

*Trusting for Authentic Friendships in the Perceptive World of Everybody Lies
Online*

Pataraporn Sangkapreecha, Bangkok University, Thailand

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Abstract

With the technological advancement of communication, especially the internet, more and more people no longer live life in a set of relatively fixed settings but rather they live through online societies. In online venues, it is easier for individuals to have power to manage their relationships, making it freer and expanding possibilities. As such, an online social communities, interpersonal beliefs and relationships are being created and reshaped in a wide variety of ways. This qualitative online study offers insights into the ways in which a group of internet users who do not believe in romantic love online by claiming the social construction of “everybody lies online” paradoxically have faith in online friendships. The argument of this research is that, if friendship choice is, in fact, highly socially available through the use of online social media, then this suggests that authentic friendships could be formed as a result of this powerful tool.

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Introduction

Almost everyone experiences the desire for friendship. Individuals need people whom they can respect, admire, value and interact with in a variety of ways and on various levels. Almost everyone sometimes has the desire for someone to talk to, to be with, to feel understood by, to share an experience with. Friendship reflects the desire for social interaction with another human being. Giddens (1990) sees relationships as “ties based upon trust, where trust is not pre-given but worked upon, and where the work involved means a mutual process of self-disclosure” (p. 121). He emphasises the need to establish trust among individuals and observes that the alternative to trust is “inaction”, which in itself may be “risky” because if people do not take the risk of interacting, they will not develop a supportive friendship network (Giddens, 1990 p. 32).

Today, the internet became a major vehicle for social interactions. It has allowed people to communicate with others through a growing variety of applications. From the beginning enthusiasts viewed this computer technology as a new method for enhancing social networks (Rheingold, 1994). Many people use internet for socialising and making friends. It has been suggested that social relations, including friendships, disclosure and intimacy play an increasing part in the lives of individuals (Jamieson, 1997).

However, a number of news items featuring “everybody lies online” have appeared in the media. The media suggest lying is a typical occurrence in everyday online life and so support public perceptions about the higher incidence of deception online. Previous studies (Anderson, 2005; S.M. Wildermuth, 2001; Susan M. Wildermuth, 2004) have suggested that media, specifically news media, might have much to do with people’s apprehension about forming online relationships. This is due in part to the overemphasis in the popular press of the dangers of meeting people over the internet. Although previous studies confirm the idea that news media portray online relationships in a negative way, there are various studies have found that exposure to media such as news stories about online deception was not related to people’s beliefs, attitudes, social norms or intentions to form online relationships.

This research study, therefore, aims to explore how online friendships are enacted through a socially mediated set of beliefs and practices by looking at why internet users form and create online friendships and how the concept of online deception is reshaped through the use of online social media.

Literature Review

Internet Use for Making Friends

The internet promises to be a real alternative medium to meet people, make friends, or meet romantic partners. It provides new forms of social interaction and interpersonal relationships that are initiated and can be maintained exclusively online or, alternatively, transferred to real life. Early enthusiasts viewed this computer technology as a new method for enhancing social networks via the creation of “virtual communities” (Rheingold, 1994). Scholars have recently started to analyse the role of the internet in supporting the establishment of new relationships both online and offline. In particular, it has been argued that the possibility of forming new social relationships highlights the power of the internet to construct people’s social networks

in meaningful ways by allowing internet users to meet new people and make friends who they would not otherwise have come into contact with (Gennaro & Dutton, 2007; Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Katz & Aspden, 1997; Parks & Floyd, 1996).

There is ample evidence that people form online friendships and that these function as a social network of emotional support when it is needed. Knox, et al.'s (2001) study revealed that the primary goal of using the internet among college students was meeting new people and making new friends and over 60 percent of these participants were successful in establishing an online friendship. Gennaro and Dutton's (2007) finding indicated that about 20 percent of internet users have met new friends online, and about half of these individuals go on to meet one or more of these online friends in person. Chou and Peng (2007) found most of their Taiwanese adolescent samples had "net-friends" and felt they could be fairly open and honest with these friends. These adolescents had positive attitudes in respect to the formation of online friendships. The perceived benefits of having a net-friend included a greater chance of self-disclosure and self-promotion, escape from life's pressures (for example, homework, parental, school), more opportunities to experiment with their "ideal self" and having fun (Chou & Peng, 2007).

A number of research studies have revealed a relationship between loneliness and internet use. Coget, et al.'s (2002) results suggested that internet use is associated with a slightly decreased level of loneliness. However, people who have online friends are more likely to describe themselves as lonely than those who do not. The results of Shaw and Gant's (2002) study on internet users of chat rooms indicated that internet use tended to decrease loneliness and depression significantly, while perceived social support and self-esteem increased significantly. Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2003) found lonely people preferred online social interactions to face-to-face interactions. Users felt online interactions were less threatening and more rewarding than face-to-face interactions. Matanda, et al. (2004) explored issues of computer anxiety, loneliness and internet use and found better-educated participants were more likely to use the internet for communication. Men, the young, and the lonely used the internet more for entertainment. Whitty and McLaughlin (2007) found lonely people were more likely to use the internet compared to less lonely individuals for social activities, such as playing games and participating in chat rooms. The results of Ando and Sakamoto's study (In press) on loneliness and online relationships indicate their Japanese samples were more likely to feel less lonely and socially anxious as a consequence of making online friendships. These studies support my argument that Thai internet daters use the internet for meeting new people and making new friends, and that loneliness and the need for emotional support are two of many reasons that motivate them to enter into internet dating.

Online Deception

While some modes of internet use encourage fantasy identities that are seen as positive by others (for example, role playing games), fantasy identities on internet dating sites are seen by others as "deception". In looking for true love, strict limits are put on self-presentation, especially on physical looks and wealth.

Online contexts offer individuals an extended ability to manage their self-presentation or their identity, and therefore greater opportunities to engage in misrepresentation or deception (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001). Concerns about the possibility of online deception thus are commonly addressed (Edgerton, 2004; Klein, 2007; Sawadisevee, 2002) and it is a key term to describe experiences online. However, the different ways

in which this deception takes place and the different reasons for its use need to be sorted out. First, there is the deception Turkle (1995) refers to as “playful”. She argues that the internet gives its users more freedom to explore “playful, fantastical online personae” that differ from their “real life” identities. Yet, it is common for many people to express concern about lying and deception occurring online. Knox, et al.’s (2001) study revealed deception on the internet was rampant. Forty percent of their participants reported having lied on the internet. Second, there is the deception Whitty (2002) found to be a result of safety concerns. Women and younger people (aged 17 to 20) in her study tended to lie about features the revelation of which could potentially threaten their anonymity. Third, online deception can be determined by the need for sex, power and love. In one Thai chat room study, Sawadiseevee’s (2002) participants revealed that they use the online community to express their hidden selves, that is, emotions and feelings that they suppress in the real world because of social norms and rules. The results of this study also indicated that the internet environment facilitates deception as a result of its features of reduced sensation, a disinhibition effect and flexible identity. Lastly, Klein’s (2007) study has suggested deception might be motivated by the desire for intimacy and enjoyment of online interactions, and could inadvertently occur through omission or distortion.

In an internet dating study by Brym and Lenton (2001), deception is reported as the “main perceived disadvantage of online dating” (p. 3) and participants see it as commonplace. Over a quarter of their participants reported misrepresenting some aspect of their identity, most commonly age, marital status and appearance. There were almost no differences between the genders in their propensity to misrepresent themselves. A survey of one internet dating site reported 86 percent of their participants felt others misrepresented their physical appearance by making it more flattering (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Perceptions that others are lying may encourage reciprocal deception, because internet users will exaggerate to the extent that they feel others are deceiving them (Fiore & Donath, 2004). Further, Cornwell and Lundgren (2001) found that individuals involved in online romantic relationships were more likely to engage in online deception than those involved in real life relationships, but this was directly associated with the level of relationship involvement. That is, participants who were less involved in their online relationships were more likely to engage in deception.

Regarding gender differences in online deception, McCown, et al. (2001) found men lied more than women. In their sample, over 75 percent of men lied and a little less than half of the woman participants lied. Whitty’s (2008) study revealed male internet daters were more likely to misrepresent their height and their relationship status than women. However, in Knox, et al.’s (2001) investigation, women were slightly more deceitful than men (43 percent to 35 percent). Their age and physical characteristics were the most commonly reported misrepresentations.

Although much of the public discussion about internet dating has centred on the medium’s inability to ensure participants’ truthful self-representations, the study of Ellison, et al. (2006) and Whitty (2008) have suggested that the notion that people frequently, explicitly, and intentionally “lie” online is simplistic and inaccurate. Their internet dating participants claimed that they attempted to present an accurate self-representation online to avoid unpleasant surprises in subsequent face-to-face meetings. However, the results of these studies highlight the fact that creating an

accurate online representation of self in this context is a complex and evolving process in which participants attempt to attract desirable partners. As such, people on internet dating sites tended to “stretch the truth a bit” in their online self-representation (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005 p. 742). Therefore, some misrepresentation or deception may be unintentional. For example, in the study by Padgett (2007) the online photographs that some men used were 5 to 10 years old or unusually flattering photographs in order to attract more women.

Participants in Whitty’s (2008) study stressed the importance of crafting an attractive profile and described this as a process of “selling themselves” (p. 1714). Participants typically elected to have a photograph (many selecting the most flattering photograph they could find), some even going as far as having a glamour shot. Furthermore, about half of her sample did admit to misrepresenting themselves on their profiles. They admitted to lying about their looks, their current relationships, age, weight, socioeconomic status, and interests. The most common way that individuals misrepresented themselves was related to their physical appearance. Noticeably, internet daters do not de-emphasise physical attractiveness as an important quality. They did not misrepresent their appearance for malicious reasons, but rather as a way to attract others. Despite admissions of their own exaggerations in their profiles, the participants in this study were often outraged to find that when they met face to face their online partners had misrepresented themselves in their profiles as well (Monica T. Whitty, 2008).

The importance placed on physical attractiveness may be greater for internet daters than for individuals developing relationships in other places online. As the results of Rosen, et al. (In press) have indicated, internet daters and traditional daters differed on what characteristics they found important in a potential date. While traditional daters found personal information, personality, and education more important, internet daters keyed in on communication style and physical attractiveness. Perhaps internet daters misrepresent themselves or undertake deception in order to attract others in a medium where first impressions are important (Rosen, et al., In press).

Walther (1996) introduced a theory he called the Hyperpersonal Perspective in which he suggests internet users make over-attributions about their online partners. His theory is that when people expect future interactions with a person they infer a perceived similarity to themselves by “filling in the blanks” in desirable ways. Then, the “reciprocal influences” of this “idealised perception” and “selective presentation” creates “self-confirming prophecies” (p. 28), which lead to more intimacy. The Hyperpersonal Perspective predicts that once two people meet, physical attractiveness is important due to those involved having already projected positive impressions based on the written word and perhaps on one or more photographs (Walther, 1996).

Methodology

This research study employs online qualitative survey with a sample of participants who have used the most popular and most widely used of the online social services in Thailand, thaimate.sanook.com. By using the online questionnaire, qualitative data was obtained via open-ended questions that invited individual accounts of experiences. The qualitative collected data was entered into the NVivo 7.0 software data management program and coded. After an exhaustive coding process, themes emerged from the data. Data reduction was achieved by collapsing thematic concepts into emergent categories relevant to the research.

There were 237 females (51.5%) and 223 males (48.5%) who participated in this study. The ages of the largest number of participants (80.2%) ranged from less than 25 years old to 35 years old. With regard to marital status, 69 percent of participants identified as single. The majority of participants indicated they had completed a bachelor degree (68.9%) and more than half of the participants (56%) lived in Bangkok or surrounding suburbs. Almost all participants (93%) identified their religion as Buddhism.

Results and Discussions

Why We Need Friends Everywhere

In this study, the majority of participants (45.1%) who have not had online romantic relationships reported that they use online social media to make new friends. Both men and women state they use the website for friendships. Of these, some were clear that their intentions were to look for friends only, not to find romantic partners. As this participant states:

Nothing serious. On the internet, we mostly speak about things in general. It is for making friends rather than searching for a date or a love partner. (Participant 452)

These comments are typical of the group who are friendship seekers. In using the site particularly to make friends, 34.6 percent of participants who have not had online romantic relationships said they continue to seek online friends. As this woman indicates:

I already have someone I love. I do online chat just for friendship. Online friends can help each other through chatting even though we don't know how they look. (Participant 380)

In this case participant 380 makes it clear that she already has a “love partner” and that the website is a place to make friends, who “help” or “support” each other. In seeking friends, some of participants said they used the site to relieve loneliness and boredom. This is consistent with the results from previous studies that indicate the internet is linked to a desire to reduce loneliness (Coget, et al., 2002; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003; Shaw & Gant, 2002). Lonelier people used the internet for entertainment (Matanda, et al., 2004; Monica T. Whitty & McLaughlin, 2007) or to communicate with others. The next three participants describe how they use the website to escape from loneliness. They suggest the website provides them with opportunities to communicate and to meet new people:

...well it's just for a fun chit chat and joking around. Sometimes I can get some support when I'm feeling down. And it's good to have someone to talk to (I'm single) when I'm lonely or burned out from work. (Participant 961)

At one point, I look around and all my friends are married and have their own family. Suddenly I felt really lonely that I started to reach out. Internet, once a part of my work, has become a gateway to get me out of loneliness. (Participant 643)

I've been a widow for two years now. I feel so lonely and have plenty of free time and I found the internet is a place I talk with people and make friends. (Participant 992)

In these responses, the participants make a link between their single status and loneliness. Participants 961 and 643 add that their long work days are connected to the need for friends. Increased pressure from work makes it more difficult to find the time to engage in conventional dating methods. People are looking for more efficient ways of meeting. Internet dating has emerged as a credible alternative. The last participant (992) links her loneliness to being a widow. Implicit in these three comments is the suggestion that loneliness would not be so acute if they were in a relationship.

Alternatively, as lonely people may have poorer communication skills, they may choose to use the internet in order to relieve their loneliness and to improve their communication skills. As participant 797 says:

I got a chance to meet new people and learn how to get along with people from different walks of life. I have improved my communication skills with friends who have different ages and locations. It also helps when I feel lonely and I have more friends.
(Participant 797)

There are some differences between men and women in the reasons they give for making friends to relieve loneliness and boredom. Men tend to adopt a playful approach in getting to know new people, involving an enjoyment of sociability “for its own sake” or the flirtatious elements of interaction. The desire to establish serious relationships appears to be out of their minds as shown in these two participants’ statements:

Come on! It’s just a game to kill my free time! Why do we have to take it seriously? (Participant 1196)

Interacting with women on the internet is just for friendship. Online friends are there for me when I feel lonely and bored. They can share some knowledge about things. Yet, I don’t believe I can find my soulmate there. Really, it’s just for fun. I don’t ever wish to find a true love or get married to anyone here. (Participant 749)

For women, on the other hand, the reasons they used the site playfully were different and came from their experiences in talking with men. Participant 516 did not believe that men told the truth:

I’ve been using this dating website for 5 to 6 years now. There are a lot of flings and flirting but no serious relationship. I don’t trust what they say. (Well ... I never lied here but they still don’t trust I tell the truth anyway.) So, I don’t take it too seriously, just for fun when I feel bored. (Participant 516)

Participant 863 thought that the motivations of many men for using the site was to flirt.

The reason I use thaimate is to make new friends. Most of the guys here are married. (I am not a young girl.) They are about 36 and older. They just want to have chat friends when they feel lonely but they would be thrilled if any girl would want more than just a friendship. (Participant 863)

These responses suggest many participants use internet for pursuing friendship. Reasons vary depending upon their marital status. Committed participants use it for making friends, arguing that friendship is distinct from romantic relationships. Single participants use the website to reduce loneliness and boredom as well as to improve their communication skills.

Authentic Online Friendships

Internet participants who believe they cannot find online true love as a consequence of the “everybody lies online” perception paradoxically believe they can trust someone they call an “online friend”. This could be explained by the argument that friendship is something distinctive and apart from the values, expectations, and responsibilities that define romantic relationships (Budgeon, 2006). The following narratives from my participants confirm these points:

You can't judge a book by its cover. It's hard to trust people you met on the internet. But it's not impossible to meet a decent person here. Anyway I think it's difficult to find love here. Well, but friendship can always continue. We still talk and catch up now. (Participant 857)

This means that internet participants consider online friendships are less risky and can be trusted more than online romantic relationships, even though they perceive it is difficult to trust people online. The reasons they have for having trust could be the motivation for developing friendships outside their real-life networks. As career and time pressures are increasing, people are looking for more efficient means of meeting other people for social relationships. Participant 984 notes his life and work conditions led him to make friends on a dating site:

I haven't met anyone special for love on the internet yet. People I have been talking to here are just like friends. Personally, I use the internet to contact people. It also gives me more opportunity to get to know a lot of people out there. Nowadays I have a busy lifestyle that makes it hard to interact with people. Those people who I meet on a trip or at places, it's not easy to talk to them and getting to know them because we are strangers. I don't know if they also want to open up and have a conversation or not. But in an internet world, everyone is willing to open up so I can determine who wants to just chat, find friends or lovers. This makes it easy for me to make an approach. (Participant 984)

Internet sites make clear that their purpose is to be a meeting place for persons who desire social relations. It has been argued that because social forms have become more fluid, friendships are becoming more important and central to people's lives as a source of continuity. Pahl (2000) states “sometimes the only continuity for increasingly reflexive people is provided by their friends” and that because so many aspects of one's life may be transitory (jobs, marriages) “men and women may come to rely on their friends to provide support and confirmation of their enduring identities” (p. 69). The results of my study affirm this view. In making friends on the internet site, many participants have found good companions. Participant 778 says:

My relationships on the internet are only about friendships. Give each other support through a rough time. I am lucky that I have received good feelings from friends here and it will be in my memory forever. (Participant 778)

Internet friends support each other in personal life. Internet daters are found to typically have positive experiences in their relationships that are similar to what real life daters have (Rosen, et al., In press). Friendships formed on the internet can last as long as friendships formed in real life such as in school or university, as participant 984 says:

Most people I talk to on the net are good friends. The longest friendship I have here is seven years. And we will be good friends forever more. (Participant 984)

There is not only support in personal life, but sometimes people can gain more constructive knowledge for their work from friends met on the internet, as another participant says:

... I have known various kinds of people. We talk and exchange our opinions. We learn each others' work. Sometimes we support each other when one feels down and we have concern for each other with the status of a good friend. (Participant 81)

The stories above show the connections that bind participants 984 and 81 to other members of thaimate.sanook.com, reaching across various facets of the participants' lives.

Conclusion

Friendship, as a “prototype of social relations”, tends to reflect individual choice. This qualitative online study offers insights into the ways in which a group of internet users who do not believe in romantic love online by claiming the social construction of “everybody lies online” paradoxically have faith in online friendships. This means that internet users consider online friendships are less risky and can be trusted more than online romantic relationships, even though they perceive it is difficult to trust people online. Therefore, if friendship choice is, in fact, highly socially available through the use of online social media, then this suggests that authentic friendships could be formed as a result of this powerful tool, which offers more free and individual choice. Since people are obviously interested in forming relationships with men and women whose values and characters are, in important respects, like their own, they normally develop feelings of benevolence or affection toward people who act in ways that are beneficial to their existence.

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