about sharing desires and experiences as if this would be enough to weave a strong social bond.

In contrast, this article shows that it is not the sharing of individual desires but the experience of shared rituals, special moments and quotidian life, the development of a shared habitus and shared feelings what relates couples durably together. That a durable bond of love can be weaved via electronic communication is doubtlessly difficult but nevertheless possible. For making the bonds of love, that couples weaved with each other face-to-face, work in an online environment, couples have to understand that they have to find ways to perform together special moments and everyday life situations, that they have to invent ways to physically touch and play with each other, that they have to work on ways to create a shared habitus in order to create a feeling of familiarity online. They have to create a feeling of permanence and stability in an online environment. Therefore they have to forget about the possible risks of not having a future together, and they have to see in electronic communication technologies an environment in which their bonds have to be recreated. The journey of (re-) discovering the body, shared experience, permanence and stability can offer new possibilities to invent, and experience each other and to weave a durable bond of love. Being connected is not enough.

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