Will You be My Friend?
A Qualitative Content Analysis of Friendster.com

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1. Introduction

With our increasingly impersonal and time-constrained world, many claim they are so busy that they do not have the time to find dates the old-fashioned way. Instead, more and more singles place personal ads in the mass media to find dates. Newspapers, the telephone, television and websites are among the places used to find "the one." Essentially, personal ads are a meta-statement about the kinds of people we are [1]. Like advertisers, people use the personals to describe their characteristics and qualities. And also, like advertisers, they adjust such qualities and characteristics to what they believe potential dating partners are looking for [2]. As a result, the personals are considered by researchers to be rich sources of information on relationships and in mating strategies [3].

One of the most popular sites is *friendster*.com, which was launched in 2002. *Friendster* was not originally promoted as an online dating site. In fact, many people see it as a place to keep in touch with their old friends nearby or other across the globe [4]. To become *Friendster* members, users can sign up free of charge, post up to six pictures and fill out profiles that lists their interests and who they would like to meet. The profiles include a section titled "about me," where users describe themselves [5]. Once users are registered, they can start building their own personal networks by inviting their friends and their friends' friends to sign up. Unlike a traditional online community network, other users do not get to be on another user's *friendster* list, unless they are confirmed as his or her "real-life" friend.

Beyond this, however, many people use *Friendster* as a place to meet future partners. Many believe *Friendster* is not like regular online dating sites because people can meet their future husbands or wives through their friends. Because of its referral element, some are calling *Friendster* as matchmaking site, a fact that makes it significant for study. By late 2004, *Friendster* had more than 13 million users [6].

2. Experiment, Result, Discussion and Significance

This study reports on how Asian women advertise themselves on *friendster*.com. The method employed was qualitative content analysis. The texts studied are the "about me" and "who I want to meet" sections of *Friendster*'s users' personal page. A total of 20 pages were studied, 10 for each of the 18-21 and 27-30 age groups. The 18-21 age group was selected for study because its members are after looking for a partner (boyfriend). But, since they are still young, it was thought they might not be as serious as those who are in the older age group. On the other hand, the second age group (27-30) was chosen because it is perceived as a group that is more serious in finding a partner. Many in this group are ready to settle down and get married.

Other parameters are set to select the sample. Users should have at least a picture on their page. They have to be single and should have chosen "interested in meeting people for dating" or "relationship" in their profiles. In terms of language, they should use English when filling out the profile. Since the researcher is looking at Asian women, she restricted the sample to users who are from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. These are the three neighborhood countries that share similar cultural norms and values.

In the analysis of the *Friendster* entries, four elements were focused on.

Element one: Presentation of name
A person's name sure has a great influence on initial impression [7]. Many people choose to use nicknames rather than their formal names to attract others' attention. From this study, the researcher found that the younger age group had the tendency to use nicknames. Out of 10 samples, five used nicknames. They were "ApPlE," "Queenie," "pEaRLyhEaRt," "bebenyp" and "bluRie anGie." Another interesting finding from the younger group related to the use of name is that the alphabets that were used to construct their names were modified. For the older age group, the researcher found that it did not use nickname at all. The alphabets were also not modified.

Element two: representation of the pictures

Pictures are one of the important elements in a personal advertisement. They give advertisers a chance to show what they really look like. Pictures are also important for the advertisement's responders because they want to know what the advertiser looks like in "real life." The younger age group employed picture that contains the user by herself. All of them were taken from a close distant. All of the young women in this group uploaded more than one picture. The research also suggest that users constantly updating their pictures. An example is taken from one user who wrote "after the hair cut" for her caption to indicate that it was her latest picture.

Most of the users in the older age group employed pictures that contain the user by herself. As far as the amount of pictures displayed, four users uploaded one picture; one user uploaded two pictures; two users uploaded three pictures; one did four pictures; and two users had the maximum amount which is six pictures.

Element three : verbal self description

"About me" is the section where *Friendster* users have the chance to express what type of person they are through words. This is the time when users whether they are conscious or not "advertise" themselves. Users have up to 2000 characters to describe themselves. The younger age group has the tendency to write more. Two users had lyrics of songs by *Christina Aguilera*, *Britney Spears* and *Maroon 5* for their self-description.

The researcher found some emergent themes from this group. There are three words that occur in most of the profiles which are love, friends and friendship. On the other hand, the older group tended to be straighter to the point with what they wanted to say about themselves. Their self-descriptions are also more succinct than the younger ones'. An emerging theme identifiable among the older group is that they present themselves as "I am who I am."

Element four: motivation

In the "who I want to meet" section, "advertisers" indicate who they would like to meet through *Friendster*. They have up to 1000 characters to express their wants. An emergent theme found in the younger age group members was users' tendency to write "you" for who they want to meet. This is how broad of audience that they want to reach because "you" can simply mean anybody. Few indicated that they want to meet "the one."

As far as the older age group, some of these users indicated that they are ready to get married and looking for one through *Friendster*. Another emerging theme that was discovered during this study is that the older age group users are looking for someone who has similar interests to them.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the researcher has studied the four elements presented on *Friendster* users' profile. From this study, the researcher discovered that these women do advertise themselves through their words and pictures. And, *Friendster* has "unofficially" become a new online dating site.

4. Acknowledgment

5. References

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