

The Impact of Cyberspace on Social Relationships

A Field Study on Citizens of Seven Wilayas in Algeria

تأثير الفضاء الإلكتروني على العلاقات الاجتماعية

دراسة ميدانية على مواطني سبعة ولايات في الجزائر

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الملخص:

تهدف هاته الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على الفضاء الإلكتروني وتأثيره على العلاقات الاجتماعية، إن العلاقات الاجتماعية موجودة بين الأفراد منذ القدم، وتختلف طريقة التواصل بين الأفراد حسب الوسط الذي يعيشون فيه، ومع التطور الهائل في تكنولوجيات الإتصال، إتخذت العلاقات الاجتماعية منحى مختلف تماما عما كانت عليه قبل قرنين من الزمن فقط، و أصبحت لا تقتضي بالضرورة التنقل والذهاب لمسافات طويلة لكي نتواصل مع الغير، وإنما فقط بالهاتف أو الإنترنت وسترى الطرف الآخر صوت وصورة وبجودة عالية الدقة، وقد توصلت الدراسة إلى أن للفضاء الإلكتروني الأثر الكبير في العلاقات بين الأفراد و طرق التواصل، حيث غيرت التقنية الحديثة بعض العادات والقيم التي كانت راسخة في المجتمع الجزائري، منها التزاور بين العائلات، حيث أصبحت تنحصر في المناسبات أو الأعياد فقط.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفضاء الإلكتروني ؛ العلاقات الاجتماعية.

Abstract:

This study aims to shed light on cyberspace and its impact on social relationships. Social relationships have existed among individuals since ancient times, and the way people communicate varies depending on the environment they live in. With the tremendous advancement in communication technologies, social relationships have taken a completely different direction from what they were just two centuries ago. It no longer necessarily requires traveling long distances to communicate with others,

but rather only through the phone or the internet, where the other party can be seen and heard with high-definition quality. The study has found that cyberspace has a significant impact on interpersonal relationships and communication methods. Modern technology has changed some habits and values that were deeply rooted in Algerian society, including family visits, which now mainly occur during occasions or holidays.

Key words: cyberspace, social relationships.

Problematic:

The modern world has witnessed tremendous advancements in technology, leading to radical changes in individuals' concepts. Previously, social relationships relied on direct interaction between individuals, by physically meeting at a specific place. However, with the recent technological advancements, the concept of communication has completely changed from what it used to be. Now, communication can occur through the internet and smartphones, enabling individuals to make audio and video calls from their location without the hassle of traveling to meet the person they want to communicate with. Consequently, social relationships have changed their meaning for individuals. This is why we have chosen to study these changes in individuals' behaviors.

Social relationships are defined as "a representation of social interaction between two or more parties, where each party forms an image of the other, which may affect their judgment of each other positively or negatively. Examples of these relationships include friendship, family ties, work colleagues, and acquaintances or friends."¹ Therefore, social relationships are a means of communication between different individuals, through any means. However, this definition does not clarify how the relationship between individuals works, but rather describes its nature in general.

As for cyberspace, it is defined as "a natural and material environment, and others see it as having a virtual nature, where electronic information operates, connecting through computer networks and the electromagnetic field to store, modify, or change data through connected and linked systems with the natural infrastructure."² Thus, cyberspace is an unreal and invisible environment that enables various individuals to communicate through the internet.

With this, individuals have become in a position to choose between modern communication, which is relatively easier, and traditional communication, which requires effort, time, and mobility. As humans tend to be attracted to things that are easy and do not require much money, effort, or time, they choose the first option. This choice reflects on their relationships with others in society. What are these reflections, and how do we deal with them in Algerian society?

To answer this question, we need to address the literary aspect concerning the study's variables.

Study Concepts:

Cyberspace:

Also known as the virtual community, it refers to a group of people who share common interests and are not necessarily bound by geographic, ethnic, religious, or political boundaries. They interact through modern social networking sites and develop conditions for group membership, entry and exit rules, mechanisms of interaction, and the ethical considerations to be observed. The virtual community is a technological social system.³

The Cyberspace definition:

The Cyberspace is the place created by information and communication technology, primarily the internet. Cyberspace is closely linked to the physical world through various communication infrastructures, information systems, and numerous services that were previously inaccessible without it. As the geographical area for the use of social networking sites expanded and their quality improved, the scope of communication in the cyberspace widened. Interest grew among individuals and countries in the opportunities it presented, as well as the risks it posed. Consequently, interest in the cyberspace has risen to the forefront of public policy concerns, at international, regional, and local levels, whether from individuals or groups, especially in commercial, financial, and governmental domains.⁴

Social Relationships:

The interaction of individuals in any circumstance and in any place is the visual expression of these relationships in a specific area of social activity.⁵

Definition of Social Networking Sites:

The concept of social networking sites emerged as a social-philosophical term since the 18th century, but what's new is its transformation from a social hypothesis into a technological reality through the internet and advanced communication media, which has moved the hypothesis into cyberspace and formed a new phenomenon in the world.⁶

Impact of Online Social Networks on Social Relationships:

Researchers have differed in their views on the impact of new communication technologies, especially social networking sites, on social relationships. The opinions of researchers in this regard can be divided into two main directions: those who see their impact on social relationships as positive and those who see the opposite.

The first perspective sees them as "communicative spaces created by groups whose members are connected to each other by commitment to common issues and concerns." In this context, Professor Jamal Elzarn sees one of the advantages of the internet as "it has become a substitute for spiritual and emotional void. Therefore, the internet has reached the point of being deified, worshipped and sacred. On the other hand, it has become a tool for social interaction as a substitute for the family, thus becoming an actor in establishing friendships and successful marriages."

On the other hand, there is a second perspective that sees social networking sites and other modern communication technologies "as causing a scarcity of personal communications based on face-to-face interaction." The continuous and excessive use of online social networking sites "directly threatens the essence of real face-to-face relationships, creating a gap between individuals, leading to the disappearance of traditional social fabric and the emergence of a virtual social fabric, characterized by the absence of neighborly intimacy and closeness."⁷

Previous Studies:

1.Study by (Keith N. Hampton) et al., 2011:

This study, titled "Social Networking Sites and Our Lives," conducted by researchers from the University of Pennsylvania for the PEW Research Center and Project American Life, aimed to examine the social impact of using social networking sites such as Myspace, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.

The problem posed was the following: Does social networking sites isolate individuals and sever their social relationships or help connect them with others? The results of the study were as follows:

Through the studied sample, it was found that 79% of American adults use the internet, and about half of them (47% of 59% of internet users) use at least one social networking site. The study also found that social relationships in America have become more intimate than they were two years ago, and the use of Facebook has significantly helped in forming close relationships among individuals.⁸

2. Study by (Helmi Khodr), 2008:

This study, titled "The Impact of Internet Communication on Social Relationships (A Field Study in Qatari Society)" aimed to understand the effects of internet communication on social relationships in Qatari society. The study sampled 471 individuals from Qatar randomly and distributed a questionnaire consisting of 21 questions. Findings showed that both males and females in the sample use the internet in their daily lives to varying degrees, with the internet's impact being higher on females than males. Education level and hours of internet use influenced this impact. Internet communication had an impact on reducing face-to-face personal contact with family members by 44.4% and with friends and acquaintances by 43%. It also

revealed a capacity for internet communication to form strong emotional relationships, with 28.8% of respondents expressing openness to the idea of online marriage. Additionally, internet use was found to reduce visits to relatives by 44.7%. Among other findings of the study, the ability of the internet to expand the social network of the sample individuals was estimated at 64.5%, while 40.3% of them felt alienated from their local community due to its usage.⁹

3. Study by (Banan Ali Dakheel and Mashaal Al-Bashir), 2012:

Titled "Social Networking Sites and Their Impact on Saudi Society," this study aimed to examine the impact of social networking sites on Saudi society and to assess their impact on Saudi youth. The researchers distributed a questionnaire to a sample of female students at Prince Sultan University, representing Saudi youth. The questionnaire included eight diverse questions to determine whether the students use these websites, and what motivations prompted them to register, in addition to the number of hours spent browsing social networks, and their opinion on teenage participation. The study's results were as follows: 86% of the students are participants on one of the social networking sites, compared to 14% who are not participants.

Among the 86% of female students who participate in social networks, 40% of them are members of "Facebook".

As for the motivations for usage, 36% use Facebook to pass the time, while 31% use it to communicate with individuals and friends. 18% use it to make new friendships, 10% for study and work-related reasons, and 5% for the site's popularity and to keep up with the current era. 56% of the students do not believe they would face difficulty if they stopped using social networks, while 11% believe they would face difficulty if they stopped using them. While 70% opposed individuals under 18 accessing these sites.¹⁰

4. Study by (Malika Haroun), 2005:

Titled "Communication among Youth in the Context of Modern Information and Communication Technologies," this field study analyzed a sample of young people in the Tipaza region. The study addressed the topic of communication among youth. The sample consisted of 160 young people, aged between 15 and 25 years old. This study aimed to uncover the nature of communication among youth, specifically focusing on the youth sector and its relationship with sports, as opposed to how young people themselves define this concept. Additionally, it sought to understand the impact of the internet on the nature of this type of communication. Findings revealed that youth communication was not limited to what was defined by youth organizations but extended beyond, focusing not only on social awareness and education about social risks but also on providing information and facilitating dialogue among youth.¹¹

5. Study by (K.R. Subramanian), 2017:

This study highlights the difficulty in containing or restricting youth from using social media platforms, which offer a variety of conveniences and have changed the way people communicate, leading to a decrease in direct interactions. The reasons might be numerous, but the reality remains the same! Easy communication will replace long-term written communication. This is the result of technological advancement. What we need to understand is whether this has led to positive or negative consequences. The main reason is the necessity of social connection and interaction. However, due to the limited time in the current environment, social media has become predominant.¹²

Importance of the Study:

The importance of this study lies in the significance of its variables, represented by the cyberspace, which is considered a new environment in the world. It continues to amaze us every day with modern technologies that surpass those that came before. Social relationships, which are the foundation of society and the origin of all connections between individuals, are also essential. Even from the perspective of Algerian society, especially with its distinct characteristics and features compared to other societies. Here, we refer to the Islamic character, customs, and traditions inherited in the community. Therefore, the importance of community relationships and connections requires us to give importance to studies in this field, by addressing various modern means of communication and understanding their impact on us, as individuals and groups, to enrich the Algerian library, especially in the field of psychology.

Study Objectives:

This study aims to identify the extent of the impact of the digital space on social relationships among individuals in Algerian society. Can we preserve traditions and customs in our society within the framework of this modern technology? This study also aims to shed light on the positives and negatives related to the cyberspace.

The practical aspect:

Study Methodology: Since the study requires description and analysis, and with the variables suitable for this type of approach, we chose the descriptive method, which combines the course material with description and analysis.

Study Population: The study population here consists of male and female Algerian citizens residing across the following states: Blida, Ouargla, M'sila, Ghardaia, Tipaza, Skikda, and Batna.

Sample Type: A purposive sample was chosen for this study.

Sample Size: The sample size was 65 individuals, distributed across seven states in the country, to include various opinions of male and female citizens. These states are: Blida, Ouargla, M'sila, Ghardaia, Tipaza, Skikda, and Batna.

Study Period: The study lasted for three months, from May to July 2020.

Personal Variables in the Study Sample:

Table (1)

shows the distribution of individuals in the sample according to personal variables

Gender	Repetitions	Percentage	Age	Repetitions	Percentage	Educational Level	Repetitions	Percentage
Male	33	51%	0 – 18 years old	2	3%	Primary school	1	2%
Female	32	49%	19 – 30 years old	39	60%	Middle school	2	3%
			31 – 43 years old	15	23%	Highschool	6	9%
			44 – 60 years old	7	11%	University	49	75%
			61 years old and above	2	3%	Vocational Training and National Institutes	7	11%
Total	65	100%	Total	65	100%	Total	65	100%

Source : Prepared by the researcher.

From Table (1), we notice the distribution of individuals in the sample according to the gender variable. The first rank was for males with 33 individuals, accounting for 51%, while females were 32 individuals, accounting for 49% in the second rank. Regarding the distribution of individuals in the sample according to the age variable, the first rank was for the age group 19-30 years with 39 individuals, accounting for 60%. In the second rank, the age group 31-43 years had 15 individuals, accounting for 23%. In the third rank, the age group 44-60 years had 7 individuals, accounting for 11%. As for the last rank, it was evenly shared between the age group 0-18 with 2 individuals, accounting for 3%, and the age group 61 years and above with 2

individuals, also accounting for 3%. Concerning the distribution of individuals in the sample according to the educational level variable, the first rank was for university graduates with 49 individuals, accounting for 75%. The second rank was for vocational training and national institutes with 7 individuals, accounting for 11%. In the third rank were high school graduates with 6 individuals, accounting for 9%. In the fourth rank were middle school graduates with 2 individuals, accounting for 3%. Finally, in the fifth and last rank were primary school graduates with 1 individual, accounting for 2%.

Table (2)

shows the sample's responses to the questionnaire items

Survey Items	Yes	Percentage	No	percentage	Total
Do you consider modern technology a reason for changing the way people communicate with each other?	62	95%	3	5%	65
Do you think that social relationships, in light of technology, are moving towards disappearance?	37	57%	28	43%	65
Can modern technologies replace traditional communication methods?	17	26%	48	74%	65
If progress is good and positive, do you think relationships between individuals have also evolved with it?	33	51%	32	94%	65
Are there any positives to modern methods of communication?	62	95%	3	5%	65
Do you think there is resistance to this type of virtual communication?	23	35%	42	65%	65
Are you a user of the internet to communicate with relatives?	50	77%	15	23%	65
The cyberspace has made the world a small village, is this true?	62	95%	3	5%	65
Can we ignore this technological advancement and not use it to communicate with each other?	5	8%	60	92%	65

From Table (2), concerning the first item, it is noteworthy that the majority, accounting for 95%, agreed that modern technology is the reason for changing the

way individuals communicate, while only 5% disagreed. Regarding the second item, 57% answered yes about the disappearance and decline of social relationships due to modern technology, while 43% answered no. For the third item, 26% answered yes about the possibility of replacing traditional communication methods with modern ones, while the majority, 74%, answered no. As for the fourth item, 51% answered yes about whether the development is positive and if relationships have evolved among individuals, while 49% answered no. Regarding the fifth item, the majority of the sample, 95%, answered yes about the presence of positives in modern means of communication, while only 5% answered no. Concerning the sixth item, 35% answered yes about the possibility of resistance to this type of virtual communication, while the majority, 65%, answered no. Regarding the seventh item, 77% answered yes about using the internet to communicate with relatives, while 23% answered no. For the eighth item, the majority, accounting for 95%, answered yes about the internet being the reason for making the world smaller, while only 5% answered no. As for the ninth and last item, only 8% answered yes about the possibility of ignoring this technological advancement and not using it for communication among us, while the majority, 92%, answered no.

Thus, according to the survey results, there is variation in the responses of the citizens, which can be attributed to the different opinions and mindsets of individuals. We can interpret these results as follows:

Regarding the first item, which asked, " Do you consider modern technology a reason for changing the way people communicate with each other?" The overwhelming majority answered yes, due to the penetration of modern technologies into Algerian society, which led to changes in some values that were deeply rooted in previous generations. For example, frequent family visits and maintaining family ties, as prescribed by Islamic teachings, have greatly decreased and are now limited to holidays, events, or feasts and funerals. The reason is modern technology, which, while providing benefits and facilitation to individuals, has also significantly changed Algerian society.

For the second item, " Do you think that social relationships, in light of technology, are moving towards disappearance?" More than half of the sample answered yes, which supports what was mentioned in the first item. Even though relationship patterns have changed compared to the past, they seem somewhat superficial. Modern technology has dominated over values and customs, and many of us now suffice with a short message via phone or social media even during holidays, while previously we used to interact and communicate with all our acquaintances and friends. This is despite the presence of modern transportation means, which were supposed to facilitate mobility, but we see a different reality.

Regarding the third item, " Can modern technologies replace traditional communication methods?" The majority of the sample answered no, indicating the absence of the warmth and affection that was prevalent in the past. When we didn't

have the internet, mobile phones, or even cars, visiting and communicating between families and friends were common. Meeting face-to-face between two parties, such as friends, allowed true feelings to surface at the beginning of their conversation, which strengthened bonds and affection. However, modern communication methods don't allow us to truly know the other party because it's already a virtual, unreal reality.

For the fourth item, which asked, " If progress is good and positive, do you think relationships between individuals have also evolved with it? " The responses were evenly split between yes and no. The viewpoint varies from person to person. Some see this type of modern technology as greatly facilitating their work and lifestyle, making them adapt to it, and they believe it helps them maintain relationships in this new pattern. On the other hand, some individuals don't see this technological advancement as enhancing or developing relationships with others. For them, modern communication leads to shallow and insincere relationships in real life.

Regarding the fifth item, which asked, " Are there any positives to modern methods of communication?" The overwhelming majority answered yes, and this is undeniable. Modern technologies have made many things much easier and more affordable compared to the past when digital technologies and the internet didn't exist. Among the positives, we appreciate the immediate access to news and events from anywhere with audiovisual capabilities. Also, concerning public administrations, it has become easier to obtain various documents needed for daily transactions, and this has become possible through the website of the Ministry of the Interior and Local Authorities.

For the sixth item, which asked, " Do you think there is resistance to this type of virtual communication? " A considerable percentage of the sample answered no. However, there are also those who agreed with this proposition, especially in workplaces or specific settings. Specifically, this resistance is seen in the older generation who didn't grow up with these communication methods throughout their lives, making it somewhat difficult for them to adapt. This pushes them to resist this technology out of fear of losing their positions to others who can use modern technologies more easily.

For the seventh item, which asked, "Are you a user of the internet to communicate with relatives?" The majority of the sample answered yes, as many work far from their families and relatives, and some are constantly traveling and rarely return home. This type of communication helps bridge the gap between the parties involved through audiovisual technologies, bringing them closer together.

For the eighth item, which asked, "The cyberspace made the world a smaller place? Is this true?" The overwhelming majority of the sample answered yes, which supports what we said earlier about knowing everything happening globally, from news to cultures, from the comfort of one's home, with one click, without moving. Previously, we only knew about the habits of different peoples if we visited them, but now we discover something new every day. Even in weather conditions, with the advancement

of science, we can know everything about cities' weather fluctuations anytime, just by connecting to the internet, which provides information through satellites.

As for the ninth and last item, which asked, " Can we ignore this technological advancement and not use it to communicate with each other? " The majority of the sample answered no, supporting our previous statements and the results obtained from the previous items. It's impossible to disregard this technological advancement, which is considered a great boon by many of us. It has made many things easier and more accessible, and even the younger generation has grown up with these modern technologies, considering them essential for various needs or for communicating with friends and peers, unlike the older generation who still cling to traditional communication methods. Therefore, we cannot do without digital technology in our communication.

Conclusion:

What we can conclude at the end of this study is that the online space is considered alien to Algerian society. It is a product of modernization and development that has changed many values and customs in our society, which in turn has affected our ways of communication. We now rely on short text messages or conversations on social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat). Importantly, there is some resistance to these modern technologies, often due to ignorance of how to use them or the perception that they are not suitable for them. However, we do not deny the benefits brought by advanced technologies. They have made many things easier and more accessible, resulting in significant time, effort, and cost savings compared to before.

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