

Internet's Influence on Social Interactions in Japan

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Although Japan in the first half of the 1990s lagged behind other advanced countries in electronic networking, Internet use has surged since 1995, with Japan now having the second-largest population of Internet users in the world. Recent rapid technological changes in electronic networking and mobile telecommunications are bringing about changes in patterns of personal interaction and the creation of new virtual communities with their own distinct cultures.

The first part of this essay looks at Internet environmental factors in Japan, such as usage demographics and means of access. Part 2 examines the formation of virtual communities and the effects of the Internet on personal interactions. The next section of this paper explores some of the language issues Japan faces with the growth of the Internet. The last part briefly considers the impact on social interactions of some Japanese government initiatives to promote the Internet.

1. Japan's Internet Environment

Until about 1995, Japan's Internet growth was held back by several factors, including little governmental assistance, low rate of home PC ownership, and high cost of high-speed digital leased lines and home phone lines, primarily due to NTT's near-monopoly status in telecommunications (Aizu 1998; *Economist* 1995, 50; Kumon 1998). Despite these impediments, the number of Japanese Internet users has increased rapidly from 129 thousand at the end of 1995 to about 27 million at the end of 1999. Even with this steep increase in users, the number of Japanese using the Internet still has much potential for growth, with Japan's Internet penetration rate of 21.4 percent only about half of the 39.4 percent in the U.S. (Aizu 1998; Ministry of Posts and Communications 2000).

Much of this tremendous growth in Japan has been driven by Internet-enabled cellular phones produced primarily by NTT DoCoMo. More than a third of the Japanese Web users access the Internet using wireless technology, and the total number of users logged on through mobile connections (about 10 million) far exceeds figures in other countries (Stevenson 2000). Since February 1999, about 7.8 million people have subscribed

to DoCoMo's "i-mode" (Internet-enabled) service, with one major reason for the high demand being its reasonable cost in comparison to home PC connections (Schmit 2000).

Although the rate of Japanese home PC ownership falls well below the percentage in the U.S., public access to the Web in cafes and kiosks and mobile access through phones and palmtops have the potential to bring the Internet to Japanese citizens in all demographic groups.

2. Effects on Personal Relations

The Internet is bringing about fundamental and profound changes in patterns of social interaction in Japan. Although online communities lack traditional face-to-face interactions, Surratt (1998, 22) argues that the communication between members allows online communities to form the basic elements of a culture, which includes a "generalized system of values, beliefs, norms and symbols."

Online communication through the Internet allows people to establish friendships and acquaintances based on mutual interests rather than primarily based on geographic proximity. This potentially will change radically how people relate with each other, as Shapiro (1999, 49) explains:

Because individuals are judged online mostly by what they say, virtual communities would appear to soften social barriers caused by age, race, gender, and other fixed characteristics. They can also be valuable for people who might be reticent about face-to-face social interaction, like gay and lesbian teenagers, political dissidents, and the disabled.

As early as the late 1980s, one can see some examples in Japan of what type of emotional support can be provided by members of an electronic network. Aizu (1996) relates the story of a Japanese high school student who disclosed many of his personal problems online and who found members of the online community to be the first persons to listen and to treat him as a real person. Members of this early electronic network in Japan found the ability to openly communicate with others as its greatest advantage. Many other network communities exist in Japan, such as a self-help group of people wanting to quit smoking and a temporary Internet community formed to support victims and volunteers helping victims of the Great Kobe Earthquake of 1995 (Miyagawa 1999).

Although the phrase "surf the Net" conjures up images of people visiting many different Web sites for short periods of time, several studies show that the majority of people repeatedly go to the same sites, especially those that have "chat" capability (Abramson 1998, 59). Japanese Internet use statistics indicate that people tend to build

communities by going to the same sites to exchange views and obtain information. The typical Japanese Internet user spends about two and a half hours a week online, but visits only six unique Web sites (Lawrence 2000). During April 2000, about 70 percent of Japanese Internet users visited Yahoo's Japanese-language site and 60 percent visited Nifty, a Japanese Internet service provider (Chea 2000).

Japanese Web sites directed to the interests and needs of women (for example, onna.com ("women.com" in English) and j-women.com) have experienced rapid growth, with the "community building" aspect of the Internet being especially strong among Japanese women. Onna.com describes itself as "a resource and safe community for Japanese women where they can comfortably share experiences, explore the Internet, and engage in e-commerce," by "providing community" with "user-friendly forums and message boards" (Onna.com 2000). According to one survey, more than half of the women respondents said they use e-mail or chat to "meet" friends either often or occasionally, but the percentage for men was much less (Howe 1999).

Although the Internet has many valuable benefits in increasing communications, there can be negative effects on interpersonal interactions when people prefer spending their time using the new technology rather than having face-to-face interactions with other individuals. Psychiatrist Edward Hallowell (1999, 59, 61) argues that many people suffer from a lack of "human moments" because of the new Internet technology. He points out that a "human moment" has two prerequisites: individuals' physical presence and their emotional and intellectual attention. Hallowell considers that people need this type of human contact to survive and to maintain their mental activity and their emotional well-being. Although surfing the Net, sending e-mails, and taking part in online chats with persons who have similar interests can be quite enjoyable, the time spent in such activity can reduce the frequency of face-to-face interactions with others. Moreover, telenetworking from home in Japan offers opportunities to eliminate long commutes, but this type of work reduces time spent with others.

Further research and time will show the extent of the negative effects of the new Internet technology on Japanese social interactions, but Hallowell's journal article has sound reasoning and provides numerous professional experiences to support his conclusions. However, some survey results do not seem to support Hallowell's concerns of reduced "human moments" in the Internet age. For example, 84 percent of the respondents to one survey of Japanese Internet users indicated the amount of time spent talking face-to-face with other family members had not changed (Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications

2000, 24). Rather than reduced personal interactions, the time spent on the Internet resulted in reduced time for other activities such as sleeping (50 percent of survey respondents), watching television (49 percent), and reading magazines (40 percent).

3. Language Issues

The Internet significantly affects both how Japanese-speaking persons communicate between themselves and how Japanese speakers communicate with non-Japanese speakers. Moreover, the Japanese written language presents unique challenges for network communications, especially outside of Japan.

The English language dominates the Internet, so Japanese people must usually communicate in English when they communicate outside of the country. The Internet Society estimated in 1996 that 82 percent of home pages in the world are in English, with German at 4 percent and Japanese at 2 percent (Economist 1997, 15). The Japanese government and most large Japanese organizations and companies provide Web sites in both Japanese and English so that non-Japanese speakers can read information. Japanese people using the Internet to communicate inside Japan use their own language, but the prevalence of English on the Internet forces Japanese, both young and old, to learn the English language if they want to effectively communicate outside the country and to obtain information from foreign Web sites. NEC Corporation explains that recent "requirements that new employees and old managers seeking promotions take a test proving a specified degree of English language skills are largely a result of the Internet" (Strom 2000, 6).

The Japanese written language, which uses several thousand Chinese characters called *kanji*, has character codes not compatible with non-Japanese PCs. The script used for Latin-based languages requires only one byte (i.e., eight bits with values of either 0 or 1), whereas Japanese requires two bytes to represent all of the *kanji*. These different character encodings result in non-Japanese PCs not being able to show Japanese characters without the use of special software. Even with this special software, very few people outside of Japan can read the Japanese language except for Japanese who have permanently or temporarily moved overseas. Some attempts have been made to create machine translation software so foreigners can read Japanese directly in English or another language, but none of these attempts have come close to effective translations that can be used on a regular basis by non-Japanese speakers.

Communication within Japan by the Internet creates some new issues in social interactions. For example, the Japanese language has several levels of politeness depending on the speaker's status relative to the listener's status. Without meeting a person face-to-

face, it becomes difficult to determine the other person's status in order to know what politeness level to use in a chat room or in an e-mail message. Voiskounsky (1998) mentions that some people try to provide company or institution information as part of their e-mail messages, thereby communicating the sender's status to the receiver. As another example, U.S. and European networks have developed an extensive set of emoticons ("smileys") to express emotions by using certain symbols from the keyboard, but the Japanese development of their own set of emoticons reflects their own unique culture (Takahashi 1996). Interestingly, emoticons used in U.S. and European networks must be viewed sideways, whereas Japanese emoticons do not.

4. Government Initiatives

The 1999 report to the Japanese Prime Minister by the Economic Strategy Council strongly recommended the improvement of Japan's Internet environment by promoting drastic deregulation in the telecommunications industry to promote active competition and by making efforts to reduce the construction cost of fiber optic networks to establish an information superhighway running across Japan. Several government ministries are taking steps to improve the Internet environment for Japanese citizens. This section of the essay briefly discusses example efforts by the Ministry of Education and by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications.

The Ministry of Education (1998) plans to connect all junior high and high schools to the Internet by 2001 and all elementary schools by 2003. The Ministry is working to train all school personnel in Internet use and to enhance educational content. Japanese teachers report that the use of the Internet in the classroom has produced several benefits in the education of children (Japan Information Network 1997). Some students who previously hated to study English put more effort into learning the language once they went on the Internet. When teachers brought up topics in class, students many times took the initiative to research them online. The Internet broadened the horizons of the students and allowed them to communicate with people they ordinarily would not meet in the school's "closed society" that existed prior to the Internet. The Ministry of Education (1997) believes the Internet will give students a better international understanding and knowledge, which has been a major goal of the Japanese government since the Nakasone administration in the mid 1980s.

The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (2000, 25-27, 35) also recognizes how the Internet changes personal interactions, especially for the disabled and the elderly. In a survey of ways that the lives of disabled people have improved since using the

Internet, over 60 percent responded that they now have more hobbies and pastimes and they can more easily gather and send out information. Over 50 percent said they have wider social interaction since using the Internet. The Internet also provides the elderly, whose opportunities for social interactions may be limited, with an additional activity and gives them an opportunity to participate more in society if they wish to do so. The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications and the Ministry of Health and Welfare are jointly working toward the creation of an "information barrier-free environment," where all Japanese people, including the disabled and elderly, can take advantage of the Internet as a means of information and cultural exchange.

Conclusion

Since widespread Internet use is so recent and since mobile access to the Internet has only been available for a little more than a year, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions on the effects of the Internet on social interactions in Japan. Although it is clear that the future of interpersonal relations will be dramatically changed by the new technology, it is unclear to what extent the Internet will replace face-to-face interactions. Nevertheless, the Internet clearly provides many advantages with its capabilities to easily obtain information and to communicate with others.

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