

Cyberlove in Thai Cybersculture

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Cybersculture is a new domain in the comparative study of societies and cultural practices, and it's a challenge in the field of behavioral science. This study explores the understanding about the beliefs and love lives of the 460 Thai participants who have used the internet for pursuing love. It aims to investigate to what extent these 460 Thai participants believe in a soulmate, why they believe they can find their cyberlove, how their cyberlove begins, and why it sometimes ends. The results of this study reveal 91.3 percent of the participants are familiar with the concept of a soulmate and 83 percent believe in this notion. Soulmate beliefs, significantly shaped by Thai Buddhism and the unique characteristic of internet dating are main reasons for their belief in finding cyberlove. There are three versions of falling in cyberlove: love at first sight, chemistry development, and the principle of similarity or like attracts like between couples. Furthermore, deception and being thwarted by obstacles and behavioral change as time passes are the most frequently mentioned reasons for the breakup of online romantic relationships. Cyberlove thus has become part of the normative structure in Thai cybersculture. People fall in love, fall out of love and are in love online. Future research would benefit from further exploring this line of research in other social networking sites and expanding the research scope into a comparative study.

Keywords: soulmate beliefs, cyberlove, online dating, thai cybersculture

Dating in Thai culture has undergone significant changes in this twentieth-first century. This study explores Thai dating in cybersculture. Cybersculture in the current study is defined as the culture that has emerged, or is emerging, from the use of computers for communication, entertainment, and dating. Cybersculture encompasses the “social and cultural levels of human” and computer interaction involved in what is popularly known as “cyberspace” (Lévy, 2001). Cyberspace, according to Bell, Loader, Pleace, and Schuler (2004) is the space created through the “confluence of electronic communications networks” such as the internet, which “enables computer-mediated communication between any number of people who may be geographically dispersed around the globe”. Since the rapid development of communication technologies in cyberspace, previous communications boundaries have been reconfigured (Bell et al., 2004). Interacting or dating with others in this space can occur in the comfort of one’s own home.

However, the boundaries of cybersculture have been variously defined and the term is used flexibly. Though it generally refers at least to the cultures of online communities, it can extend to a wide range of cultural issues relating to cyber-topics. It can also embrace associated intellectual and cultural movements, such as cyborg theory (Haney, 2006) and cyberpunk (Cavallaro, 2000). At the same time, the term refers to cultural practices involving “the set of technologies (material and intellectual), attitudes, modes of thought, and values that developed along with the growth of cyberspace” (Lévy, 2001). Though the term cybersculture is broad, it provides the idea that those connected to the computer networks – the internet – are part of a unique culture.

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Some of the specific concepts of cyberspace that have been formulated are useful for this study. Escobar (1994), for instance, developed a concept of cyberspace that suggests it is about “cultural constructions and reconstructions on which new technologies are based and which they, conversely, contribute to shaping”. He understands cyberspace as a new domain in the comparative study of societies and cultural practice and a challenge to the study of humankind. His point of departure is the belief that “any technology represents a cultural invention”, in the sense that technologies “bring forth a world”; they “emerge out of particular cultural conditions” and thus in this sense they in turn, could help to create “modern” social and cultural situations. With respects to Escobar’s (1994) concept, cyberspace is transforming the conditions of human life in the “ancient” society. In terms of this study, the concept of cyberspace suggests a new means of social interaction that provides more opportunities for Thai people to form personal relationships or “cyberlove” through the support of online dating services.

As processes of modernization, urbanization and industrialization suggest that Thais have entered an era of “romantic love” freed from the moorings of external constraints (Atipas, 1997; Bumroongsook, 1995). At present, technologies of communication, especially the internet, have reshaped dating, making it freer and expanding possibilities. The idea of meeting a potential mate via past dating such as matchmaker services within a context that includes impressions based on face-to-face interaction is now being replaced with an online communication in this modern era. Online dating has considerably altered the previous dating environment (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). Cyber dating services assist by affording members the opportunity to maximize on the time and effort. Members of the services navigate through larger dating pools on the website by themselves, making their dating lives freer, simpler and less stressful. Members can also exaggerate their positive characteristics and attributes to be evaluated more favorably by their potential partners (Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010). Most online dating websites provide the opportunity to interact and communicate with a potential partner based on compatibility-based matching (Finkel et al., 2012). Online daters thus can evaluate themselves and others, look for a perfect match through filtering systems, and employ various options to select the best partner from a large pool of prospect candidates.

Most of the online relationship research to date has been undertaken in the United States and Europe. There are very few studies focusing on online romantic relationships developing between Thai men and women via cyberspace. Significantly, these studies into online relationships tend to center on ideas drawn from communication theory and viewpoints, with a comparative lack of behavioral research (for example; Leelakajonjit, 2002; Rakaiemsaa-ard, 2003), which this study attempts to redress. The qualitative study by Leelakajonjit (2002) explored the communication process, patterns of communication and computer technology in the development of online relationships on three dating websites. This study indicated that the internet has an influence on the construction of positive relationships because its unique characteristics enhance opportunities for users to communicate (Leelakajonjit, 2002). The qualitative study by Rakaiemsaa-ard (2003) on interpersonal communication and mate-finding on the dating website thaimate.com has suggested the website and the internet have provided users with a chance to seek potential partners who fit their desired qualifications. The author found that the thaimate.com members expected to find a potential romantic partner on the site. Many members reported joining the site with the hope of finding and getting to know someone special faster. In addition, many participants stated that they wanted to meet their online partner in person and most of them did within a month or two after initial contact on the site (Rakaiemsaa-ard, 2003).

According to Rakaiemsaa-ard (2003), despite the fact that the internet daters stated they had more freedom of choice in mate selection, they revealed that they believed destiny and particularly a “predestined spouse” or “soulmate” from a past life shaped their expectations of finding true love or soulmates on the internet. This belief of a soulmate comes from Thai Buddhism. Thai soulmate beliefs are well known, commonly spoken about and are recognized as a set of distinctive beliefs. However, no research to date has attempted to validate these Thai daters’ beliefs about the notion of a soulmate.

Despite the considerable research on cyberlove literature, little research has explored the notion of soulmate beliefs in online relationships. Anderson (2005) expected that people whose romantic beliefs are stronger might perceive online romantic relationships differently than those of people whose romantic beliefs are less intense. Anderson’s (2005) research, however, revealed different results from his expectation. He found that the amount of time spent online and an affinity with the internet were positively related to more favorable perceptions of online romantic relationships. Perceived realism and romantic beliefs were not related to perceptions of online romantic relationships. Hefner and Kahn (2014) experimented the association between media exposure and endorsement of romantic beliefs among undergraduate students. Their results revealed that exposure to the conditions featuring any ideal content produced stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs, but not ideal partner characteristics. Exposure romantic media predicted stronger endorsement of romantic beliefs and higher ratings of dating profile attractiveness.

Whilst these prior studies explored the romantic beliefs in cyber relationships, their choice of sample was problematic. They used a sample of American men and women who had never been involved or had no prior experience of cyberlove of any kind. Since experiences with online romantic relationships have been found to be significantly related to people’s beliefs (Toohey, 2007), we cannot use the answers from those who have never experienced online love to generalize about the soulmate beliefs of all cyber daters. Most significantly, different cultures have different beliefs, and these American results may not be generalizable to Thai people because Thais hold soulmate beliefs that are culturally different from the participants in Prior studies’ sample. This study thus aims to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the soulmate beliefs of Thai cyber daters who have experiences online romantic relationships.

The site known as S! Thaimate or thaimate.sanook.com was chosen as the case study since it is the most popular and most widely used of the cyber dating services in Thailand. It is a pioneering company, operating business of M-WEB Thailand Co. Ltd that has grown to be Thailand’s biggest internet dating site. The company claims to have more than 1,000,000 subscribers. The site was established in 1999 and stated that its purpose was “helping Thai people to find friends or love partner with the personality and characteristics they desire”. The target group of the site is heterosexual Thai men and women. The age range is between 21 and 40 years old (S! Thaimate, 2015).

As the use of the internet for meeting romantic partners has dramatically increased in Thailand, more research regarding how Thai cyber daters think and experience romantic love and how their beliefs about finding a soulmate on the internet are needed. This research, therefore, aims to examine how romantic love and soulmate beliefs are interwoven with the experience and practice of cyber dating. It explores the beliefs and love lives of cyberlovers in Thai cyberspace: do they believe in a soulmate; why they believe they can find it; how their cyberlove begins; and why it sometimes ends.

Literature review

Studies The Beliefs of Love in Thai Culture

Religious beliefs and practices are one of the cultural influences that shape people's ways of understanding the notion of love. For Thai culture, views of love are shaped by a Buddhist perspective. Buddhist beliefs provide a set of beliefs about the notion of love and about the correct behaviors for finding and maintaining love relationships for Thai people.

Unlike most Western theories of romantic love, the Thai notion of love is related to the belief in karma and reincarnation. Human life in Buddhist cosmology is determined by one's own accumulated karma in the past. In Buddhism, karma refers to an intention or action that contains future implications. Phra Methithammaphon (1992) explained that karmic action may be classified as one of three types: physical acts, speech acts, and acts of thought and imagination (Phra Methithammaphon, 1992, as cited in Kitiarsa, 1999). Buddhist adherents view all human conduct as containing karmic potentials and consequences. Karma conditions one's present gender, socioeconomic status and spiritual wellbeing. Karma works through a certain "law", widely known as the "karmic law" or "law of action" in which "good" intentions and acts generate "good" outcomes and merits, while "bad" acts produce demerits. According to Nimanong (2002), the Buddha said: "Those who do good receive good and those who do evil receive evil, man reaps according as he has sown". Most Thai Buddhists, in relation to the law of karma, believe in reincarnation. They tend to believe that their karma is the result of their conduct in previous existences.

In Thai culture, the beliefs in karma and reincarnation have always been seen as a part of marriage. These beliefs influence Thai understandings about a "predestined spouse" or "soulmate". According to Daychasetthadee (2007), Thais often put down the meeting of the love couple to "bub pe san ni wat" which refers to the mating of souls in a former existence that draws a couple together in the present existence. Further, there is a general belief that the more merit individuals accumulate together in this life, the better the chance that their souls will meet again in the next life. Lovers from the past will reincarnate within the same time frame again and again. Although couples will not remember events of their past lives when they meet in their next life, they will be strongly attracted to each other, and love will be renewed (Dungtrin, 2006). The Thai notion of love is useful for an argument of how and why Thai cyberlovers pursue cyberlove.

Related Studies on Cyberlove

The way in which cyberlove is formed has changed considerably in the past few decades. Cooper and his colleagues (2000) claimed that the internet and associated technological advances will have tremendous influence on every aspect of sexuality in this new "information age". People are in increasing numbers, using the internet to develop romantic relationships much as they earlier used match-making services or newspaper personal advertisements. Henry-Waring and Barraket (2008) have argued that finding love online is "becoming an everyday aspect of postmodern life" (p. 20). Studies have suggested people feel safer flirting and forming relationships on the internet (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004a, 2004b; Blackhart, Fitzpatrick, & Williamson, 2014; Whitty, 2003). People who have been unsuccessful at developing offline relationships are using the internet to find a romantic partner and those higher in rejection sensitivity are more likely to use cyber dating sites than those lower in rejection sensitivity (Blackhart et al., 2014).

There is ample evidence to support the view that people do make friends and initiate romantic relationships on the internet and often these relationships progress offline. Some of these may be rewarding, some disappointing. Wildermuth and Vol-Bauer (2007) examined the written narratives of 202 online love participants in a Usenet newsgroup to see how they described online romances. Forty-seven percent of their participants indicated that they were currently participating in online romantic relationships. Thirty-two percent reported that they were married or romantically involved in real life relationships at the same time as being involved in online romantic relationships. The results indicated that despite the physical limitations of the medium, online relationships elicited powerful positive and negative emotions for participants. Individuals spoke of the love, happiness, fear, anger, and sadness resulting from their online romances. Many participants described their feelings for their online partners as “true love”. Participants characterized the experience of falling in love online as “getting swept away”, “going fast and furious”, or “feeling an instant connection” (p. 217). Participants also offered the warnings and cautionary advice about online romances. (Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Lawson and Leck (2006) examined the motivations of internet daters and their styles of courtship. The findings revealed internet daters sought companionship, comfort after a life crisis, control over the presentation of themselves and their environments, freedom from commitment and stereotypical roles, adventure, and romantic fantasy. Most participants in the study eventually met, which sometimes resulted in abrupt rejection and loss of face, but other times ended in marriage (Lawson & Leck, 2006). These studies suggest that as cyberlove intensified, individuals wanted to maximize additional modalities to enhance their relational experiences.

Methodology

Participants

This online survey research had the target participants—natives of Thailand who are members of the Thailand’s biggest cyber dating service, S! Thaimate. The site was established in 1999 and stated that its purpose was “helping Thai people to find friends or love partner with the personality and characteristics they desire”. Even though the total number of S! Thaimate members varies on a daily basis, the estimated population of the site is 1,000,000 members (S! Thaimate, 2015). The desired sample size of this study calculated from Yamane’s simplified formula (1973) 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 1169 replies to the online survey, 460 participants (223 men, 237 women) completed all items in the online survey, resulting in a 39 percent response rate. The age mainly 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.

Measures

The participants completed an Online Survey Questionnaire, a measure created by the researcher to assess use of cyber dating site and soulmate beliefs related to online dating. To measure dating site use, participants answered questions about their use of the dating websites, the range and average time of their exposure and whether they hoped to find a romantic relationship from using it. Further section contained measures of the notion of

soulmate. The questions were designed to gain the opinion of the respondents about the definition of soulmate, whether they know of or believe in the idea of a soulmate and its importance as a reason to marry. The final question of the questionnaire was an open-ended question in which the respondents were asked if they would like to briefly tell the story of their cyberlove, or make any additional comments about their experience. This open-ended question served as a crucial way of understanding the nature of online relationships because it 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). An open-ended question thus provided the researcher with the possibility of examining how cyber daters understand and interpret their own online experiences.

In order to enhance the trustworthiness or credibility of the study, The researcher draw on Lofland and Lofland's model (2006) to "test" the reliability and validity of the qualitative results. This is especially important in this study as many scholars understand Thai people as "face saving", arguing Thai people tend to take others' interest to heart (Redmond, 1998). Applying Lofland and Lofland's criteria, the qualitative data is reliable. First, because the style of reporting is direct, responses are passionate, and diverse. The participants were speaking from first-hand accounts from their personal experiences. This resulted in genuine responses. Second, internal consistency- the participants' accounts do not contradict themselves.

Data Collection and Analyses

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 S! thaimate about the research project. The email included a link to the web-based questionnaire. 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 company. 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.

Quantitative data collected through the closed-ended questions of the online survey questionnaire was descriptive analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 16.0. Findings from qualitative analysis were mainly used for setting the themes in the results and discussion sections. The qualitative collected data from the open-ended question 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.

Results and Discussion

This section discusses the analysis of results, revealing to what extent Thai cyberlovers believe in a soulmate, why Thai people who have experienced online romantic relationships believe they can find their cyberlove, how their cyberlove begins, and why it sometimes ends.

Do You Believe in a “Soulmate”?

In the quantitative findings, 91.3 percent of my participants are familiar with the idea of a “soulmate” and 83 percent believe in this notion (See Figure 1 and 2).

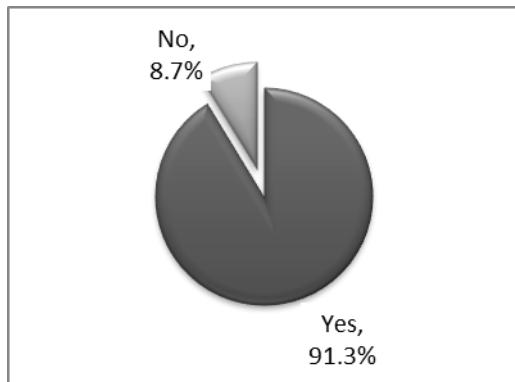


Figure 1. Have You Ever Known about the Ideas of "Soulmate"?

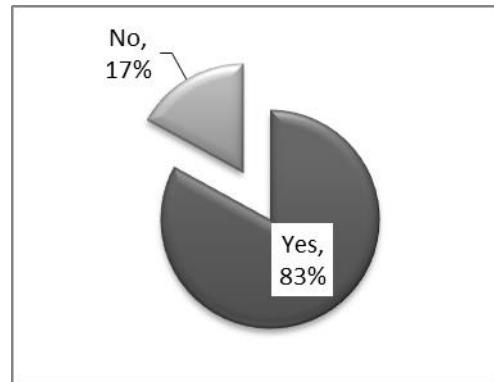


Figure 2. Do You Believe in the Notion of "Soulmate"?

Why Do You Believe You Can Find (True) Cyberlove?

The participants in this study provide two main reasons for their belief in finding cyberlove. First, as a consequence of their soulmate beliefs, significantly shaped by Thai Buddhism, they think they can find their soulmate anywhere, including in the cyber. The cyber, in this sense, is perceived as an alternative medium, as called in this study, an “online cupid” that brings soulmates together. Second, the participants favor the unique characteristic of dating in the cyberspace that facilitates the chance for meeting, getting to know and developing relationships with others. These reasons given by the participants support their modern belief in finding (true) cyberlove.

Online Cupid

The soulmate beliefs – that everyone can have true love and that true love inevitably leads to happiness – are part of Thai Buddhist notions of romantic love and marriage. In the *Sigalovada Sutta* of the Buddhist canon, the Buddha gave various kinds of advice for married couples and for those who are contemplating marriage in order to find the right person and lead a happy married life. The Buddha said, “If a man can find a suitable and understanding wife and a woman can find a suitable and understanding husband, both are fortunate indeed” (Sri Dhammananda, 2005).

According to the dominant or popular myth of romantic love, there is a “soulmate”, another half, for each person, a person who is meant to be in one’s life and who can make one’s life “complete” (Plato, 1994). In relation to soulmate beliefs of Thai Buddhists, finding a soulmate is about finding “true love” and that true love is critical for happiness. As such, it is the most important experience many Thai people wish for.

In the *Samajivina Sutta* of the Buddhist canon, the Buddha taught the way to have and be with the perfect partner or soulmate both in the present life and in next life. The Buddha stated (Bhikkhu, 1997):

If both husband and wife want to see one another not only in the present life but also in the life to come, they should be in tune (with each other) in conviction, in tune in virtue, in tune in generosity, and in tune in discernment. Then they will see one another not only in the present life but also in the life to come. (para. 3)

The majority of participants give the definition of a soulmate as a person who you are born to be with as a consequence of your accumulated merits in a previous existence. Notions of love, marriage and soulmates are related to beliefs in reincarnation and the law of karma. This love will last as a result of present merits. These definitions support the idea that Thai culture belief in a soulmate remains significant. The following narratives are examples of this belief. Participant number 976 reveals she found Mr. Right on the internet:

“I met him on the internet and I really thought he is Mr. Right. He is the man who is ready to go through good times and bad times with me. I always dreamed of being with a clever man who lives his life wisely. And I finally found him, the man of my dreams who will love me and take care of me forever.” (Participant # 976)

Participant number 1180, who met his love partner on the internet believes that his online partner was his soulmate from a past existence:

“She is the one I’ve been looking for and I am sure we were together in a past life and that we are meant to be with each other again in this present life.” (Participant #1180)

Participant number 285 believes that happiness in her romantic relationship will last if she lives in a good way in the present:

“... I don’t know what the future will bring. I just do my best and seize the day. Being happy for what we have today will make everything go well, I think.” (Participant #285)

Many participants often suggest that destiny or fate is an important aspect of love. It brings soulmates to meet even though they live in far away from each other. This finding is consistent with the notion of soulmate in Thai Buddhist culture. Notions of love, marriage and soulmates are related to beliefs in reincarnation and the law of karma. The narratives of love told by many of the participants demonstrate the place these beliefs have in their romantic lives. Participant number 460 defines perfect love in relation to the law of karma:

“... Love is like the previous merit that love couples accumulated together in a past life. If it is already destined, they eventually will be together and nothing can separate them.” (Participant #460)

A number of participants believe a “soulmate” can exist anywhere, including on the internet:

“Some people say there’s nothing real and certain in a cyber world. Personally I think it doesn’t matter how we met. If we are soulmates, we are meant for each other, we will always be together.” (Participant #840)

Buddhist beliefs provide a set of beliefs that frame many participants’ ideas about finding a soulmate and about the correct behavior required for finding and maintaining love relationships. The Thai notion of soulmate is related to beliefs about karma and reincarnation, and the responses given by the participants in this study demonstrate the existence of Buddhist soulmate beliefs in modern Thai culture. Even though Thai people’s lives have changed in many ways, religious beliefs and practices maintain their significance as a cultural means of shaping understandings of the notion of love. As has been demonstrated, the participants in this study believe if two people are soulmates, then the location of their initial meeting is inconsequential, even if that location is in the cyber.

Unique Characteristics

Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2007) state internet dating websites provide chances for finding, getting to know and meeting others in ways that are so much easier and faster than previous forms of matching arrangements. The site examined here is intended to allow users to enter into meaningful relationships. Some members who are seeking a “serious relationship” also note how they are impressed by the ease with which dating itself could be entered into:

“... Internet communication can shorten the distance between two people so that they can learn about each other much faster. If we are both honest, true love can be found.” (Participant #1015)

Another participant comments on the importance of the getting-to-know-you period. She liked the time spent getting to know each other on the internet. She said this time helped develop love and commitment. These elements are essential to the development of romantic relationships. The internet is not only a place that offers people a chance to meet, it also provides time for people to learn more about each other before the meeting in real life.

“I found that to have a chance to learn about each other before meeting each other face to face is helpful. I think we get to know each other well when we talk and exchange words. We spend time talking and that helps us to know each other better. No matter how we met, having communication is important. It makes us care and bond. Love gradually grows when we get to know each other more and more, then we eventually want to meet in real life.” (Participant #1129)

Cyberculture facilitate the chance for people to meet, get to know and develop relationships with others. The unique characteristics of online dating mentioned by these participants support these participants’ beliefs that they can find true cyberlove. The period of

getting to know prospective partners online before the real life meeting is emphasized as an advantage of online meeting, a period that enhances people's feelings of love and intimacy. The next section will explore how and when the participants felt an initial romantic involvement with their online lovers.

How Did You Fall in Love?

There are three versions of falling in love through internet dating given by participants who have had an online romantic relationship: love at first sight, chemistry development, and the principle of similarity or like attracts like between couples.

Love at First Sight

In real life, many people have believed in or have experienced the “love at first sight” phenomenon (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Interestingly, in the cyberspace, where people communicate with one another without seeing each other, the “love at first sight” phenomenon is still mentioned. In this study, the participants who have had an online romantic relationship were asked when they experienced their first romantic feelings towards their online partners. About 70 percent said they first began feeling a romantic attraction at the first moment in different ways (see Figure 3). It can be experienced through visual (profile and photograph), written (email and chatting) and verbal (face to face) interaction.

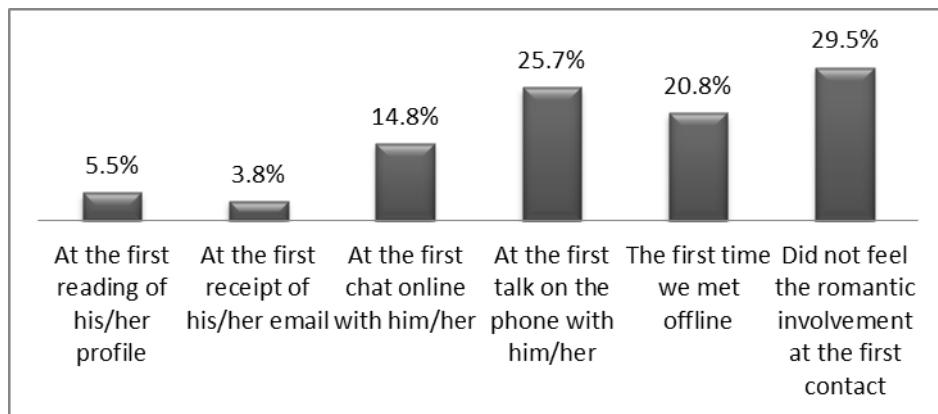


Figure 3. When Did You First Begin Feeling a Romantic Involvement with your Online Partner?

For example, participant number 867 fell in love with his online partner when he first saw her photograph:

“I started to fall in love when I saw her smile the first time on her photo. I could feel that she is sweet and feminine. Then I sent her messages to say hi ...” (Participant #867)

The language of chemistry, as Johnson (2005) pointed out is one of the most common terms in referring to “love at first sight”. This is evident in this survey. The metaphor of chemistry such as “spark” and “click”, serves as a constant discursive framework in these types of accounts of romantic love (Johnson, 2005). In these contexts, chemistry is also recognized as the prerequisite for a romantic relationship based on “true love”. For example,

for participant number 1095, the feeling of a “spark” when she first chatted with her online partner verified for her that it was true love:

“... The first time I felt this feeling it stunned me, I remember I felt like a spark of the electricity or some energy running through the letters when we were chatting. Therefore, I believe in true love. Although we are far apart, you will meet and be together in the end.” (Participant #1095)

From these findings, it can be argued that the phenomenon of “love at first sight” is possible in the context of cyberspace. Love at first sight is understood as a phenomenon that goes beyond rational explanation (Johnson, 2005). The feeling of this extraordinary connection in the context of Thai cyberspace may be explained by prior notions of cosmic fate. It is the fate tied by a cosmic order that draws couples to be attached (Daychasetthadee, 2007). Participant number 1180 wrote that he was attracted to his online partner when he first read her profile. He also felt that his online partner was his love in the past life:

“When I first met my online partner on thaimate, I was really interested in her profile. I always checked on her because I felt like she was my love partner in the past life. Finally I decided to say hello to her ... Since then we got to chatting and fell in love.” (Participant #1180)

Drawing on a Buddhist perspective, love at first sight may be the result of the law of karma in a former existence that draws a couple together in the present existence. In this sense, the context of the initial meeting may be of no consequence.

Chemistry Development

The chemistry between participants develops as a result of mutual emotional interaction and intimacy. It emerges from the sense of getting to know the other person via online communication. It begins with a version of friendship and then romantic chemistry is established:

“We met on thaimate. First I just wanted to have fun friendly chats, just to kill loneliness. But after a while we talked more and got to know each other better. We learned about each other and began to see the real person inside. We trust and feel good for each other. Our friendship has grown gradually and now we are in love. It’s been three years already. Everything is going well.” (Participant #1170)

The next participant tells her story and creates a story of a true friend becoming a true lover:

“At first I wasn’t serious. We just chatted on the net. But after a while we agreed to meet. We did and became true friends, no special feelings. But later on ... we got closer and started our relationship as true lovers. It’s been 2 years now.” (Participant #78)

Similarly, in the next story, the “getting to know you” period enhances the participants’ ability to discover that her friend is actually her ideal partner:

“We met through a chat room. Starting off as online friends, we felt closer and more special to each other. We fell in love. He’s the man of my dreams. Our relationship has been going stronger for over a year now.” (Participant #131)

The findings in this study show how friendship deepens over time to romantic love. Time allows for the realization of romantic love (Toner, 2003) and a feeling of special chemistry. In real life, these participants might not have had the chance to meet their partners, because of geographical distance. Long distances between them would make the possibility of meeting face to face negligible. The cyber is sometimes regarded as a “miraculous” medium that connects and constructs bonds between people regardless of their locations. These bonds are the social bonds that Chayko (2002) argues exists primarily in a mental realm, in a space that creates a “meeting of the minds” (p. 1). As Chayko (2002) also notes, these social bonds are the manifestation of a genuine and often deep attraction that exists in spite of physical separation. While people may be separated by large physical distances, the social distance between them may be very small (p. 2). This idea describes the experience of communion expressed by some of the participants who do not depend upon face-to-face meetings to begin a relationship.

Like Attracts Like

The responses given by the participants in this study reveal that “social overlap” or “similarity” between love couples is an important factor in determining whether they fall in love. When it comes to attraction and partner selection, similarity refers to the principle of “like attracts like”. In many studies, similarity in personalities, attitudes and values have been found to increase perceived attractiveness when falling in love in face-to-face relationships (Barelds, 2007; Gaunt, 2006; Markey & Markey, 2007; Tantong, 2005; Wongtanongsak, 2002). The findings in this study are in line with these previous studies. In online relationships, cyber dating participants noted that they selected their cyberlovers because of their similarities. Participant number 641 says of her online love experience:

“Love grows when we have things in common, especially interests and attitudes. So when we chat, it is such a great joy. Even without ever having seen each other in real life, we can share either sadness or happiness.” (Participant #641)

It is not only similarity in attitudes and interests that is important, parallels in life situations are also mentioned in this study as factors that increase intimacy in relationships. One similarity referred to is a previous bitter relationship experience:

“We have similar experiences in our lives even though we have lived far away from each other. Our divorces, the causes and other similarities were sometimes too coincidental. It is very easy to relate our stories to each other because both of us have had similar painful experiences.” (Participant #1006)

Similarity in marital status is also seen to enhance the couple’s understanding of each other. This mutual understanding provides them with a meaningful relationship in spite of a large gap in their ages:

“We met on the internet. Although there is 12 years difference in our ages, I felt warm and it was nice to have him ... We both were married and have kids from our first marriages. So we understand each other very well; what we want and what we should be concerned

about. I won't let this great chance to have a life partner slip from my hand." (Participant #1086)

The participants' love stories analyzed above demonstrate the significance of a "social overlap" or similarities between love couples. These similarities are seen by participants to maximize the potential for meaningful relationships. As cyberlovers choose to have personal conversations specifically based on the online qualities of participants, those with great social overlap have a chance to be attracted to each other. In this way, relationship quality and deep intimacy are created regardless of how they met.

Why Did You Fall Out of Love?

Deception (one person fooling another) and being thwarted by obstacles and behavioral change as time passes are the most frequently mentioned reasons for the breakup of cyberlove.

Deception

Lying or concealing facts themselves have been noted by participants as reasons for the collapse of potential online relationships. Goffman (1973) argues actors create an idealized impression of themselves through concealing or underplaying those facts that are incompatible with an idealized version of the self. Ekman (1985) calls this "falsification" or "concealment". It is a tactic used to conceal information, but it also involves a deception by deliberately conveying false information (Ekman, 1985).

Deception about relationship status in order to attract desirable partners was found in the present study as well. Participant number 1052 tells of her love story with a man in another relationship who intentionally lied, saying that he was available:

"I met my online partner in thaimate's chatroom. He told me he was single so I decided to start a relationship with him. A week later, we arranged to meet and go out on a date. He's good looking and attractive. We met almost everyday. One day I found out he already has a girlfriend. So, I decided to end this relationship." (Participant #1052)

Similarly, participant number 604 was deceived by a married man and that deception left her with a negative attitude towards men. She writes:

"... He told me he is single but in fact he is married. And just when I trust them and am ready to fall for him, his wife just shows up! In the end it's just me, alone with a broken heart." (Participant #604)

Despite the fact that some people report being able to get to know the "true self" of others online (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002), others often discover that aspects of the others' life are being concealed. For these people, particularly those who believed they had found Mr/s. Right and who liked the partner more (Sprecher & Metts, 1989) tended to exaggerate that person's virtues and downplay their shortcomings (Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002). The narrative of participant number 1005 tells of meeting Mr. Right, but the relationship ended when she discovered he concealed the real purpose for being with her. She writes:

“To meet someone you have been waiting for so long is amazing. I was so happy I had met a man I could love. But after I fell in love so deeply, I found that he took advantage of me. He used me for his work. And when he got what he wanted, everything turned upside down. I was used and left with a broken heart.” (Participant #1005)

Obstacles

Love conquers all is a common romantic love mythology. However, internet dating participants in this study reported different experiences; their love did not overcome all obstacles and these obstacles led to a decline in the feeling of love. It was found that there were two key obstacles referred to as the reasons why a relationship ended: something between us (differences between couples, including age, geographical distance and interest in sexual desire); and someone between us (one of the people in the couple having extramarital-affairs).

i. Something between us

In Thai society, the normative expectations are that a man will be the leader of the family. It is also assumed that older people have a higher status than younger people. Thai women commonly choose a man who is older as their love partner. Therefore, age differences between a couple, particularly where the man is younger than the woman, could cause a problem. This kind of obstacle was sometimes named as a reason for ending relationships. Participant number 216 tells of a relationship with a younger man and finally she had to end the relationship because of his “immaturity”:

“I used to be so close to this person I met online. Though he was much younger than me, we really got along. Still, I always had this feeling that he was too immature for me. Anyway, I just hoped time would clear things up and I would eventually know if he’s the one. But he was so childish and hot-tempered, he didn’t seem to understand anything. That’s why we had to call an end to it.” (Participant #216)

Furthermore, in taking advantage of meeting through the online environment, some participants encountered the problem of how to overcome distance and continue their relationship. The following narrative of participant number 1094 illustrates this version of an obstacle:

“...We lived a long distant apart so we couldn’t meet face-to face ... later, it was in summer break, I went to the beach with him and some of my friends. He was so romantic ... Anyway, the long-distance relationship didn’t work out. Finally, we broke up...” (Participant #1094)

Similar to the above participants, participant number 760 faced the obstacle of age difference and geographical distance. Significantly, he also encountered the obstacle of different sexual desires. He writes:

“... She has had many sexual experiences whereas I have known little about it. She asked for it every time we met, but I did not want to do that. So I told her, we should not meet in person often, we should go back to just talking on the phone. As the only time that I felt very good in our relationship was the time we talked on the phone. Despite this moment,

nothing appeared to be matched between us. We finally ended our relationship.” (Participant #760)

Differences in sexual expression bring to the fore the sharp separation between romantic love and physiological arousal and sex or passion (Johnson, 2005).

ii. Someone between us

Internet technology has rescaled and revamped the nature of human relationships. Phenomena such as cyber dating websites are places where these new types of relationships take place and come into being. Cyber dating facilitates a freedom of choice in partner selection with a large pool of prospect candidates who sometimes rival partners of pre-existing relationships. As people continue to grow and evolve, their needs and desires change or shift emphasis. New goals and longings can emerge, causing rifts in relationships. Participants recall meeting a new love partner who seems to be better than the existing one. This is another reason nominated for breaking up relationships:

“... we decided to be a love couple. But after a while, I found that she was still seeking other men who she thought might be better than me. So, I was a foolish man even though I was faithful to her. She finally hurt me badly ... Our relationship thus was ended.” (Participant #104)

“I have only ever met and had a relationship with one girl on the internet, but only for a short period. She left me without any thought because she met a new person.” (Participant #304)

Nothing is Permanent

“We love each other very much, but if the question is, are we right for each other?, I want to answer that in this moment. No, we are not. But if in the future if we still are in the relationship, I may call him, my Mr. Right.” (Participant #1216)

Participant number 1216’s statement reflects the Buddhist philosophy, nothing is permanent (Bhikkhu, 1965). Even when meeting a beloved who one believes is a soulmate, one is still blind about what will happen in the future. Since there is nothing that exists without depending on other things, there is absolutely nothing which can be determined to be permanent. The following story of participant number 755 illustrates this Buddhist truth. She comments that true love is a feeling in the present:

“True love in the cyber world is possible. It’s important to enjoy the moment and believe in your heart that it’s true. Still, time might change people. And true love then might leave us with only some good memories from today.” (Participant #755)

This sentiment is especially true where romantic love is seen as the ideal. The initial phase of love is full of excitement and joy. As times passes, however, people inevitably get to know an actual self of each other. Many couples cannot cope with the model that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) called the “trap of romantic love” (p. 87). In this model, love starts out as infatuation and lingers as an expectation, which in this form cannot be met so that all that is left is disappointment (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). The stories of these two participants illustrate this point:

“I always wanted to talk to him after we first met. As I got to know him better ... his true colors became clearer and clearer. Though we planned the future, I no longer thought I wanted to have a relationship with him; I just couldn’t deal with his dark sides That’s why I broke up with him ...” (Participant #372)

“Guys in thaimate.com are all jerks! One guy I met seemed very serious with me at first. We even planned to get married until he changed and revealed his true colors – from a perfect soulmate to the most appalling guy I’ve never met. His name is xxx [real name was provided originally but removed here to protect privacy].” (Participant #974)

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argued “the main attraction people see in one another nowadays is not a common aim in life but the prospect of happiness, of finding the right partner, a mixture of a dream lover and best friend” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). However, as dreams alter and partners prove less exciting than one thought, happiness turns out to have escaped, as in participant number 299’s story:

“... Anyway, after a while, I’d seen a lot more of him and I learned that we couldn’t really get along. Though we even planned to live together in Bangkok before getting married, he changed. Everything was so devastating. I was broken-hearted. I was disappointed by everything he’d done to me. And we had to break up eventually.” (Participant #299)

In Buddhist philosophy, that nothing is permanent is a truth in the multi-faceted nature of life. In terms of romantic relationships, people fall in love, are in love, fall out of love and fall in love again and again. Not because love is impermanent – love can be the most permanent thing in human being’s life – but because change is the very essence of life and it is the most natural thing in this universe. It is true that change has two directions: for better or worse. The latter is often a cause of disappointment and it becomes necessary to say goodbye.

Conclusion

This Buddhist beliefs provide a set of beliefs that frame many cyberlovers’ ideas about finding a soulmate and about the correct behavior required for finding and maintaining love relationships. The Thai notion of soulmate is related to beliefs about karma and reincarnation, and the responses given by the participants in this study demonstrate the existence of Buddhist beliefs in modern Thai cyberculture. Even though Thai people’s lives have changed in many ways, beliefs and practices maintain their significance as a cultural means of shaping understandings of the beliefs of love. The argument of this research is that the internet and associated technological advances have tremendous influence on every aspect of sexuality in Thai cyberculture. Cyberlove is becoming an everyday aspect of “modern life” among young Thai people. Romantic love relationships thus have become part of the normative structure of internet society. People fall in love, fall out of love and are in love online.

Limitations and Recommendations

Limitations of the current study are that all data were collected via self-report measures, were cross-sectional, and were collected online. It is, therefore, unable to make causal interpretations and cannot be certain that participants accurately reported their beliefs and behaviors related to online dating. An additional limitation is that a majority of participants were relatively young, highly educated and lived in Bangkok or surrounding

suburbs. This makes it difficult to generalize the findings to other populations. Despite these limitations, however, this research has contributed to the body of research on online dating as few studies have investigated soulmate beliefs related to Thai cyberculture. Cyber dating services also could use the findings to develop their services in order to support their members' needs and help to protect some possible risks that could be happened to their members.

The study's findings lead to some further considerations for future research. The findings provide implications for what and how Thai cyber daters experience the digital world of online dating, as well as offer evidence for how Thai Buddhism can influence romantic beliefs and behaviors. Future research should continue to investigate this line of research in other social networking sites like Facebook and unpack the association between soulmate beliefs and its role in developing and influencing cognitions, attitudes, and actions, particularly within the context of romance. Future research should further do comparative study, examining differences in gender, sexual orientation, age group, education, and many other desired attributes.

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