

A thesis submitted to Prof. Dr. Philomen Schönhagen by Jessica Allemann

USE AND PERCEPTION OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION
RELATED TO SOCIAL INTEGRATION

A case study analyzing people with physical disabilities

Extended Abstract

Jessica Allemann

Forschungsassistentin (lic. rer. soc.)
Departement für Medien- und Kommunikationswissenschaft
Universität Fribourg
Boulevard de Pérolles 90, Büro E340, 1700 Fribourg
jessica.allemann@unifr.ch

Extended abstract

For people with handicaps concerning their mobility, the access to public and social life is hindered by physical and social barriers (e.g. places that are not accessible by wheel chair and social exclusion). It is difficult for them to access and maintain face to face contacts (F2F contacts). For concerned persons communication via the internet may be a stronger alternative for social interactions in everyday life, as physical particularities and local distance do not matter there.

Central issue and theoretical basis

The main objective is to explore the interaction of social integration and the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC)¹ of people with physical disabilities. The analysis is based on the uses and gratifications tradition² and refers to contemporary findings of internet research as well as to the concept of social support by Sommer and Fydrich³. The user group in question has been chosen relying on conclusions made in special education and social studies that handicapped are less integrated in society than non-handicapped.⁴ CMC offers the possibility of social interaction free of prejudice. The absence of clues to physical appearance in text-based CMC allows the users in a way to create and

¹ *Computer-mediated communication* (CMC) means in this context technically mediated, synchronic and not synchronic, partially public or private interpersonal communication over the internet (e.g. email, instant messaging, online fora).

² Cf. e.g. Rubin, Alan M. / Rubin, Rebecca B. (1985): Interface of personal and mediated communication: A research agenda. In: *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Jg. 2, Nr. 1, p. 36-53; Bryant, Jennings / Miron, Dorina (2004): Theory and Research in Mass Communication. In: *Journal of Communication*, Jg. 54, Nr. 4, p. 662-704; Schweiger, Wolfgang (2007): Einführung: Computervermittelte Kommunikation als Forschungsgegenstand in der Publizistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft. In: Kimpeler, Simone / Mangold, Michael / Schweiger, Wolfgang (Hrsg.): *Die digitale Herausforderung. Zehn Jahre Forschung zur computervermittelten Kommunikation*. Wiesbaden.

³ The concept of *social support* links social ties and social interactions with the subjectively perceived or anticipated social support, cf. Sommer, Gert / Fydrich, Thomas (1989): *Soziale Unterstützung. Diagnostik, Konzepte, F-SOZU*. (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Verhaltenstherapie: Materialien 22). Tübingen.

⁴ Cf. e.g. Markowetz, Reinhard (2000): Freizeit von Menschen mit Behinderungen. In: Markowetz, Reinhard / Cloerkes, Günther (Hrsg.): *Freizeit im Leben behinderter Menschen. Theoretische Grundlagen und sozialintegrative Praxis*. Heidelberg, p. 9-38; Rehberg, Walter / Klingemann, Harald [o. J]: *Behinderung im Sozialstaat. Benachteiligung und Integration von drei Gruppen behinderter Menschen in der Schweiz. Kurzfassung der Ergebnisse des Projekts im Rahmen des Nationalen Forschungsprogramms 45 «Probleme des Sozialstaats»*. URL: http://www.sozialstaat.ch/global/pdf/tagungen/august/rehberg_d.pdf (08.05.2008); or Weinwurm-Krause, Eva-Maria (2000): Poliomeyelitix und das Post-Polio Syndrom. In: Kallenbach, Kurt: *Körperbehinderungen. Schädigungsaspekte, psychosoziale Auswirkungen und pädagogisch-rehabilitative Massnahmen*. Bad Heilbrunn, p. 213-292.

simulate their identity, and to develop their personality without the disability being perceived sometimes as a «defect».⁵

The elaborated uses and gratifications approach explains the appeal for a specific medium, considering the basic needs and the personality of an individual as well as several social factors. If the individual experiences a deficit concerning its basic needs, these factors have an influence on the decision making process which includes several concurring solution possibilities. If one of the possible sources of need satisfaction is not available or insufficient, the search for a solution is shifted to a functional alternative.⁶ The following simplified scenario is imaginable. An internet user with a physical disability is feeling the need for social interaction and social integration. For the fulfillment of this desire the user has two options. One of it is an encounter on a personal level. The other would be an interaction by means of technically mediated communication. Because of the mentioned barriers the person has difficulties to establish F2F contact. As a solution to this problem, CMC is gaining in importance. And the more a person has experienced the positive aspects of this type of communication, the more he is attracted to it. Online he can have a conversation with like-minded people, strangers or friends, regardless of the physical distance or possible prejudices of his vis-à-vis.⁷ This communication is characterized by a large degree of freedom of expression, and it also allows the

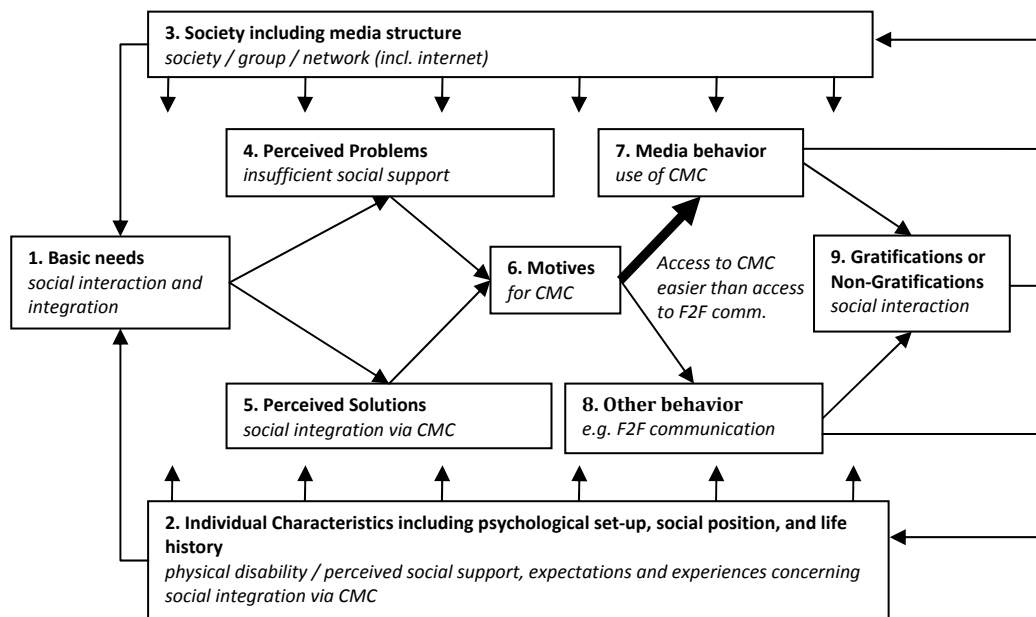
⁵ Cf. *to characteristics of CMC*: Beck, Klaus (2006): Computervermittelte Kommunikation im Internet. München; *to barriers*: Gredig, Daniel / Deringer, Sabine / Hirtz, Melanie / Page, Roman / Zwicky, Heinrich (2005): Menschen mit Behinderungen in der Schweiz. Die Lebenslagen der Bezügerinnen und Bezüger von Leistungen der Invalidenversicherung. (Nationales Forschungsprogramm 45: «Probleme des Sozialstaats»). Zürich; Leyendecker, Christoph (2000): Geschädigter Körper, behindertes Selbst, oder: «In erster Linie bin ich Mensch». Eine Einführung zum Verständnis und ein systematischer Überblick zu Körperschädigungen und Behinderungen. In: Kallenbach, Kurt: Körperbehinderungen. Schädigungsaspekte, psychosoziale Auswirkungen und pädagogisch-rehabilitative Massnahmen. Bad Heilbrunn, p. 13-52; Bowker, Natilene / Tuffin, Keith (2003): Dicing with Deception: People with Disabilities' Strategies for Managing Safety and Identity Online. In: *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Jg. 8, Nr. 2. URL: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol8/issue2/bowker.html> (22.06.2008), [o. p.]; *to the model of simulation*: Döring, Nicola (2003): Sozialpsychologie des Internet. Die Bedeutung des Internet für Kommunikationsprozesse, Identitäten, soziale Beziehungen und Gruppen. 2., überarbeitete und erweiterte Aufl. (Internet und Psychologie. Neue Medien in der Psychologie, Bd. 2). Göttingen.

⁶ Cf. Rubin, Alan M. / Rubin, Rebecca B. (1985): Interface of personal and mediated communication: A research agenda. In: *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Jg. 2, Nr. 1, p. 36-53; Rosengren, Karl Erik (1974): Uses and Gratifications: A Paradigm Outlined. In: Blumler, Jay G. / Katz, Elihu (Hrsg.): *The Uses of Mass Communications. Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*. (Sage Annual Reviews of Communication Research, Vol. III). Beverly Hills / London, p. 269-286.

⁷ Cf. e.g. Tröster, Heinrich (1988): Interaktionsspannungen zwischen Körperbehinderten und Nichtbehinderten – verbales und nonverbales Verhalten gegenüber Körperbehinderten. Göttingen / Zürich; Gredig, Daniel / Deringer, Sabine / Hirtz, Melanie / Page, Roman / Zwicky, Heinrich (2005): Menschen mit Behinderungen in der Schweiz. Die Lebenslagen der Bezügerinnen und Bezüger von Leistungen der Invalidenversicherung. (Nationales Forschungsprogramm 45: «Probleme des Sozialstaats»). Zürich.

person to interact with less emotional pressure.⁸ Easier access to CMC, including its gratifications (sought and obtained) may convince the person to seek for social interaction in the internet. For exemplification of the above, the model for uses and gratification studies by Rosengren is suitable.

Figure 1: Model for uses and gratification studies by Rosengren⁹



Research Questions and Survey

The following research questions can be derived from the above presented subjects. What types of CMC online media are being used how extensively by people with physical disabilities? What is the proportion of CMC and F2F contacts in this population group? Is there a relation between the social integration of an individual with physical disabilities and its use or perception of CMC? In what way is the perception of CMC's integrational potential different compared to the perceived potential of its functional alternatives (telephone and F2F contact)? What effect does mobility have on CMC: do people being dependent on a wheelchair use the internet more extensively? Are there differences in the use of CMC between people with physical disabilities and other users?

In order to examine those questions a standardized online survey among Swiss internet users with physical disabilities was carried out. The survey gathered data on the use of the internet and of CMC media, on the perception of

⁸ Papacharissi, Zizi / Rubin, Alan M. (2000): Predictors of Internet Use. In: Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, Jg. 44, Nr. 2, p. 175-196.

⁹ Thematically relevant additions (italic) and highlighting of the arrow from 6 to 7 were made for the thesis, cf. Rosengren 1974, p. 271.

its integrational potential compared to the functional alternatives and on the social integration of the participants. The design of the questionnaire is inspired by already existing and well elaborated instruments.¹⁰ The participants were invited to the online survey via messages on specialized websites as well as by email and newsletters sent by handicap organizations. Between May and August 2008 the questionnaire was submitted 366 times. After clearing up the data 244 valid questionnaires remained. Univariate and bivariate analyses were carried out with descriptive methods and with analytical statistical tests.

Results

In comparison to the reference survey on the overall Swiss population the present analysis showed the following two differences. The representation of strong internet users is higher in this survey.¹¹ The participants also chose a higher number of motives for the use of the internet (e.g. online shopping, information gathering or personal contact with peers). But personal interaction is still chosen over CMC. Further there is no proof for a correlation between social integration and the intensity of internet use. However persons perceiving themselves as less integrated stress the social-interactive function of CMC. They primarily seek contact and entertainment while socially well integrated persons mainly search the internet for information. An even stronger influence on the internet use motives is determined by mobility limitations: Persons who are dependent on a wheel chair tend to spend more time in the internet and to use a bigger variety of its options. Furthermore they mention interactive needs more often as a reason for their choice to use CMC.

These results can be seen as indications for the support of the assumption that people who are limited in their mobility by a wheel chair choose the better accessible interne-banking) over the «real life» alternatives where physical barriers have to be dealt with. Moreover, the interpretation can be made that physical barriers are more important than social barriers, when it comes to the choice for CMC.

¹⁰ The operationalisation of social integration is based on the model of subjectively perceived social support by Sommer and Fydrich (Sommer / Fydrich 1989); the measurement of the perception of CMC is based on the method of Flanagin and Metzger who derive the functional image of a medium from the use purposes of the users (Flanagin, Andrew J. / Metzger, Miriam J. (2001): Internet use in the contemporary media environment. In: Human Communication Research, Jg. 27, Nr. 1, p. 153-181).

¹¹ This result has to be seen within the context of the fact that strong internet users are overrepresented can be explained by the nature of the online survey and by the online call for participation.