My friendster, Myself:
Identity Construction, Presentation and Negotiation through the friendster Website
by Alexandra More M. San Joaquin

URL - http://www.friendster.com

Www.friendster.com is one of a multitude of websites that have recently been established with an online-community-cum-online-dating-service theme. Its introductory page states that the site is basically an "online social networking community that connects people through networks of friends for dating or making new friends…" In addition, it distinguishes itself from similar websites offering online dating services with the note that it can be "…used for all types of social networking, such as making friends, meeting other couples, or people with kids, etc."

Beyond its potential to take on the qualities of a typical online dating service however, one may say that friendster's strength as a website, not to mention its appeal, hinges on its capability to offer users an avenue for self-construction and self-presentation. Through this website, they can experiment with and even reshape aspects of their identity, even as they develop "social networks" that enable them to establish/maintain contacts with friends as well as the friends of their friends.

Given friendster's user-friendly interface, the process of initially constructing one's identity in this site begins easily enough with the creation of a "Profile" that would include, among others, one's name, date of birth, occupation, civil status, location, hometown, interests and a short personal essay. One may also post a picture or – as is the case with many friendster users – a set of pictures of oneself. The friendster user also has the option to be as detailed or cryptic as he/she wishes to be with the profile, and may even opt not to post any pictures altogether. This profile is protected by a password that the user himself/herself sets. Likewise, should – for one reason or another – a friendster user decide to make changes in his/her account such as the password, the e-mail link, personal information or even his/her photos, these

changes are readily accomplished with a few clicks of the mouse. Canceling or terminating one's own friendster account is just as easy, with the added assurance that one's profile and account information are, henceforth, erased from the friendster database.

The creation of a friendster profile manifests what some media theorists observe as the shifting or blurring of the boundaries of the public and private identities in the new media (Meyrowitz 1985). That is, the new media – as represented in this case by the friendster website – provides the virtual setting for individuals to construct portrayals of themselves and turn what was once essentially private into that which is public. But this negotiation of the private self alongside the public self rests not only on the web's capacity to automatically publish on a global scale but also on what the user chooses to make public about himself/herself, i.e., the "virtual persona."

Once the profile has been created – that is to say, the "virtual persona" published – the friendster user may begin searching for friends who have also posted their profiles on the site, by typing in the first name and last name of the person or the latter's e-mail address in the User Search section of the site. The site likewise carries a Gallery feature where one can look through the profile summaries and photos of other friendster users. Conversely, one's own profile is also available for other members to view when they use the Gallery feature.
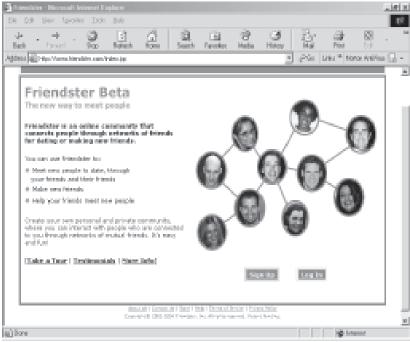
In this regard, a user has the option of availing of friendster's promise and premise of "social networking" in as extensive or as limited a manner as he/she prefers. Miller (1995) in his treatise on the presentation of the "self" on the internet alludes to this type of interaction as actually "liberating" because, while a face-to-face overture necessarily leaves one vulnerable to rejection, friendster enables the user to present himself/herself for interaction without ever having to be aware of a rejection. In like manner, others may view the user's profile sans the risk of an involvement deeper than they would be comfortable with.

The other side to this "liberation," however, is potentially negative. Unlike face-to-face interaction that is controlled and regulated by transparency and synchronous communication, interaction through friendster is virtual. This communication context makes it all too easy for the user to be ambiguous about, or to omit altogether, important aspects in his/her constructed identity. Weighing what and how much to reveal in one's profile thus becomes a challenge for anyone who decides to join the friendster community.

Should the friendster user decide to take the "extensive" or active route to interaction by inviting others to join his/her private friendster network, he/she then gains access to the full

Welcome page of friendster (Retrieved from http://
www.friendster.com on February 7, 2004)

profiles of friends who accepted his/her invitation, browse and
search through the profiles of friends' friends and so forth. Aside
from browsing through profiles and photos and inviting people
into one's network, friendster also allows one to see how he/she is
connected to other people in terms of mutual friends, send e-
mails to other friendster users, request for introductions to friends'
friends and even suggest matches between people.

Undertaking the above necessarily pushes the virtual
persona of the friendster user further out to the public sphere, so
to speak. As such, he/she repeatedly runs the risk of being
rebuffed by those he/she initiates interaction with. But based on
the number of people (running to the millions worldwide) who
have signed up as members of this website, it is obvious that this
is a risk many are ready, willing and able to take.

Analyzing the seeming enigma of friendster's popularity
among so many users then should not only consider just the site's
identity-construction/presentation function or its potential for
social networking. While taking care not to adopt the stance of

hard technological determinism, there is also a need to evaluate how the very features carried by the site measure up in terms of ingenuity, usability and basic appeal.

For instance, when looking for old friends, the website's feature of including photos and links to the networks of those who are part of one's *own* network may be viewed as relatively ingenious, given that it simplifies the process of finding mutual acquaintances or friends. And for those whose primary purpose for using friendster is to make new friends, the site enables one to browse and potentially contact the friends of friends even if they are several degrees and links away from one's own network. Because one will only be coming across people who are friends of friends, the ambiguity and anxiety felt over meeting people through the website are reduced. This particular feature of friendster arguably makes it a more credible system of social networking.

Such "credibility" is reinforced by another feature of the site wherein users can create testimonials for other friendster users. These testimonials are short statements about the person and may be viewed alongside one's friendster profile. For the most part, however, testimonials that are eventually posted on the site tend to be predominantly positive. This is because the person concerned must first approve the testimonials before they are made available for viewing on the site. In addition, testimonials that do get posted online may be deleted at any given time by the concerned friendster user.

Quite obviously, the above feature could easily be exploited by friendster users to their advantage, thereby reducing the site's reliability as a reference for the real identity of its users. Aside from this limitation, the site cannot totally prevent its users from giving bogus profiles and "fake" pictures. Browsing through the friendster photo gallery, one comes across a multitude of pictures of animals, movie personalities, cartoon characters and objects that are obviously not the actual pictures of members. One could only speculate, too, on the number of users who post other people's pictures and pass them off as their own. Such deception, after all, is virtually impossible to detect unless one is personally acquainted with the person(s) concerned. As for dishonest entries in the friendster profile, these are even more difficult to catch unless they have been made out to be so outrageous as to be obviously untrue.

The prohibition against using false profile entries and pictures is clearly detailed in friendster's Terms of Service. However, the proliferation of false entries and pictures clearly indicates the site administrators' lack of control over violators. The burden of identifying as well as reporting violators to the site administrators more or less remain to rest on the shoulders of

friendster users. This burden is lightened somewhat by the user-friendly interface of the Report User feature of the site. Through this feature, a user can notify the site administrators about violators and send their profiles to friendster Customer Care, which will then review the profiles for specific violations (e.g., use of fake profile entries, fake photos, offensive language and images).

The issue of policing content violations notwithstanding, the above phenomenon underscores how treading the fine line between identity construction and deception will always be *de rigueur* among any and all of the friendster users. Given that the construction of an identity on the friendster site necessitates the use of graphics and texts that are virtual and digital in nature, "bricolage" or the appropriation of readily accessed, on-hand, and often copyrighted materials from the Web (Jenkins, 1992) becomes all too easily the norm rather than the exception. In this context, bricolage ultimately turns out to be more than the simple act of appropriation (i.e., poaching) of material. In certain cases, it may actually be a fundamental aspect of the construction of one's online (e.g., friendster) identity.

Another violation of the Terms of Service of the friendster site concerns the large number of groups and organizations that have put up their profiles on the site. Friendster stipulates that only individuals may join the site, yet one finds in it groups and organizations who tend to rack up the maximum number (500) of allowable members in their respective networks. This poses a serious implication on what may, to date, be the main drawback in using friendster in the Philippines: this is the increasingly difficult access to and slow download time of the site. Such is partly attributable to the fact that most access points to the internet in the country – cyber cafes, personal computers at home/the office or those shared among friends – are through dial-up connections which are themselves saturated with people logging on to the internet for their own purposes. The other factor is the sheer volume of traffic that the site has to cope with at any given time, day in and day out. Simply put, the slew of new subscribers and the so-called friendster addicts (those who spend hours on end browsing through the Gallery for new faces and possible new friends), usually clog up friendster enough to generate pure frustration among those who attempt to access the site on certain hours.

Still, despite all its shortcomings, friendster undeniably remains as much an innovative venue for identity construction as it is an engaging system for social networking. Its unique features have also addressed, in part, the issues that previous similar sites have failed to manage or even attend to. These issues include ascertaining members' credibility (however sketchily), the use of a relatively straightforward, "idiot-proof" interface and – at least

until the conclusion of its beta (trial) phase – the provision of all the aforementioned services *totally free of charge*.

It is tempting to conclude that friendster's fresh, ingenious approach has moved the idea (if not the practice) of identity construction/presentation and networking people through the internet up to another level. However, a note of caution will have to be given to those who have joined and plan to join the site. This has to do with the *authenticity* of identities as well as relationships that are formed through the web in general and the friendster site in particular. With the masking and distancing intrinsic to the new medium within which friendster operates, this authenticity (in terms of identity and relationships) will always be in question in a way that it is not in real life.

References

Chandler, D. (1998). Personal home pages and the construction of identities on the Web. Retrieved January 19, 2004, from http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/webident.html

Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. London: Routledge.

Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Miller, H. (1995). *The presentation of self in electronic life: Goffman on the internet*. Paper presented at Embodied Knowledge and Virtual Space Conference Goldsmiths' College, University of London.

Rheingold, H. (n.d.). Multi-user dungeons and alternate identities. Retrieved January 23, 2004, from http://www.well.com/users/hlr/vcbook/vcbook5.html

Alexandra More M. San Joaquin is a faculty member of the Department of Communication Research of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UP CMC). She is also currently UP CMC's Information Technology Coordinator and Webmaster. She has been a friendster user since October 2003.