Sex and Money: The Sexual Norm Phenomenon in Thai Cyberculture

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This online survey research was conducted to explore the phenomenon of sexual norms among Thai internet daters. 460 internet dating members (237 females and 223 males) 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. The findings revealed that there are substantial changes in sexual norms among young people in Thai cyber culture. The internet and internet dating websites in particular, has become one of the mediums used by some sex and money-oriented people. These people come to internet dating for sex, not for romantic love, and they sometimes also exchange sex for money.

Keywords: sexual norms, internet dating, online sexual relationships

There are an increasing number of internet users in Thailand. The latest statistics reported that in 2008, approximately 60 million Thai people (population 65.5 millions) use the internet (Internet Information Research, 2009). Although complete statistics are still unavailable, there is evidence that increasing online relationships in Thailand has become notable since the beginning of the century. Hongladarom (2000) has stated that the internet is popularly known in Thailand as a place where young people hang out and find their girlfriends or boyfriends. He argues that internet serves as a substitute for the traditional meeting grounds for boys and girls, such as shopping malls or cinemas. In recent years, it appears that the internet dating websites have been widely used among Thai people as an alternative way of finding their prospective mate. This method is found to be very popular and is widely used among Thais aged 25 to 45 who are either still single or divorced (Rakaiemsa-ard, 2003; Limanonda, 2007). There are a considerable number of internet dating services; they can be found on almost every web service in Thailand. Of these, the most popular dating services are those aimed at Thais looking for heterosexual relationships (Manager Weekly, 2004; Wattanasukchai, 2007).

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Most of the online relationship research to date has been undertaken in the United States and Europe, although there has been some research carried out in Thailand (Leelakajonjit, 2002; Michelet, 2002; Rakaiemsa-ard, 2003; Limanonda, 2007). It is difficult to determine the actual number of Thais using internet dating, as research results vary. However, all research confirms substantial use of internet dating and indicates increasing numbers of Thai people are using the internet as a method for seeking potential partners.

Interestingly, increased exposure to the internet has led to changes in the cultural sexual norms of Thai young adults. The online survey of End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT), an international non-governmental organisation based in Bangkok, in 2000 revealed that more than 71 percent of the youths (aged 12 to 25) surveyed had accessed a pornographic website at least once and 45 percent of them have been the sites' regular users. The survey also highlighted the dangers of real-life meetings with online impostors and of online conversations about sex. The survey found that 92 percent of children and youth have been invited to talk about sex. This survey also indicated that the internet as a medium of communication provided Thai youth with an unprecedented degree of freedom to speak their minds (Michelet, 2002).

Amalee McCoy, the ECPAT regional officer for Asia and the Pacific who wrote the report on Thailand, cited a survey by Chulalongkorn University which found Thai students are meeting adult sex exploiters through, for instance, internet chat rooms. In late 2002, a 16-year-old girl in Bangkok admitted earning up to 100,000 Thai baht a month working as an escort girl (Assavanonda, 2004). As a result, while the experience of Thai youth of internet is largely positive – making the best of the new opportunities, including to connect, explore and learn – there is no doubt that the benefits of the internet can be offset by detrimental effects it can have. However, there is a dearth of Thai literature on the phenomenon of finding sexual partners in the internet dating. This study, therefore, is a pioneering effort that seeks to explore this phenomenon by focusing upon the sexual norms occurring among Thai internet daters.

Literature Review

This section will review the concept of Thai cultural sexual norms and internet dating for sexual relationships.

Thai cultural sexual norms

Male and female sexuality has been regarded as a socially constructed norm. It has been produced through "a set of authorising discourses" that give "validity to legitimate" and normative forms of sexual expression (Johnson, 2005, p. 59). The regulation of men and women's sexual practices through romantic love produces the "normative construction of gendered sexualities" (Johnson, 2005, p. 66). The author has argued that men and women come to a sexual connection, "not as neutral sexual beings, but with the full history of the social construction of gender mediating their expressions and practices" (Johnson, 2005, p. 66).

Thai sexuality is socially constructed through gender norms, which are themselves components of a broader system of social relations and expectations between men and women in Thai society. Thai gender norms typically have granted sexual freedom to men, but imposed constraints on women. The value of female chastity before marriage is a culturally constructed expectation for Thai women. The method most commonly used to prevent premarital sex is teaching young women that yielding their chastity to their sweetheart before marriage only makes the man feel contempt for them (Bumroongsook, 1995).

However, there are a growing number of studies reporting that the norms governing sexual practices among Thai adolescents and young adults have changed. Teenagers in the study by Vuttanont et al. (2006), for instance, had developed a dual-value system and conflicting aspirations. On the one hand, teenagers frequently stated that they valued modesty and virginity (in girls) and respected, and sought to obey, their parents. On the other hand, they aspired to modern relationships and gender roles, in which boys and girls can date, show public affection, and experiment with sex before marriage is permitted. This study indicated that male sexual desire was expressed in terms of activity and performance while female desire was often given legitimacy and explained

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in the context of "love", in which sex was a means of confirming feelings for, and trust in, a partner.

The studies of Liu et al. (2006) and Rasamimari, et al. (2007) have indicated an increasing number of premarital sexual relations among young Thai women. Thai women appear to be having sex at an earlier age than was previously the norm, whereas men's age at sexual initiation in Thailand does not appear to have changed in recent decades. Yet a key difference remains: young single men usually have more partners, particularly more casual partners, than women. Male and female sexuality in Thai culture, therefore, has changed, and this is not unexpected, given that changes are taking place around the world as the result of the influence of Westernisation and popular culture. The trend toward earlier sexual initiation for Thai women may be the result of the increased acceptability of premarital sex among young women.

Internet dating for sexual relationships

Internet dating sites have become one of the most popular methods people use not only for soliciting friendships and romantic love, but also for searching for sexual partners. Mackay (2001) has argued this new technology has introduced "undreamed of possibilities into sexual arenas around the world" (Johnson, 2005, p. 81). Previous studies revealed that the internet has been used as an avenue for meeting sex partners and arranging sexual encounters (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Daneback, Mansson, & Ross, 2007; Padgett, 2007). An online survey conducted in Sweden in 2002 (Daneback et al., 2007) revealed that 45 percent of the women and 55 percent of the men surveyed used the internet for sexual purposes and, of these, 40 percent of the women and 35 percent of the men reported they had met some offline sex partners online. A report in Canada indicated that 63 percent of the internet daters surveyed had sex with at least one person they met online (Brym & Lenton, 2001).

Studies have investigated to the extent to which their female age-mates surf the internet in search of sex. In the study of women's online sexuality by Padgett (2007), 97 percent of participants reported communicating via email before meeting face to face with a man they had met on dating websites. Of these, some participants discussed with men their sexual likes, dislikes, fantasies, sexual experiences and sexual expectations

prior to an initial encounter. 62 percent of these participants reported that their first face-to-face encounter involved sexual activities.

Method

Internet dating communities exist solely in cyberspace, indicating that conducting traditional surveys with them are impractical. Therefore, employing the online survey method was extremely beneficial in terms of reaching participants in internet dating communities.

Participants

This research had a particular population in mind – natives of Thailand who were members of thaimate.sanook.com, the most popular and most widely used of the internet dating services in Thailand. The recruitment of participants in this research was carried out using email as the contact mode and the web as the response mode. Participation in this study was solicited by sending an individual introductory email message telling members of thaimate.sanook.com about the research project. The email included a link to the web-based questionnaire. The email software offered the transformation of URLs into direct links to the web site, reducing additional steps for the respondents.

Anonymity and confidentiality were important for internal validity. Therefore, every effort was made to maintain the privacy of the participants. Although thaimate. sanook.com maintains a database of email addresses of their membership, email addresses are confidential so as to protect the members' anonymity. Therefore, the introductory email telling members of thaimate.sanook.com about the study with a link to the online survey was sent by the Sanook Online Limited.

The email recruitment of participants was supplemented by placing a general request for respondents with the link to the online survey on the www.thaimate.sanook.com web page. This supplement solved the problem of any introductory emails not going to the members' email inbox as a result of spam mail collection by their mail cleaner services. A banner announcing the study was displayed to inform members who came to the site

about the research project directly. Participants who wished to seek further information followed this link and completed the survey online on the website.

Even though the total number of thaimate.sanook.com's members varies on a daily basis, the estimated population of the site is 350,000 members (ThaipostNewspaper, 2005). The desired sample size of this study thus was 380 respondents, as the statistical formula of sample size with an Alpha of 5 percent corresponds to a 95 percent Confidence Interval. Of the 1,169 replies to the online survey, 460 participants completed all items in the online survey, resulting in a 39 percent response rate.

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.

Procedure

The online survey with open-ended questions was used to collect the data. The open-ended questions were asked about the story of their online experience regarding sexual issues, or make any additional comments about these experiences. These open-ended questions served as the crucial way of understanding the phenomenon of online sexual behaviours because they examined the meanings participants construct about their interpersonal online interactions. The participants in this study are not merely users influenced by the internet, but also social actors who shape the online dating context for themselves (Goffman, 1973). The open-ended questions thus provided the researcher with the possibility of examining how internet daters understand and interpret their own online experiences. The collected data was entered into the NVivo 7.0 software data management program and coded. Using the content analysis, the coding process was accomplished through line-by-line evaluation of the transcripts and through attribute searches of the transcripts. As nodes were developed, the data was searched through NVivo search tools and further edited and coded as necessary. 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. The results were organised into essential textural themes, essential structural themes, and essential categorical themes. Description was set carefully to reflect an understanding of the participants' meanings, the social reality of the phenomenon and a careful use of language (Van Manen, 1990).

Results and Discussion

Thai male and female sexuality can be understood as socially constructed norms. These norms are changing or being challenged by younger Thai people. There is increasing evidence that Thai young adults engage in sexual behaviors such as premarital sexual activities and multiple sexual partners. It is evident that Thai young adults both men and women have greater opportunities to engage in sexual activity than they had in the past because of the rapid changes in sexual behavior norms (Liu et al., 2006; Rasamimari et al., 2007) and increased exposure to the internet (Assavanonda, 2004). These changes have had significant effects on the sexual attitudes and intentions of Thai youth in using internet dating.

There were some participants who provided their opinions and experiences concerning other members who use thaimate.sanook.com for sexual purposes and/or financial gain. This is consistent with the findings of previous internet dating studies (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Daneback et al., 2007). It is also consistent with McCabe's (2005) study that found some evidence that men using internet dating sites were seeking casual sex, while women were seeking intimacy and commitment. This view is certainly expressed by some female participants here. Participant 1021 expresses her wish for beautiful and pure love. She contrasts this with the sexual activities that she thinks many men are looking for:

If love relationships here on the internet, well, I wish for it as the radiant and warm relationships rather than the focus on a sexual activity. Nowadays many men just look for some (sexual) fun and think about it just as easy and quick and it ends fast, superficial and nothing meaningful. (Participant 1021)

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Participant 1051's story also reveals her experience of a man using internet dating for sex and money. Her story is quoted at length, as it is useful to read as it informs us about what is reported in the news media on the sexual issues arising in Thai internet phenomenon. She writes:

It's not possible to find true love because this place is full of lies. In my case, we met through a chat room of thaimate. Later we arranged to meet and went out. One day I found out he already had a girlfriend. He lied, and I trusted him, that's why I decided to meet. When I tracked him down, I realised he was such a slick. He had many girls and slept with them one after another. His choice is always rich and older women so that he can use their money to please himself. Just recently I've heard that he took someone else out. When she got really drunk, he took her to his apartment. He videotaped everything when they had sex. He took her mobile and cash. There were many girls who were harassed and trapped by this man. (Participant 1051)

Internet dating websites commonly provide a set of ethical guidelines concerning the use of the site, yet they do not police the content of exchanges that are communicated through their resources. Therefore, many unwanted or harmful messages are written on the site. Interestingly, Goffman (1977) notes what he calls a "courtesy courtship" system in which women are somewhat vulnerable in a chronic way to being "hassled" within face-to-face interactions between men and women (Goffman, 1977, p. 320). Courtship on a dating website, on the other hand, provides internet daters with a special way to withdraw from any interaction by the simple strategy of not responding to an email. This can also be supplemented by the ability to "block" communication from anyone who is unwilling to accept the termination of correspondence (Hardey, 2004). Given the techniques offered by the internet setting, though men still "hassle", it is easier for women to control. Women are able to interact on their own terms and easily disconnect or end exchanges with little loss of face and with little damage to their social self. Internet dating thus is sometimes described as a "safe zone" in which people can meet and interact in a relatively safe way (Whitty, 2003; Ben-ze'ev, 2004). Those who are not willing to proceed with a relationship will not be exposed to the psychosocial pressure they would experience in real life. Participant 1173's story confirms this point:

There was one man sending me a message confessing he missed sex and he hadn't had it for a long while. He was hoping he would find someone who had the same desire just like him. So he randomly sent messages to people. I didn't reply and I blocked him. I would say if anybody gets an email from this man. Just send him one line, "pervert!". (Participant 1173)

In fact, some thaimate.sanook.com members were claimed to use the site for "hidden" purposes, such as obtaining sex and money, purposes that do not conform to what other dating site members expect:

Most guys here are hungry for sex and money. They are not sincere. Either young or old ones, they are all the same. Just one quick chat and they want to meet (for sex)!. (Participant 91)

Most men who I meet on the internet usually care for physical appearance. They look for good-looking photos. So those who post photos on their profiles will get people's attention and more people come to check them out. Unfortunately, most men aim to contact women for sex only. Sadly there are more and more men doing this nowadays. (Participant 1039)

Participants 91 and 1039's comments reveal how they understand men who are motivated by a desire for sex and money operate. They talk about clues to the men's real intentions, including invitations to meet in person after a very short period of getting to know each other, and an interest in beauty or physical appearance.

While the desire for sex and money is usually revealed by various indirect means, there are some participants who ask for what they want directly. One male participant reveals straightforwardly that he uses internet dating exclusively to seek casual sexual encounters, though he is already married and has a happy family life. This story reflects the craving of some happily married people for "forbidden fruit" and internet infidelity (Mileham, 2007). It also indicates that some people come to internet dating to express their hidden selves because they could not do what they want in the real world where they are controlled by social norms (Sawadisevee, 2002). In this story, the man says that one woman is happy to be involved with him, even giving up her virginity for him:

I married a girl I met on the internet and we have children together. As time goes by, everything goes well but I just want to have a lover on the internet. I found one. Although she knows I am married, she doesn't mind. She really loves me. She let me be her first. So, the internet is just the gate that lets two people meet and their relationship starts to grow really fast, amazingly fast!. (Participant 946)

Not only men are reported as being internet seekers of sex, women also have online sexual intentions (Padgett, 2007). There are stories revealing that some women used http://thaimate.sanook.com to find sex:

My 40-year-old male friend told me that he met a young girl here on the internet. They arranged to meet and slept together. Her profile says she is just looking for online friends and she is so young, still in school! So I think we can't trust anything in the cyber world, especially this kind of website. People have hidden purposes. (Participant 863)

The girl's sexual relationship mentioned by participant 863 confirms the findings of previous studies regarding the increased acceptability of premarital sex and earlier sexual initiation for Thai women (Liu et al., 2006; Rasamimari et al., 2007). Yet, not only is less value placed on female chastity, some women exchange sex for money. As reported in Thai news, some women use the internet as part of their sexual businesses (Assavanonda, 2004). Some women members of thaimate.sanook.com reported that their motivation for using the site was money:

I use this service because I want to have online friends. Of course, some girls offer me sex for money. But I don't take it too seriously. I sometimes give these girls good thoughts that they should not exchange sex for money. (Participant 961)

I have heard a lot about other girls here. They want money and they are willing to sell themselves for it. I have watched news about this. I feel really sad for young people. (Participant 91)

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Participants 961 and 91's comments reveal gender differences toward women's intentions to use the internet for sex and money. While men (for example, participant 961) do not take it seriously, women (for example, participant 91) feel sad about it.

The responses given by these participants confirm the substantial changes in sexual norms among young people in Thai cyber culture. Female premarital chastity is less valued by some Thais than it used to be. Thai people, both men and women, have greater opportunities to engage in sexual activity than they had in the past. The internet and internet dating websites in particular, has become one of the mediums that is used by some sex and money-oriented people. These people come to internet dating for sex, not for romantic love, and they sometimes also exchange sex for money. This intention provokes a mixed reaction. Some people are worried, others are amused and other people do not care.

Recommendations

Drawing on the findings of this study, there are some suggestions for Thai government and organisations concerning the norms governing sexual attitudes and practices in Thai culture. Policy formulation and campaigns to raise awareness among Thai adolescents and young adults about the value of female chastity before marriage, cultural sexual norms and problem of premarital sex would be an important first step. Additionally, internet dating companies should take a more active role and engage in screening and monitoring people who join their online services especially those who are sexually and money oriented.

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