EXPLORING SELF CONCEPT AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF ONLINE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS.

By

Phillip van Staden

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Supervisor: Prof. J.G. Howcroft

Co-Supervisor: Prof. L. Stroud

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Abstract

Many South Africans are developing online relationships. Due to the anonymous and artificial context of the online environment it is possible that a person’s identity differs within the on- and offline environment. Sternberg’s (1986) Triangular Model of Love as well as Rogers’ Self Theory (1951) were utilized as a theoretical base for investigating online identity and intimacy. Using a qualitative, exploratory design, the study explored this phenomenon by analysing open ended questionnaires administered online to people in intimate online relationships. Participants were selected by means of non-probability snowball sampling.

The findings indicated that Internet socialisers vary in their experience of their online identities. Individuals may have a multitude of genuine online selves, each one represented differently depending on the anonymity and level of intimacy in the relationship. Self-disclosure and deception play an important role in identity representation and exploration and both are experienced as being affected by the online context.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ARPA</td>
<td>Advanced Research Projects Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPTO</td>
<td>Information Processing Technology Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAGE</td>
<td>Semi Automatic Ground Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCLA</td>
<td>University of California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRI</td>
<td>Stanford Research Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nic</td>
<td>Nickname / Pseudonym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webcam</td>
<td>Internet Video Camera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VoiP</td>
<td>Voice over Internet Protocol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMORPG</td>
<td>Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game</td>
</tr>
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<td>MMO</td>
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Chapter 1 - **Introduction**

1.1. **INTRODUCTION**

The Internet has changed the way society is able to communicate and maintain relationships. Any person is able to access social networks anonymously via modern cellular phones and can interact with friends, family and strangers anywhere in the world at a very low cost (Suler, 2005). A South African cellular phone application called Mxit is able to connect Internet capable phones to a large social online network, and has become the mainstream method of ongoing communication for the youth (Mxit, 2009). The Internet has a potential impact on how friendships are initiated and maintained and has even become a key feature in dating (Gonyea, 2004; Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

There are many online solutions to socialising, ranging from less intensive activities such as email and online forums to more involved activities such as online multiplayer gaming and Internet dating (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001; Suler, 2005). Social scientists, as well as concerned members of the community are sceptical of the potential for the online context to allow for deep, meaningful relationships and intimate interactions (Gonyea, 2004). The anonymity and perceived artificiality of the Internet casts further doubts as to the safety of the online world for socializing (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2007).
1.2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

1.2.1. THE INTERNET

The Internet is a worldwide interconnection of independently operating computer networks. This means that home, business and organization computers all over the world are all potentially connected as long as they have access to the Internet (Barett & King, 2005). Advances in technology have allowed for other devices, such as cellular phones, gaming consoles and televisions to be connected to the Internet as well. People from across the world, separated by tremendous distances are connected by a method of virtually instant communication (Strate, Jacobson & Gibson, 2003) that can involve the sending and receiving of text, pictures, photos, audio and video (Suler, 2005).

The Internet is simply too large and complex to navigate without the use of software and websites. Social interaction is taking place online by means of a variety of such interactive websites and Internet applications. These include social networking, Internet dating and chat websites, instant messaging applications, online multiplayer games and forums (Gonyea, 2004). A large number of users worldwide have become involved in these facilities and are forming and maintaining online relationships within cyber communities (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

1.2.2. PREVALENCE OF ONLINE SOCIALISATION

The Internet is constantly changing and rapidly evolving. Software infrastructure adapts and memberships to web facilities constantly change. This means that the composition of online communities and even the amount of communities is in constant flux (Suler, 2005).
The exact prevalence of online socialization is difficult to establish as new applications and websites are created and established while old ones sometimes lose popularity. Internet users are free to choose from a large array of websites and the world’s active online daters may be spread across hundreds of Internet dating websites. Similarly, the world’s online gamers are spread across hundreds of online game servers. In order to find statistical data, recent numbers were taken for some of the most popular online applications and websites.

It is estimated that in March 2009 there were over 1.5 billion Internet users worldwide. In March 2009, over 4.6 million South Africans had access to the Internet (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2009). During December 2008, the online multiplayer game known as World of Warcraft had over 11.5 million active players, of which a large portion is South African (Irvine, 2008). Facebook, a networking website has over 250 million users (Facebook, 2009). MXit, a South African instant messaging application that makes use of the Internet to facilitate low cost communication has over 13 million users (Mxit, 2009). The online dating site, Flirtbox has over 640 thousand registered users of which over 22 thousand are South African (Flirtbox, 2009).

1.2.3. MEETING AFFILIATION NEEDS ONLINE

The need to affiliate can be seen as the desire to acquire and maintain interpersonal relationships. According to the theory of needs, people have a physiologically determined psychological need to affiliate (Baron, Byrne & Branscombe, 2006). People want to find belonging and desire intimate interaction with other people. These needs can be understood in terms of the neurobiology of the brain and form the core of personality and functioning (Sternberg, 2000).
Individuals differ in terms of their needs for affiliation and seek the amount of interpersonal contact that they desire (Sternberg, 2000). People often join groups in order to meet their goals, including their needs to meet certain kinds of people who they think they might like (Baron, Byrne & Branscombe, 2006). This is particularly relevant to online environments, where large amounts of people can conveniently meet and interact in a variety of online social settings. Due to the design of some of the social websites, such as Facebook or dating sites, people are able to use the site features to easily find people with particular interests, goals or backgrounds.

People can use website tools to instantly find communities of people that share their interests. Just as in the offline context where people can engage in activities with other people, Internet users may play online multiplayer games in order to meet their needs for affiliation (Wan & Chiou, 2007). In an experimental study (Smyth, 2007) it was found that although online multiplayer game players experienced some negative consequences after a month of play, they also reported enjoyment while playing and a greater acquisition of new friendships.

1.2.4. Online Relationships

An online relationship refers to a relationship between people that is initiated and maintained online via online applications such as chat sites and multiplayer games. No face to face contact occurs between the people in the environment as they communicate using electronically transmitted information. In a recent study five hundred and seventy-four Internet users were asked about their online socialisation (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). It was
found that 50% of them had online friendships and that the majority experienced only a
minor difference in the quality of their best online and best offline friendship. This highlights
the possibility of deep and meaningful relationships within the online context.

The Internet provides a unique context for social interaction in which people have
anonymity inside an artificial setting. This new context changes the socially accepted rules
and norms for interaction, such as social expectations, etiquette and the way greetings are
handled. Additionally, the way in which relationships develop is also different (Zaczek &
Bonn, 2006). In a quantitative study on social interactions in online multiplayer games, it
was found that the online multiplayer game environments were highly socially interactive
environments (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). Players are often required to play in teams and are
able to communicate either through text messages or over microphones while playing. It was
also found that strong and emotional relationships were reported by players and that a great
number of them had made lifelong friends and partners online.

Some researchers maintain that the Internet facilitates online relationships, and users can
experience their interactions with other users online in a relatively ‘real’ way (Strate,
Jacobson & Gibson, 2003). Many people manage to form meaningful relationships online,
ranging from casual friendships to romantic relationships (McCown, Fischer, Page &
Homant, 2001).

1.2.5. **Online Identity and Intimacy**

The focus of the present study was on exploring the nature of self-concept and online
social identity in the context of intimate online relationships. As was mentioned before, the
online context affects both the norms and the development of relationships. This context includes an element of anonymity that may greatly affect how people present themselves online. Self concept refers to a person’s perception of themselves (Rogers, 1951). The current study required participants to talk about how they see themselves online and whether they feel different about themselves offline. Online social identity refers to those personal characteristics that people display in the online environment. This also differs from the offline environment as individuals no longer have body language, physical behaviour or their appearance to incorporate into their social identity and must rely on the tools and features presented by online applications and websites (Suler, 2005).

Intimacy refers to a specific quality that a relationship possesses that emotionally bonds two individuals. It can be theoretically defined as the level of caring, trust and understanding two people have for each other irrespective of the duration or type of relationship (Sternberg, 2000). Intimacy is referred to by Sternberg (1986) as liking and can exist between family members, friends or lovers and is experienced differently by different people. Operationally it is often measured by means of subjective self report questionnaires that rate level of caring, trust and understanding on nominal scales. Intimacy is regarded by some researchers as being present in online relationships (Scott, Mottarella & Lavooy, 2006; Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

1.2.6. The Implications of Online Socialisation

The artificiality and anonymity linked with online interaction has a variety of implications in terms of intimacy and identity. The problem that arises is that it is questionable whether relationships that are maintained in online environments can exhibit enough intimacy to be
meaningful. The lack of both physical contact and proximate presence and the ease of deception accompanying online interaction has often been highlighted by researchers (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). When people engage in social interaction on- or offline, they present a social identity. This can be seen as a person’s identity in the context of a group (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2007; Baron, Byrne & Branscombe, 2006), and may differ depending on the context. This social identity is sometimes misrepresented in order for a person to gain approval from others and the online environment can make this very easy. In a study on the Internet relationships of the disabled, participants reported experiencing the risk that people may be dishonest with them while in online interaction (Seymour & Lupton, 2004).

In the online environment people have the disinhibiting freedom and safety to self-disclose, leading to a greater degree of honesty and intimacy (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). In a recent study, intimacy was found to develop surprisingly quickly online due to the frequency of contact and is fostered in the virtual environment in unique ways, for example, by using emoticons such as smiley’s and frowns formed from punctuation (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006).

The interesting paradox that occurs is the potential of anonymity to encourage honesty as well as dishonesty. From the research mentioned above it is clear that the anonymity provided by the Internet may both increase and decrease the occurrence of deception and honest self-disclosure. It is thus not clear whether online social identity is necessarily more true or false than offline social identity. As mentioned above, a person may deceive or self-disclose with greater ease online, suggesting that some people are ‘more themselves’ and others ‘less themselves’ online. This aims of the present study includes exploring this.
1.3. **Research Aims**

From the literature review it is clear that online social identity is poorly understood. There exists the potential for both deception and self-disclosure due to the high level of anonymity. This could potentially influence people’s online social identities and self-concept, as well as the quality of intimate online relationships. The present study focused on social identity and self-concept as experienced in an online setting by means of an open ended questionnaire. Factors that influence self-disclosure and deception in the online setting were also explored.

The primary aims of the present study include exploring the views of online intimate friends and partners regarding social identity and self-concept in the context of online intimate relationships. The occurrence and interplay of anonymity, deception and self-disclosure in the online environment was also explored.

1.4. **Outline of Treatise**

Chapter 1 provided an introduction and context to the study. Chapter 2 deals with the nature and types of online socialisation and cyber communities. Chapter 3 will conceptualise relationships by means of Sternberg’s (1986) Triangular Model of Love and discuss these in the context of online relationships. Chapter 4 will focus on the formation of social identity in the online environment by referring to Social Identity Theory, as well as Roger’s (1951) Self Theory. Roger’s personality theory will be used to conceptualise the phenomena of online self-disclosure and deception. Chapter 5 will describe the research methodology and procedure used to collect and analyze the data. Chapter 6 will provide a summary of the
results of the study. Chapter 7 concludes the treatise by referring to the limitations of the study and recommendations for future enquiry into online social research.

The broad overview of the research relating to the present study was briefly outlined in chapter one. Chapter 2 will begin to deepen this understanding by exploring the online context and how it may impact on socialization. It will become clear how complex, rich and well developed on the online community truly is and the reader will be given some technical understanding of the mechanisms of virtual communities, cyber communication and online socialization.
2.1. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of the Internet as a medium for communication has revolutionised the way communication occurs across the world for many people. Due to this phenomenon, millions of people are connected and able to communicate instantaneously in a variety of ways over a variety of mediums. Text, video, sound and pictures can be sent and received over the Internet via desktop computers, laptops, cellular phones, gaming consoles and even through certain television decoders (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). These new methods of communication that have originated need to be studied from a social point of view. The aim of this chapter is to elaborate on the online context by referring to the origin of the Internet as well as discussing the unique characteristics of the online environment. This chapter concludes by listing and discussing the various forms of online socialisation as well as various types of online communities.

2.2. THE ORIGINS OF THE INTERNET

The United States government created the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in February 1958. The Information Processing Technology Office (IPTO) was created by ARPA to further the research of the Semi Automatic Ground Environment (SAGE) program, which had networked country-wide radar systems together for the first time. After much work, the first two nodes of what would become the ARPANET were interconnected between the University of California (UCLA) and the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) in Menlo Park, California, on October 29, 1969. The ARPANET was one of the “eve” networks of
today’s Internet. As the ARPANET grew to connect larger numbers of networks more uses for it were developed (Barett & King, 2005) and the Internet evolved into a robust environment facilitating online communication.

2.3. Characteristics of Online Communication

Online communication has a unique set of characteristics that sets it apart from other forms of communication. The Internet allows communication to occur in real time over a great distance and for the sending and receiving of text messages, images, sound and video. In this way the internet is able to efficiently facilitate and expand on the functions previously performed by telephones, radios, fax machines and televisions. The Internet is versatile in its applications and virtually limitless in its possibilities.

What makes the Internet different to traditional forms of communication is that it relies on the transmission of digitised information (Suler, 2005). Electronic data needs to be encoded, sent, received and decoded by means of specifically designed software. A website or Internet application can allow for the simultaneous transmission of pictures, text, sound and video. Users of the Internet can then utilise the appropriate hardware and software to send, find and receive whatever data they choose. This has led to several characteristics of online communication which are discussed below.
2.3.1. **Tele-presence**

Tele-presence refers to the ability of an individual using the Internet to transmit their virtual presence to an online location and to interact within this online location as though it were a physical one (Strate, Jacobson & Gibson, 2003). For example, in an online chat room, all the participants are transmitting their presence to a virtual location in order to communicate as though they were together in an actual room. This allows an Internet user to say things such as: “I am in a chat room”, or “I am on Facebook”.

This ability to transmit one’s awareness and influence over the Internet to a virtual location is aided by a variety of Internet norms (Strate, Jacobson & Gibson, 2003). These include nicknames (or nics as they are colloquially referred to) and avatars (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001).

2.3.1.1. **Nic**

A nic, or nickname, is an online name that one may choose when socialising online. Internet users are free to make use of their real names if they desire, but most opt for a pseudonym (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). This allows for the preservation of anonymity as well as the creation of an online identity. Any one person may possess a number of nics that they use on different websites or in different situations. In online communities, people get to know each other by means of their nic, as this is one of the few identifying features that a user brings onto the web.
2.3.1.2. Avatar

An avatar refers to a virtual representation of the Internet user that is somehow displayed graphically online. This may be a small portrait photograph or picture. Or it may be a three dimensional character model inside an online game. The Internet user is free to use their actual photograph, but many opt for a picture of a television character or anything else they wish to represent them in the virtual environment. The avatar becomes another identifying characteristic that can act as a costume in the online environment (Suler, 2005).

2.3.2. ANONYMITY

The Internet user transmits their presence over the Internet, and are thus not physically in the same location as other Internet users. Due to the fact that they are free to use nics and avatars, their true identities may remain hidden. Research on online socialisation suggests that most Internet users tend to protect their anonymity (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001), which is one of the primary characteristics of online interaction.

Internet users are free to keep their names, ages, genders, religions, sexual orientations, political views, nationalities, races and even their appearances secret. They may also use deception about any of these characteristics with an ease that would not be possible in face-to-face interactions (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001; Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). Despite this increased ease with regards to deception, some researchers have found paradoxically that the anonymity offered by the Internet can actually make it easier for people to connect, share information truthfully and explore relationships (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997).
2.3.3. **Deception**

As mentioned above, deception is particularly easy online (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). Some researchers maintain that the anonymity allows people too much freedom to hide aspects of themselves that they consider undesirable. This can have a big impact on the development of trust in the online environment. Research has found multiple reasons for the use of deception, including many instances where it is simply safer to keep many of one’s details a secret in order to avoid cyber-stalking (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

The issue of deception raises many concerns about online interaction and the implications for the development of trust and intimate relationships. One cannot know if anyone online is truly who or what they claim to be (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). Self report studies have shown that Internet users tend to generally experience themselves as being honest in their online interactions (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001), with some participants reporting that deception is used sparingly either to keep safe or in order to exaggerate some desirable qualities such as confidence. An important criticism is that participants may not comment honestly about their honesty online.

2.3.4. **Disinhibition**

With the anonymity provided by online socialisation comes a second consideration. There are not as many consequences for aberrant behaviour in online environments as in the physical world due to a potential lack of social influence between members. With this lack of accountability and distance from those other people in the virtual environments people are
free to do or say whatever they want to with little fear of consequences (McLeod, Baron, Marti & Yoon, 1997).

This creates an ideal place for people who are discriminated against for whatever reason to simply be themselves or for prejudiced individuals to speak their minds (Suler, 2005). Antinormative and antisocial behaviour may become apparent in such anarchic circumstances (Moral-Toranzo, Canto-Ortiz & Gomez-Jacinto, 2007). Other users are free to disagree with the online behaviour of an individual and many websites have strict rules for conduct that may prohibit or even block the transmission of crude language or undesirable references. Research does show an increase in antisocial behaviour online when compared to offline interaction (Moral-Toranzo, Canto-Ortiz & Gomez-Jacinto, 2007), but these occur only in specific contexts (Lea, O'Shea, Fung & Spears, 1992).

2.3.5. DEINDIVIDUATION

The anonymity provided by the Internet as well as the salient group identities of the online communities may lead to a phenomenon called deindividuation. This refers to the individual becoming more prone to behaving and communicating in ways that disregard their own personal identities and instead adopts a self-stereotyped group identity (Moral-Toranzo, Canto-Ortiz & Gomez-Jacinto, 2007). There is a theorised loss of private self-awareness in the online environment that may lead to the individual losing a consistent sense of self (Postmes & Spiers, 1998) and adopting a group identity in place of a personal identity (Turner, 1982).
2.3.6. **Self-Disclosure**

The safety gained due to the anonymity of the Internet may create an environment where self-disclosure is not as threatening as it is in face-to-face situations. This means that some individuals may be more willing to talk about certain sensitive issues while online (Suler, 2005). Although self-disclosure is highly variable online, many individuals report feeling freer to make themselves known within the safety of the anonymity (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). It has been found that relationships progress at a different rate online when compared to offline relationships. In the offline context, individuals tend to share information gradually in layers, starting with broad superficial information and progressing to in-depth personal information. In contrast to this, much online interaction is found to start with both broad and in-depth information and the rate at which personal information is disclosed is often increased (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Whitty, 2007).

Many online communities also exist with specific themes where likeminded individuals can meet and interact. Someone who is homosexual can for example find an online chat group that is open to this and find a sense of belonging. At the same time, rejection online can also occur but may be experienced as less traumatic to the individual (Gonyea, 2004). This may create a safer environment in which to take personal risks and in which to self-disclose openly.
2.3.7. Physical Separation

Due to the Internet’s capability to connect people from anywhere in the world, many online relationships are formed over vast distances. Even if a relationship is started with someone who lives nearby, many Internet users opt to keep their interaction online and physical contact may never occur (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). According to some studies, this does not have to be a problem as it can be compensated for by means of the various options available for online communication as well as the possibility of making face-to-face contact (Walther, 1996). This compensation is limited as online communication cannot yet simulate physical contact such as a handshake, a pat on the back or a kiss (Suler, 2005).

2.3.8. Absence of Non-Verbal Cues

In most forms of online communication, video is not used. This means that people mostly have to rely on verbal cues while communicating (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This leads to reduced sensations while interacting and the users are often limited to text on their screen (Suler, 2005). There are, however, solutions to this situation as individuals are able to use website and application specific features such as smileys for adding colour and tone to their verbal communications. These can potentially compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues (Walther, 1996) and the expressive potential of text only communication should not be underestimated (Suler, 2005).
2.3.9. TEMPORAL FLEXIBILITY

Online communication often does not require Internet users to be actively communicating at the same time. Messages can be left and replied to whenever the individuals happen to be online with asynchronous forms of communication such as email and message boards (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Suler, 2005). Even with synchronous forms of communication such as instant messaging, users have seconds or even minutes to formulate and reflect on their replies (Suler, 2005).

2.3.10. EQUALIZED STATUS

In the online environment there is a reduced importance on similarity in terms of psychical proximity and culture between individuals. Due to the distance between individuals being less of a boundary to communication while online, Internet offers an opportunity to find individuals with similar interests from around the world (Suler, 2005). Regardless of characteristics such as wealth, gender, social status, disability, race, appearance and so on, individuals have equal opportunity to voice their opinions. Instead the importance shifts to communication abilities, personality traits and the quality of ideas (Suler, 2005).

2.4. FORMS OF ONLINE SOCIALISATION

With the vast amount of possibilities on the Internet, several means of online socialisation have developed. These types of online socialisation are described below.
2.4.1. **Instant Messaging**

Instant messaging refers to a variety of text based online communications that result in a message being rapidly sent from one Internet access point to another. This includes online chat, in which messages can be shared between a number of individuals in real time. This is similar to having a group conversation online and demonstrates the level of complexity that the Internet is able to offer its users (Suler, 2005).

2.4.2. **Gaming**

Online gaming is a very sophisticated method of online interaction that is rich in sensory experience making use of high quality audio and video to recreate social environments (Suler, 2005). Online gaming has become a lucrative industry with modern games relying more and more on online multiplayer components. Players from around the world are able to join the same game and play against each other. There are many games that simulate strategic war gaming, first person shooting, racing, gambling, sports and many more that put players against each other in team or individual formats.

2.4.3. **Webcasting**

Webcasting, or audio-video conferencing, refers to the transmission of sound and video over the Internet (Suler, 2005). Videos and sound can either be streamed in real time, meaning that two people can make use of webcams (Internet video cameras) and microphones to have a verbal conversation while video of each other is displayed on screen.
Alternatively, people can record videos and then make them available online for other people to download or watch at any time. This is called podcasting.

2.4.4. **VOICE OVER INTERNET PROTOCOL**

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) refers to the transmission of audio over the Internet and is the technological basis for Internet facilitated phone calls. This technology can help reduce costs that would normally have been spent on traditional telephone costs. One such online application is a program called Skype, which allows voice and video transmission over the Internet in real time (Skype Limited, 2009).

2.4.5. **EMAIL**

If instant messaging is comparable to having a live conversation over the Internet, then email is comparable to having a speedy mail service. Electronic messages can be sent to and from people and has become a mainstream form of communication in business and private communication. Email has evolved from a simple text based communication form to a more complex multimedia medium (Suler, 2005).

2.4.6. **MESSAGE BOARDS**

Message boards refer to virtual online locations where messages can be left by Internet users. These messages are not addressed to anyone in particular, but rather to the community that frequents this virtual location. A common form of message board is an online forum or news servers. Many websites are created with a forum section as standard practise. For
example, an online movie review website may have a public message board below each review. This will allow the public to leave their opinions of either the movie or the review of the movie for others to read.

2.4.7. **WEBLOGS (ONLINE DIARIES)**

Individuals can create weblogs, or as they are more commonly known, blogs. These are online diaries that individuals will post information about themselves, their thoughts and their activities. Others who are interested are then free to access their blogs to find out more about them. Blogs have become a popular mode of self expression and communication (Suler, 2005).

2.5. **ONLINE COMMUNITIES**

By combining the above mention basic methods of online interaction, a variety of online communities have developed. These communities often use a unique combination of the types of communication mentioned above. For example, Facebook allows instant messaging in the form of a chat application, blogging in the form of a customisable Facebook page for each user, gaming in the form of many optional applications, message boards in the form of an application called a wall and even email notifications to the users if anything on their Facebook pages have changed (Facebook, 2009).
2.5.1. **SOCIAL NETWORK SERVICES**

Social network services refers to online virtual environments where large numbers of people can find and interact with each other. Some examples of this are Facebook (Facebook, 2009) and Myspace (MySpace, 2009). In these environments people can share information about themselves with likeminded individuals or with people they consider to be friends. Photo sharing, instant messaging, blogging, message boards and online activities are available on these sites.

2.5.2. **ONLINE DATING SERVICES**

Romance can be pursued online using a variety of Internet services including chat, dating websites, webcasts and more (Gonyea, 2004). Online dating services are similar to social network services, but have a more focused purpose. These sites allow people to share personal information with the objective of starting a romantic or sexual exchange. Dating sites offer more privacy to their users as only other members of the sites are usually able to access their information. These sites allow people to look for specific qualities in their potential matchups such as gender, age, hair colour, race and so on.

Different dating sites, including sites such as Dating Buzz (Dating Buzz, 2009) and Flirtbox (Flirtbox, 2009) are often linked, allowing Internet daters to browse profiles of potential matches from around the world. Different sites allow users to display different kinds information such as photos, demographic information, interest questionnaires, star signs and even personality profiles. Communication occurs through the websites allowing
users to initially have assured anonymity, until they choose to share information such as their real name, contact details or address.

2.5.3. **ONLINE CHAT COMMUNITIES**

Online chat communities refer to websites and applications that share some form of theme, target market or method of access. The MXIT community is an example of a chat community, as people can access it via cell phones (Mxit, 2009). Within these communities there are often sub-communities that players can belong to. For example, on MXit users are able to join a Port Elizabeth chat room, or a chat room with a sports theme.

2.5.4. **MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMES (MMO’S)**

Online gaming before MMO’s was limited to a fairly small number of players joining a single game, usually between 2 and 64. With MMOs such as World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2009) and Eve Online (CCPGames, 2009), game developers create enormous online environments for their games in which millions of players can interact at the same time. These games often feature not only competitive game-play activities, but also specifically social activities such as trading in-game resources between players, in game chat rooms and applications for finding and joining with friends in the game world.

2.5.5. **THE BLOGOSPHERE**

Due to all blogs being registered or recognised online as blogs, all blogs can conceivably be found using a variety of websites and applications such as Twitter (Twitter, 2009). This
virtual connection between blogs leads to the blogosphere. People who are interested in accessing and sharing information on blogs form part of this blogosphere community.

2.6. Conclusion

The Internet provides its users with a unique array of contexts within which to socialise, some of which have been listed in this chapter. By combining images, sounds, text and video a wide range of websites and applications are made available for interpersonal interaction. The online context differs from the offline context in several ways that may have a marked impact on the nature of online socialisation. This chapter has discussed the potential impact of the anonymity and the lack of non-verbal cues on disinhibition, truthful self-disclosure, use of deception and the occurrence of deindivuation. The next chapter will provide a theoretical overview of the components of a relationship and how these may manifest within these online structures.
3.1. **Introduction**

When talking about online relationships such as friendships or even romantic relationships, a frequent concern is the quality, depth and realness of such a relationship (Gonyea, 2004). There is initially no face-to-face contact in an exclusively online relationship. Research has shown that many individuals do eventually choose to make telephone and face-to-face contact with some of their online contacts (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001).

Although people are free to share pictures, video and voice transmissions over the Internet if they so choose, most of the time people have complete anonymity (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Both this anonymity and the apparent impersonal quality of online interaction are of concern as they may have a negative impact on the quality of the relationship (Gonyea, 2004). With the anonymity possible in online relationships, there may be a difference in the use of deception as well as the truthful self-disclosure of the people in such relationships (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001).

This chapter will aim to describe the components of offline relationships by means of Sternberg’s Triangular Model of Love, dealing mainly with the concept of intimacy. This model will then be explored in the context of online relationships, specifically dealing with the concept of anonymity.
3.2. Love

Exploring the quality and depth of relationships is a complex task, as scientists are likely to disagree over what qualities make a relationship good or bad. Also difficult to operationally define is the concept of love, an important component of intimate relationships (Sternberg, 1986). For the purposes of this study, love will be defined as a combination of emotions, cognitions and behaviours that often play a role in intimate relationships (Baron, Byrne & Branscombe, 2006). Love can be seen as a complex phenomenon that arises in part from genetically transmitted instincts and in part from socially learned role modelling. Certain feelings, drives, thoughts and behaviours are socially defined and understood as characteristic of love (Sternberg, 1986).

3.2.1. Sternberg’s Triangular Model of Love

Figure 1: Diagram of Sternberg’s Triangular Model of Love

Source: Baron & Byrne, 2004, p.324.
Sternberg’s Triangular Model (Depicted above in Figure 1) breaks love down into three components, namely intimacy, commitment and passion. These terms can be used in a variety of ways and contexts, necessitating clear theoretical definitions for each of these for the purposes of this study (Aron & Westbay, 1996; Sternberg, 1986). This is presented in the sections below. This model accounts for a number of empirical findings found in literature and provides a comprehensive model for understanding close relationships (Sternberg, 1986). The comprehensiveness and simplicity of the model makes it ideal for the present study. In a study conducted to establish the construct validity of love scales based on the Triangular Model of Love, the researcher noted that the three components of this theory have appeared in various other theories of love and seem to correspond with the public’s implicit views of love (Sternberg, 1997).

3.2.1.1. Intimacy

Intimacy refers to the closeness and connectedness felt between two people in a relationship as well as the extent to which they feel bonded. These feelings give rise to feelings of warmth in the relationship and in general, intimacy can be seen as deriving largely from an emotional investment in the relationship (Sternberg, 1986). In a relationship marked by intimacy, people rely on, value, like, understand and care about one another (Aron & Westbay, 1996) and in close long term relationships, intimacy is seen as the most stable and important component (Sternberg, 1986). In fact, intimacy is at the core of many loving relationships including family, friends and lovers (Sternberg & Grajek, 1984). According to some theorists, intimacy can be defined as the ability to disclose core aspects of the self to someone else (Gonyea, 2004).
Intimacy is an important aspect of many love and relationship theories (Sternberg, 1986). Research has shown that intimacy is often accompanied by a variety of desires, feelings and behaviours. These include (a) a desire to promote the welfare of and share happiness with the loved one, (b) valuing and having a high regard for and mutual understanding with the loved one, (c) giving and receiving emotional support, (d) sharing one’s self and possessions with the loved one, and (e) intimate communication with the loved one (Sternberg & Grajek, 1984). The intimacy component of love scales based on the Triangular Model of Love was found to have high levels of construct validity (Sternberg, 1997).

In close relationships, emotions arise when there is an interruption or disruption of the predictable pattern that the individuals fall into. As time goes by, people become used to each other’s behaviour and people become more predictable to each other. Over a long time of predictability, emotional ups and downs decrease, and so too does intimacy. In this way, the antithesis to intimacy is stagnation, or a lack of disruption to the behavioural pattern shared by two people (Berscheid, 1983).

In their study on the intimacy component of love, Sternberg and Grajek (1984) found that the structure of intimacy was stable across all types of loving relationships. It was the passion and commitment components that greatly differentiated close friendships from romantic or familial relationships. It was found, however, that the amount of love experienced is greatly variable between various types of relationships and depends on the characteristics of the individuals (Sternberg & Grajek, 1984).
3.2.1.2. Passion

Passion is based on romance and includes the sexuality and physical attraction between people in a relationship (Aron & Westbay, 1996; Sternberg, 1986). Passion can be seen as arising largely from a motivational involvement in the relationship (Sternberg, 1986). This component is not typically seen as important in relationships other than romantic or sexual ones. Passion can, however, refer to other motivational drives that bring people together such as the need to affiliate, self-esteem needs, and a desire for self-actualisation (Sternberg & Grajek, 1984).

In close relationships, passion interacts dramatically with intimacy and these can be positively or negatively correlated. In some relationships passion brings people close together so that intimacy can develop, whereas other relationships may start with a foundation of intimacy while passion slowly builds over time. The important point here is not that passion and intimacy affect each other in a particular way, but that they do interact (Sternberg, 1986). The passion component of love scales based on the Triangular Model of Love was found to have high levels of construct validity (Sternberg, 1997).

3.2.1.3. Commitment

Commitment refers to the decision made by two people in the short term to love each other, and in the long term to commit to, share and maintain a relationship (Sternberg, 1986). It is also the decision to love and the desire to be associated with the other person (Aron & Westbay, 1996). Commitment can be seen as arising largely from a cognitive decision (Sternberg, 1986) and along with intimacy is a vital component for long term close
relationships, including some friendships (Sternberg & Grajek, 1984). The commitment component of love scales based on the Triangular Model of Love was found to have high levels of construct validity (Sternberg, 1997).

3.2.2. Relationship Types

The abovementioned components of love can exist in a relationship in eight combinations. Each combination is characterised by a different type of love (Aron & Westbay, 1996; Sternberg, 1986).

3.2.2.1. Nonlove

Nonlove consists of none of the three components of love and is an example of most of the casual acquaintances that we have (Sternberg, 1986). Many opportunities exist online for this kind of relationship. In online games and on message boards individuals are able to view each other’s public messages without ever engaging in a meaningful way.

3.2.2.2. Liking

Liking is characterised by intimacy alone, and is the primary type of love that exists between true friends (Aron & Westbay, 1996). In this kind of relationships, the individuals feel close, bonded and connected, but do not experience physical attraction. Nor does the friend arouse the thought that one loves the friend. This type of relationship can be determined by observing the reaction if the friend is taken away. In liking, the friend is missed, but the loss is not dwelled upon. If the relationship is more than just liking, the loss
will be more impactful and their absence will have a substantial long-term effect (Sternberg, 1986).

The online environment again provides many opportunities for this kind of relationship. In public chat rooms, people can share intimate information and develop a strong sense of liking without ever committing to future communication. The previously mentioned impermanent and fluid nature of online communities makes this kind of relationship particularly relevant to the online context. People can disappear from websites by logging out indefinitely or by simply changing their nicknames. This leads to a fleeting kind of intimacy that can be deep and meaningful (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006), but transient.

3.2.2.3. Infatuation

Infatuation is characterised by passion alone and is the primary type of love in a passionate relationship that develops no intimacy and in which no commitment is made (Aron & Westbay, 1996). Infatuation can arise and dissipate suddenly and involves a high degree of psychophysiological response (Sternberg, 1986).

Although this may seem like an unlikely kind of relationship to find online, research has shown that sexual exchanges can occur or be initiated online through chat rooms, social networking communities and dating sites (Gonyea, 2004). Individuals can log into a site designed for ‘hooking up’, find a willing individual and initiate a single sexual encounter. This sexual encounter can occur on- or offline and the relationship will be over without developing intimacy or commitment.
3.2.2.4. Empty Love

Empty love is seen as a type of love in which only a commitment to love each other and stay together exists. Such a relationship is characterised by neither passion nor a sense of intimacy (Aron & Westbay, 1996). This kind of relationship is often seen as the near-final stage of a relationship that has become stagnant and in which there is little emotional involvement between individuals (Sternberg, 1986).

In online multiplayer games, particularly MMO’s, people can join guilds or teams. They commit to perform certain in-game roles for the team and are expected to give their time to the group (Blizzard Entertainment, 2009). Although intimacy and even passion may develop in such a relationship, individuals may also limit their involvement to performing their in-game roles.

3.2.2.5. Romantic Love

Romantic love is characterised by passion and intimacy in the absence of commitment. A relationship based on romantic love is likely to be lovers who engage in a passionate and emotional relationship over a very short period of time (Aron & Westbay, 1996). This type of relationship has the same emotional bondedness and connection of liking, but with the added dynamics of passionate arousal and romance (Sternberg, 1986).

Online this kind of relationship may occur within the dating sites. Flirting, cybersex, sharing and emotional support can develop online with contacts met on dating sites (Dating
Buzz, 2009). Here individuals can share passion and intimacy for brief or extended periods and end contact easily should they choose not to commit to a long term relationship.

3.2.2.6. Companionate Love

Companionate love is based on intimacy and commitment, but not passion. A relationship based on companionate love will be one that is emotionally close and committed, but where the passion may have faded over the years (Aron & Westbay, 1996). In essence this kind of relationship is a long-term committed friendship (Sternberg, 1986).

This relationship type may be ideally suited for the online social context. Although cybersex can be engaged in, sexual contact is severely limited online (Gonyea, 2004). Lovers separated by a great physical distance are not able to touch at all. Friendships made in chat rooms, social networking sites and in the gaming community can be maintained in a meaningful way over a long time despite physical distance (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

3.2.2.7. Fatuous Love

Fatuous Love consists of passion and commitment, but does not include intimacy. A relationship that is accompanied by fatuous love is likely a commitment that is based on passion. There may not be time for true intimacy, meaning that the relationship may be considered to be shallow (Aron & Westbay, 1996). The stabilising element of intimacy is absent and this kind of relationship is at risk for termination (Sternberg, 1986).
Paradoxically, the Internet may harbour this kind of relationship through the anonymity it provides. Individuals may get to know each other anonymously and much information may remain hidden. It is the opinion of the primary researcher that the potential exists for some online relationships to be based on romantic fantasy instead of intimacy, and that individuals may fuel this fantasy by choosing to make themselves unknowable within the safety of the anonymity. The findings of the present study may shed more light for future research.

3.2.2.8. Consummate Love

Consummate love consists of all three components. The people in such a relationship are committed to staying together, have passion for one another and share a sense of intimacy (Aron & Westbay, 1996). In this kind of relationship the emotional connection, motivational involvement and conscious decision to commit to love are all present. This state can be hard to reach and even harder to maintain (Sternberg, 1986). In romantic relationships, this is seen as the ideal form of love or complete love, and is considered difficult to attain (Aron & Westbay, 1996). The love of a parent for a child can be seen as consummate love in that the motivational drive, intimacy and commitment are generally present and strong (Sternberg, 1986). As previously mentioned, researchers are sceptical of this kind of love occurring purely online and the present study may yield valuable new information.

3.3. Cyber Love

Relationships that are maintained online present individual’s with a unique context to do so. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the inherent anonymity provided in the online environment may influence individuals’ deception, disinhibition and truthful self-disclosure.
If this is the case, it would be important to know the impact that this would have on the relationship.

### 3.3.1. Cyber-Passion

The concept of passion in online relationships is a controversial one. Online dating is a phenomenon that is gaining popularity (Gonyea, 2004). The purpose of much online dating is ultimately to reach a face-to-face situation whereby both individuals actually meet in the flesh. But before this point is actually reached, the Internet offers many possibilities for romantic and erotic interactions. These may include typing romantic, flirtatious or erotic conversations through chat programs, sending affectionate messages through email or by posting messages on blogs and message boards. Online sex may also be engaged in.

The anonymity provided by the Internet allows individuals to control what information they reveal and provides a buffer for rejection (Anderson & Emmers-Sommers, 2006). This may free an individual from many threatening concerns prevalent with offline sexual acts, such as rejection and vulnerability (Gonyea, 2004). Individuals may make use of multimedia options such as sharing photos or videos of themselves. Live webcasting allows individuals to have live conversations over the Internet by using microphones and even video cameras.

Although some researchers argue that the Internet is too impersonal and risky for the development of passion, many people may not consider the Internet to be impersonal at all (Whitty, 2007). The Internet allows people to be in permanent and instant contact and many Internet dating facilities cater specifically to the individual’s need for authenticity and may aid in protecting individuals from being mislead (Gonyea, 2004).
3.3.2. Cyber-Commitment

Commitment comes in many forms in the online environment. In MMO’s, players may choose to join guilds. These refer to a group of players that commit to cooperating in the game environment in order to achieve in-game wealth, experience and prestige to the guild as a whole. Members are expected to perform their in-game functions and to be actively playing the game on a regular basis.

It is possible for individuals to make commitments to online relationships. One study showed that individuals who were able to genuinely express their true selves online were more likely to successfully maintain online relationships and move these relationships into the offline context. Many of these relationships were reported as stable even two years after the relationships were initiated during the study (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). A criticism that can be made is that individuals have very little control over or knowledge of each other’s behaviour. Individuals may find it difficult or foolhardy to trust others over the Internet. Studies do show that despite this, commitment can be a very strong component of online relationships (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

3.3.3. Cyber-Intimacy

As the focus of this study is identity within an intimate relationship, this section is of particular importance.
A criticism that can be made of intimacy over the Internet is that many would not consider it possible to gain a deep sense of understanding and caring in such an impersonal medium. Some view online intimacy as no more than an illusion (Gonyea, 2004). Studies show that, although predictability and understanding are among the poorest developed characteristics of online socialisation, getting to know other people over the Internet can be remarkably quick and easy (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

Some theorists maintain that intimacy is very reliant on the level of truthful self-disclosure that occurs between individuals (Sternberg, 1986). In an intimate relationship, people are more willing to show who they are (Gonyea, 2004). The anonymity offered by the Internet may enhance individual’s disinhibition and lead to a greater degree of self expression and truthful self-disclosure and may provide individuals with an environment in which it is safe to be oneself (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). Studies suggest that Internet socialisers tend to have strong verbal abilities and demonstrated empathy for other Internet users (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001) and that participants experienced a greater degree of liking after interacting briefly online when compared to brief face-to-face interaction (Bargh, Mkenna & Fitzsimons, 2002).

3.4. CONCLUSION

The three components of Sternberg’s Triangular Model of Love have been found by prior research to exist to at least some extent in the online environment. Although some studies have found that intimacy and passion can be limited online (Gonyea, 2004), other studies have highlighted the unique ways in which the Internet can make up for these deficits (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). Intimacy can be generated at a rapid pace online due to the
concentrated amount of personal sharing that is possible within the context of the online anonymity (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).

Despite many similarities, intimacy, passion and commitment function online in a different way to which they function offline. The impact of anonymity on communication, relationship development and self representation is discussed throughout this text. This means that the eight relationship types may function online in a unique way as well. Perhaps a true friendship online can be experienced as real and meaningful, despite the lack of physical proximity. Perhaps an online romantic relationship can be experienced as intense and satisfying, despite the lack of body language and physical touch. Although establishing the validity of the model within the online context is not the primary aim of the present study, the findings may shed some light as to how participants view their relationships online.

From this chapter it is clear that individuals’ ability to make themselves known is crucial to developing intimacy online. The focus of the next chapter is thus online identity and how individuals make themselves known to others.
4.1. Introduction

Research has shown that individuals are sometimes strategic in terms of how they present themselves online (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001). In a study on online dating it was concluded that the Internet provides a safe space for individuals to express their true selves while experimenting with how to present themselves to others in order to attract potential dates. Participants of a study on online identity reported trying to find a balance between being their true selves online while trying to appear attractive and interesting enough to not disappoint other site users (Whitty, 2007).

Between different situations, individuals may adopt different social identities. Social identities refer to an identity that is portrayed within a social setting and may be strongly influenced by the individual’s desire to fit into the group or to affiliate (Tafjel, 1982). Identity, for the purposes of this study, refers to those characteristic that individuals portray in order to express who they are. Roger’s Self Theory was chosen for this study.

This chapter will broadly describe Roger’s (1951) Self Theory after briefly comparing it to the Social Identity Theory (Tafjel, 1982) due to its similar acknowledgement of multiple presentations of socially determined identity. How people make use of defences to unconsciously distort their self perceptions and consciously manage the impression they present to others will be discussed by making reference to peoples’ inherent need for positive
regard. Additionally the impact of unconditional positive regard on an individual’s ability to actualise and access their true self will be discussed.

4.2. **Social Identity Theory**

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals have differing personal and social identities. Whenever an individual interacts with a group or category of people to which they belong, the individual is likely to take on a social identity that corresponds with this group. This means that an individual is likely to behave in accordance with the salient social identity (Tafjel, 1982; Tajfel, 1978). This corresponds with the views of Rogers (1951), who described personality as a fluid construct that changes based on the demands of the context and the perceived expectations of others in the social environment. The online context provides individuals a wide variety of social environments, each with its own unique properties, purposes and inhabitants. Individuals are thus likely to experience a variety of unique social groups, and may adopt a variety of unique online social identities in order to fit in.

In the online environment, individuals have freedom in terms of how they express their identities and can carefully manage the impressions they make (Whitty, 2007). By making use of nicknames and avatars individuals can capitalise on the anonymity and lack of visual cues to present whatever identity they choose. People are able to remain completely anonymous, selectively express specific parts of their true selves or even take on a completely false identity (Suler, 2005). Social Identity Theory posits that individuals have multiple true selves, and that one’s identity changes between contexts. The online environment is a context that is radically different from the offline environment.
Additionally, the Internet provides multiple contexts that differ from each other. This implies that individuals may have multiple true identities online that differs radically from each other and from their offline identities.

4.3. **Roger’s Self Theory**

Rogers developed a theory of psychotherapy and the personality change that occurred during the therapy process. He achieved this by exploring the inherent processes in what was going on during successful therapy. As this theory developed, he turned his attention to the nature of personality and the dynamics of behaviour (Rogers, 1959). Roger’s theory of personality hinges on the concept that all human beings have an actualising tendency that enhances, maintains and drives them towards autonomy. This actualising tendency can be suppressed, but never destroyed (Rogers, 1951). Rogers viewed the therapeutic relationship as just another relationship in the client’s life and believed that valid knowledge gained about this interpersonal relationship would be applicable to other fields of human experience as well (Rogers, 1959).

In this section the various components of Roger’s (1951) Self Theory will be briefly described. These include the concepts of the self, symbolisation, self-concept, conditions of worth, ideal self, incongruence, needs for positive regard, defence mechanisms and unconditional positive regard. These concepts will also be linked to the online environment where applicable.
4.3.1. **The Self**

According to the Self Theory, each person’s identity consists of the self, which is a differentiated portion of the individual’s experiential field. This means that the self involves all the experience relating to the “I” or “me” of the individual. The self develops in interactions with other people and involves both the individual’s awareness and functioning. The self is the structure inherent in an individual that contains all information available to his or her awareness. It is a fluid and dynamic structure that is always changing (Rogers, 1959) and through the efforts of the individual can be presented to others in various ways in different contexts (Rogers, 1951; Tafjel, 1982). People have a great degree of control in terms of what aspects of the self they allow others to become aware of. Research has illustrated the deliberate level of control that individuals are able to exert in their self presentation while engaging in online dating (Whitty, 2007).

Rogers (1951) observed that psychotherapeutic clients constantly referred to their problems and goals by referring to the self and that much therapy is about the client becoming their true selves. This tendency of people to refer to this seemingly abstract concept, made it clear to Rogers that the self is an important phenomena in human experience (Rogers, 1959). The online environment provides individuals a unique opportunity to find this abstract true self, and according to research, individuals report experiencing a large degree of authenticity in their self presentation while interacting online (Bargh, Mkenna & Fitzsimons, 2002). An important consideration while exploring identity is the possibility of multiple genuine social identities, as posited by Social Identity Theory (Tafjel, 1982). The Internet may provide individuals with a context in which to find not just one, but multiple true selves.
4.3.2. Symbolisation

When an individual becomes aware of a stimulus, that stimulus needs to be perceived and symbolised in order for it to have meaning to the individual. A phenomenon that is perceived is identified by relating it to prior knowledge and assigning meaning based on past experience. Hypotheses are then made as to what will happen next (Rogers, 1959). For example, an individual may become aware of a black speck and can symbolise it as a number of things. It could be a small gnat near the individual’s eyes, or perhaps an aeroplane in the distance. By relying on prior knowledge, other senses and hypothesis testing, the individual may symbolise what he or she has become aware of accurately or inaccurately (Rogers, 1959).

In this way, events occurring in the social environment as well as perceptions and opinions about the self can be accurately or inaccurately made and given meaning (or symbolised). The concept of symbolisation accounts for individuals’ capacity to misinterpret social cues from others and to develop unrealistic perceptions and expectations of themselves (Rogers, 1959).

4.3.3. The Self-Concept

The self concept is a collection of characteristics that the individual experiences as being true for the self and is evaluated based on social values. The individual develops a self-concept based on the interpersonal interactions that he or she experiences (Rogers, 1951). For example, an individual who is constantly criticised by others for being overweight is
likely to develop a self-deprecating self-concept. Assumptions and hypotheses about the self can be accurate or inaccurate to the true self-structure of the individual (Rogers, 1959). Using the same example mentioned above, a teenage boy may accurately perceive himself to be above the average weight, but may also inaccurately perceive this as meaning that he is not worth other peoples’ acceptance due to his weight.

Reactions gained from other people leads to the accurate or inaccurate symbolization of perceived events. This means that individuals develop a perception of themselves by assigning specific meanings about themselves to how other people treat them (Rogers, 1951). The way in which an individual symbolises or perceives themselves to be, as well as the value attached to the characteristics attributed to the self leads to a self-concept. Rogers writes that the self-concept is a fluctuating entity, which is capable of sudden and dramatic changes between settings (Rogers, 1959). The present study aims to explore how people conceptualise themselves online and how they interpret, or symbolise, cues from other intimate contacts.

4.3.4. CONDITIONS OF WORTH

When the individual receives conditional positive regard in his or her social interactions, he or she may adopt these conditions into their self-concept. In such a case, these conditions become conditions of worth, and become a measure of a person’s self-worth, or self-esteem (Rogers, 1951). For example, if a parent praises a child when receiving good grades and punishes the child for receiving average grades, the child may internalize that he needs to achieve high grades in order to be acceptable. Research suggests that although the Internet can reduce the social anxiety experienced by individuals, an acceptable self must still be
established and maintained (Miller, 1995). This means that the Internet comes with its own set of conditions of worth that individuals may feel compelled to conform to.

Furthermore, the conditions of worth that commonly occur offline may be different online. Some theorists argue that physical appearance is much less important online than offline (Levine, 2000). However, this may simply be due to the ability of users to hide their appearance online. In another study on online dating it was found that Internet users were very concerned about their appearance and were particular when selecting photos to display on their dating profiles. Some users tended to make use of older photos in which they appear younger and some users reported misrepresenting their weight (Whitty, 2007). These fears were more reported more saliently in studies on online dating, where romance component of love is more important.

In the abovementioned study on online dating, participants identified a list of characteristics they were looking for in potential matches on the site. Appearance came at the top of this list followed by similar interests, socio-economic status, personality, honesty, weight, humour, star sign and family status (Whitty, 2007). This indicates that in the online dating context, conditions of worth are both salient and pace a heavy pressure on the site users. This may, however, not apply to other online contexts or to relationships based on different components of love, such as intimacy and commitment.
4.3.5. Ideal Self

The conditions of worth that are internalised by the individual leads to him or her developing an Ideal Self. This refers to a collection of characteristic that the individual strives to be. The ideal self is what the individual would most desire the self-concept to be (Rogers, 1959). The ideal self is heavily reliant on feedback from other people in the individual’s life and on how the individual symbolises that feedback. The Internet is a social setting in which users are able to provide feedback to other users. This suggests that the Internet may provide social pressures that may influence individuals to desire creating a particular impression by behaving in a particular way. A large discrepancy between the ideal self and the self concept may leave an individual with low self worth, as they are not meeting the standards that they feel they need to meet do have worth.

4.3.6. Incongruence

When there is a large gap between an individual’s Self-Concept and the True Self, then he or she will experience a sense of incongruence. What the individual really wants and is driven to achieve may be denied in preference of maintaining the self-concept (Rogers, 1951). For example, according to this theory an individual who perceives himself as fiercely independent may strive to maintain this sense of independence. He may refuse to acknowledge needing other people in his life and will deny his real internal desire to be loved. His devotion to his self-concept of ‘independent loner’ may lead him further from his true need and desire for human contact.
In effect, the real self and its needs are partly sacrificed in order to maintain the incongruent self concept. Behaviour is no longer motivated by a clear drive to self actualise, but also by the illogical self concept. This may lead to internal confusion and incomprehensible behaviour. The individual acts in a way that is contrary to what he or she actually wants and the individual becomes incomprehensible to even themselves (Rogers, 1959). In the online context it is much easier to create a specific impression to others (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001) and individuals may be more able to suppress their true selves in favour of presenting an Ideal Self. This incongruence may lead to behaviour that actually reduces the satisfaction of real social needs experienced by the individual.

### 4.3.7. Needs for Positive Self Regard

According to Self Theory, people crave positive self regard or a sense that they themselves are good enough (Rogers, 1951). People measure themselves against the conditions of worth internalised from their social world. These conditions of worth, that together make up the ideal self, tell the individual whether or not they are acceptable. This along with the discomfort of incongruence may lead the individual to distort or even deny their perception of themselves, their behaviours and their attitudes. For example, an individual may have a strong unconscious desire to maintain an impression of herself as a good mother. She may then protect herself from the discomfort of incongruence by denying or distorting her perception of her performance as a mother. She may ignore instances where she does not live up to her stringent conditions of worth as a mother or distortedly interpret her actions in such a way that they do conform to these conditions of worth.
4.3.8. **DEFENCE MECHANISMS**

In order to meet needs for positive regard from others and from the self, the individual may engage in a number of defence mechanisms and defensive behaviours. The individual experiences anxiety when there is a threat of allowing something that contradicts the self-concept into awareness. This new contradicting event can be symbolised accurately and the self-concept can change accordingly, or the individual can save the self concept from changing by distorting what is perceived (Rogers, 1959). These unconscious distortions of one’s perception of the self are referred to as defence mechanisms. These include distortion and denial, which will be described in more detail below. Another defence, called façades, refers to a deliberate misrepresentation of the self to meet needs for positive regard, and is also described below.

4.3.8.1. **Façades**

In order to meet positive regard from others an individual may simply choose to pretend, or to act in ways that are contrary to who they perceive themselves to be. This involves deliberate, purposeful deception and research suggests that the online medium allows the Internet user more freedom to create such façades. Individuals can capitalize on the text based interactions and lack of non-verbal cues to be very selective about their self-representation (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001). In a study on online dating, many participants report deliberately misrepresenting their appearance to some degree to attract the interest of other users (Whitty, 2007). Other aspects that were misrepresented by some online daters according to the study are their current relationship status, age, weight, socio-economic status and interests. Participants reported being careful not to misrepresent themselves too
much though, as they did not want to disappoint their dates as soon as they had face to face contact. There was a strong awareness of the importance and desirability for honesty while engaging in online dating (Whitty, 2007).

4.3.8.2. Defensiveness

Even though a person may choose to be honest, their discomfort surrounding their negative self perceptions may lead them to resisting full self-disclosure (Rogers, 1959). This defensive resistance to making the self known is not a purposeful deception, but rather an attempt to remain hidden and unknown. As mentioned above, many individuals value their anonymity while online and simply choose to not disclose certain information until their relationships become more intimate (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). This correlates with Sternberg’s (1986) views regarding the greater level of sharing in an intimate relationship.

4.3.8.3. Denial

In order to meet positive self regard a person may engage in this defence mechanism. It involves unconsciously keeping certain facts about the self and the self’s behaviour from reaching consciousness (Rogers, 1951) and leads to a marked impairment in objective reality testing. Facts and actions that to not match up to the self concept are denied, as though they do not even exist. These may include positive or negative impulses or feelings and goes beyond simple repression (Rogers, 1959). A person with a negative, self-defeating self concept will be unlikely to allow personal strengths to come into awareness.
4.3.8.4. Distortion

Facts about the self that are not denied, but cannot be tolerated due to their incongruence when compared to the self concept can be distorted. They are cognitively reframed in the person’s mind to carry a more acceptable and congruent meaning (Rogers, 1951). In a study by Whitty (2007) on online dating, participants formed rationalizations in order to justify the lies they deliberately told to attract other people. Some stated that they were simply embellishing the truth or claimed that everybody else is doing the same thing anyway (Whitty, 2007). These rationalizations are an example of distortions used by participants to help them feel honest while being dishonest.

4.3.9. UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD

According to client centred theory, an individual moves closer to their core true selves if they experience unconditional positive regard from those important to them. In this case the individual is not pressured to internalize conditions of worth and is free to accept themselves for who they truly are. With a decrease in conditions of worth, an individual is less likely to feel shame or guilt over their desires, likes, drives and emotions and becomes free to be their true selves (Rogers, 1951).

Some researchers claim that within the context of an intimate relationship where there exists mutual liking, trust and understanding individuals are more likely to share aspects of themselves that they fear may be undesirable. This may translate onto the online context where intimacy is obtained in unique ways (Bargh, Mkena & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). In a study by Bargh, Mkena and Fitzsimons (2002) it was found
that people were able to experience a greater sense of their true selves after interacting in the online environment. In another study, socially anxious participants reported greater ease expressing their true selves while online when compared to offline (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). These researchers concluded that the Internet is not a place for individuals to hide from real life, but can in fact be a non-threatening environment for people to maintain and initiate relationships. They also posit that the Internet provides a safer social space for those who have difficulty with forming face-to-face relationships due to shyness, social anxiety or lacking social skills (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002).

### 4.4. Conclusion

According to Rogers (1951) and Tafjel (1982), individual possess a fluid self that changes depending on the context and social expectations of others. In the social context, individual’s experience social pressure in the form of conditions of worth. In the face of conditions of worth, individuals feel less able to simply be themselves and are pushed to distort or deny aspects and qualities of themselves in favour of more socially acceptable aspects and qualities. Additionally, individuals may internalise conditions of worth that are perceived as being set by others. This means that individuals start to view themselves critically and may feel shame and anxiety with regards to their desires, feelings and inherent qualities and traits.

The online environment is a unique context that presents conditions of worth in a different way than in the offline context. The anonymity and potentially impersonal nature of the Internet provides a buffer for rejection that may moderate how Roger’s (1951) Self Theory manifests. The present study will explore this in more detail and may shed light on
the unique nature of the conditions of worthwhile socialising online. Additionally, the unique online manifestation of the defences such as facades, defensiveness, distortion and denial will also be explored.
Chapter 5 - Research Design and Methodology

5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the research aims, design and methodology that was used for the present study. The participants as well as the sampling and data gathering procedure is explained in depth and is followed by a description of the research procedure and data analysis used. The chapter concludes with the ethical considerations relevant to the study in terms of gaining informed consent from the research participants, ensuring anonymity and minimizing or avoiding harm to research participants.

5.2. AIMS OF RESEARCH

From the literature review it is clear that online social identity is poorly understood. There exists the potential for changes in the level of both deception and self-disclosure due to the high level of anonymity. This could potentially influence people’s online social identities and self-concept, as well as the quality of intimate online relationships. The present study explored social identity and self-concept as experienced in an online setting by means of an open-ended questionnaire. Factors that influence self-disclosure and deception in the online setting were also explored.

The primary aims of the present study include exploring the views of online intimate friends and partners regarding social identity and self-concept in the context of online intimate relationships. Several concepts such as anonymity, intimacy, deception, self-
disclosure, social identity, and self-concept are of importance according to the literature review. Participants’ perceptions regarding these within the online context are explored.

5.3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

5.3.1. QUALITATIVE DESIGN

This study made use of a qualitative research design. Qualitative data consists of non-numerical information and is typically used for exploratory and phenomenological research (Silverman, 2005). Qualitative research deals specifically with the participants’ subjective worldview as well as the meanings that they attach to the phenomena being studied. Rather than uncover universal truths, it helps the researcher to interpret those meanings and intentions that underlie everyday human behaviour (Schurink, 1998).

The phenomenon of online socialisation occurs in an environment that social researchers have not yet explored to a great extent. Concepts such as intimacy, love, self-expression and identity may not necessarily have the same meaning and value to the people in these online communities as they would to people in an offline context. A qualitative approach that is aimed at exploring the online social environment through the eyes of those people that interact socially within it, was deemed most suitable by the present researcher.

Qualitative research is criticised for its lack of standardized statistical procedures and its limitations in terms of generalisable results (Schurink, 1998). For this study these limitations need to be considered as the results will not necessarily be applicable to all instances of Internet socialisation. A further criticism is that qualitative research lacks the objectivity of
the quantitative approach (Schurink, 1998). This limitation can be understood as the differing epistemological viewpoints of these approaches. Qualitative methodology rests on the assumption that research participants understand their worlds by subjective means, and that social scientists need to explore these subjective appraisals if they are to understand human behaviour (Schurink, 1998).

5.3.2. **EXPLORATORY RESEARCH**

The exploratory nature of this study means that no direct causal links were established. Online relationships have only recently started receiving attention and many questions remain unanswered. The study attempted to explore this new field so that a knowledge base could be established. Exploratory research is conducted in order to satisfy the researcher’s curiosity, to test the feasibility for further studies in the area and to develop the methods to be used in such studies. The strength of this kind of research is that it studies the topic broadly and generally enough to usually yield at least some insights into the observed behaviour and hinting at where further studies need to be done. The main weakness is that it often does not yield definitive results and further explanatory research is needed to obtain satisfactory answers to research questions (Babbie, 2005).

5.3.3. **PILOT STUDY**

A pilot study was used in order to assess the research procedure of the present study as well as the quality, relevance and validity of the research measures. Pilot studies aid the researcher in orienting himself to the project. It is usually done on a small number of participants that have characteristics similar to those of the target respondents (Strydom,
1998). For this pilot study, three participants were used. The suitability of the questionnaire items was of particular importance and could be established by means of the pilot study (Strydom, 1998). Ambiguous, leading and vague questions are detrimental to a study as results become vague, non-comparable and biased. If any such issues became apparent during the pilot study, it would not have cost much to rectify them (Fouché, 1998).

In the present study it was found that participants responded to open ended questions with very short, vague answers and it was decided that the main study would have to consist of a larger number of focused questions. The new questions were still open-ended, but requested much more specific information. Additionally, questions that were experienced as vague in the pilot study were omitted in the main study.

5.4. PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING PROCEDURE

This study made use of non-probability purposive and snowball sampling in order to gain participants. Specific selection criteria were established based on the target population. The target population is the group of individuals who the results of the study should apply to (Whitley, 2001). For this study the target population included individuals who made use of the Internet to initiate and maintain online intimate relationships. This population was then limited to English speaking people over 18 years of age in order to deal with consent and data analysis complications that would have arisen without such limits.

The sample for the pilot and main study consisted of sixteen participants, eleven male and five female. All participants reported being fluent English speakers. Participants were between the ages of 20 and 56 and consisted of white, coloured and Indian races. Although
there was a wide age range, most participants were between 24 and 28 years old. In terms of nationality, 12 were South African, two were American, one was Russian and one was Canadian. Participants reported being computer literate and spending an average of 28 hours online a week, with an average of 16 hours being spent in online social interaction. All participants reported passing matric and having maintained long term friendships or romantic relationships online for between two and nine years. Most participants come from middle to high social economic status and have some form of tertiary education.

5.4.1. Non-probability Sampling

For this study, non-probability sampling was used. This refers to a sample that is chosen in a non-random way. This is ideal for research where information on a very specific part of the population is under investigation (Babbie, 2005). Access was gained via purposive sampling from personal contacts of the researcher, as well as subsequent snowball sampling. A very specific sample was needed, making this the best method. Data was collected until saturation of the categories was reached. Three participants were used for the pilot study, whereas the main study reached saturation with 13 participants.

5.4.2. Purposive Sampling

This type of sampling makes use of the researcher’s judgement in order to select a sample that will be representative of the target population. For this reason, it is possible for the researcher’s bias to effect his decisions with regards to who he chooses for the sample (Strydom & De Vos, 1998). By making use of clear criteria as well as subsequent snowball sampling for admission into the study, the researcher avoided bias. Only a small number of
participants was invited in this way, with the majority of the sample being selected by means of snowball sampling.

5.4.3. **Snowball Sampling**

Individuals who engage in online relationships were also chosen for the study by means of snowball sampling. Snowball sampling refers to a method of sampling in which the researcher relies on the initial participants of the study to aid them in finding more people from the target population. This form of sampling is good for gaining access to hard-to-reach participants (Strydom & De Vos, 1998). The present study gained access to participants from around the world by this means, increasing the scope of the sample.

5.4.4. **Selection Criteria**

Participants of any gender or race were selected for the study, as long as they could communicate effectively in English. For ethical reasons, only participants above the age of 18 were accepted. The most important prerequisites for participants were that they have access to the Internet and regularly engage in online social activities such as online gaming, chat rooms, Facebook or any similar activities. In addition they needed to have been in a significantly intimate relationship or strong friendship with at least one person exclusively in the online environment. The reason for this is that the study focused on identity in intimate online relationships and it was important that participants have a point of reference when responding to questions in the questionnaire.
5.5. *Research Questionnaires*

Although theories from the cognitive paradigm are typically studied quantitatively through experiments and naturalistic observations, qualitative methods such as clinical interviews are also used (Galotti, 2004). Open-ended questionnaires as well as biographical information questionnaires were administered to participants via a website. This was done in order to reach as many potential participants as possible. Due to of the nature of online relationships, potential participants were separated by great distances, making face to face data collection impractical. Additionally, the context of the phenomena under investigation is the online environment and by making use of online measures, the context of the research also becomes the online environment.

5.5.1. *Open Ended Questionnaire*

An open ended questionnaire was provided for participants to complete online. Questionnaires refer to a set of questions on the research topic that is presented on a form. Participants are asked to answer these questions in writing so that the responses can be analysed at a later stage. Questions can be either open or closed. For this study the questions were open, meaning that instead of having to choose from a small selection of responses, participants were given an opportunity give whatever responses they wanted in as much detail as they wanted (Fouché, 1998). See Appendix B and Appendix C for a list of questions in the pilot and main study.
5.5.2. **Biographical Information Questionnaire**

A short biographical questionnaire (included in Appendix D) developed by the researcher was included in the study for all participants to complete. The questionnaire included several items to enrich the findings of the study by enabling a more detailed description of the participants. These included the participants’ genders, ages, nationalities and races. Some items were included in order to get an understanding of the participant’s online relationship status and history and included the duration of the online relationships that participants were in, the number of hours per week spent in contact with these persons online as well as the nature of the relationships. Some items were included in order to administer the data collection procedure including email addresses where participants were willing.

All the questions in the biographical questionnaire were closed questions, making them suitable for generating some statistical data regarding the participants of the study. No data was analysed for the purposes of drawing conclusions relating to the research aims. Questions were either multiple-choice or completion questions. Multiple-choice questions refer to questions that need to be answered by selected an answer from a list, whereas completion questions refer to questions that are answered by typing in a short, specific response (Fouché, 1998), such as age, number of hours, and so on.

5.6. **Research Procedure**

5.6.1. **Creation of Webpage and Online Questionnaires**

The first step in the study was the creation of a webpage for data collection. A website service called Formdesk was used to create the webpage for the present study (Van
Oldenbarneveltlaan, 2009). Participants were given a link to this webpage in an email. Formdesk only makes the data available to the primary researcher by means of email, meaning that no one else has access to the research data. This protects the participants’ confidentiality. No identifying information of participants was used on the website, meaning that participants’ anonymity was also protected.

5.6.2. Email registration

Before data collection, participants were given an email information letter. This letter informed participants about the nature and aims of the study, the selection criteria and the nature of the anonymity. Participants were also asked to forward this letter to other people who may be interested in taking part in the study. The letter contained contact details of the researcher so that questions could be asked. The website was loaded with the appropriate biographical and open-ended questionnaires.

Participants were simply required to log into the data collection website in order to complete the study. In order to access this website, a link provided in the letter needed to be followed. By reading the information participants were informed of the purpose and nature of the present study. Participants were informed in the information letter as well as in the webpage containing the study that participation is voluntary and that the webpage can be exited at any time. Participants consented to the study by accessing the link that lead to the data gathering website in the information letter.
5.6.3. Website Access

The website remained active for the duration of the study, and participants were free to log onto the site at any time in order to complete the questionnaire. The website was active during the months of June, July and August 2009, twenty four hours a day. The website stores the information securely in such a manner that only the researcher is able to retrieve the raw data from the website. If more data were needed due to non-response or lack of saturation, the entire process could be repeated at a later stage. In the present study it was not necessary to repeat the process as saturation was reached within the allocated time period.

5.6.4. The Raw Data

Participants were notified that the raw data would not be used for anything other than the current study and would be destroyed as soon as the study was completed at the end of 2009. Participants were also made aware that only the researcher and research supervisors would have access to the data and that no identifying information would be linked to their responses. The raw data received by the website which was used for data collection was stored as text files on the researcher’s personal computer and deleted after the analysis was complete. No printed records of the raw data were made.

5.7. Data Analysis

5.7.1. Thematic Analysis

The qualitative data collected by means of the open-ended questionnaire was analysed systematically by means of thematic analysis. The researcher divided the data into themes, or
categories and then attempted to saturate these categories. Any data that did not fit into a category was sorted into a newly created category. The researcher remained open to the possibility of adding, removing or adapting decided on categories (Silverman, 2005). In this way, data analysis is an extremely creative and involved process that the researcher uses in order to explore the subjective experience of the participants (Poggenpoel, 1998).

The open-ended nature of the questions as well as the focused scope of the study meant that the researcher needed to find a method of analysing the data without going beyond the parameters of the present study. Therefore, themes were chosen based on their relevance in terms of identity and intimacy in the online environment. The relevance of these themes to the scope of the study was decided by referring to grounded theory covered earlier in this study.

The danger with relying on established theory in qualitative, exploratory research is that the researcher may become biased in favour of the theory. It is thus important for the researcher to remain sceptical and to periodically step back and look at the meaning of the data in the absence of theory (De Vos & Van Zyl, 1998). Roger’s (1951) personality theory and Sternberg’s (1986) intimacy theory were used for the study and the researcher needed to be careful to avoid bias while making thematic categories that corresponded with these. In order to avoid such bias the researcher needed to remain open to the fact that neither of these theories may necessarily be applicable and that findings may very well have been contradictory. The researcher was open to finding alternative explanations for the findings (Poggenpoel, 1998) and readily created thematic categories that were not covered by the theories whenever they emerged. The participants’ subjective reality is more important than the validity of an established theory when doing qualitative research (Silverman, 2005).
5.7.2. Tesch’s Model

Tesch’s model of content analysis was used and proposes a systematic eight-step approach to data analysis (Tesch, 1990). By making use of hierarchically organised codes, data was divided into clustered topics. First the data was read through as a whole so that the researcher could become familiarised with it (Poggenpoel, 1998). Some major themes and interesting links to the chosen theories started to emerge and were written down. Next the underlying meaning of the participants’ responses was determined by going through the questionnaires one by one. Thoughts were noted as the researcher moved through the questionnaires in no particular order (Tesch, 1990).

The topics that came up during this process were eventually listed and sorted into main topics, unique topics and remaining topic. Codes were developed for each topic and written next to segments in the data that corresponded to the topics represented by the codes. These topics were then sorted into a smaller number of descriptive categories so that data could be relevantly grouped together. Categories were abbreviated and the codes that belonged to each category was alphabetised (Tesch, 1990). This process of generating themes, categories and patterns requires a great deal of creativity and analytical thinking (Poggenpoel, 1998), and the researcher relied heavily on theoretical knowledge during this step.

Next a preliminary analysis was done on each individual category by assembling all the data relevant to that category in one place. The researcher was prepared to recode the existing data if it became necessary (Tesch, 1990). By considering alternative explanations
for the findings the researcher refutes his initial thoughts and may end up reworking the categories (Poggenpoel, 1998).

5.7.3. **Validity and Reliability**

Guba’s four principles of trustworthiness were used. These include credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5.7.3.1. *Lincoln and Guba’s Model of Trustworthiness*

Credibility refers to the results being true for the aims of the study and the population being studied. Instead of a focus on internal validity, the focus is on the accurate communication of the multiple subjective realities presented by participants. For a study to be credible the findings must be true to the participants (Guba, 1981). The questions in this study required participants to comment on their own unique and individual experiences of their online interaction. In order to ensure that all subjective realities be represented by the study, the researcher aimed to make use of all data and to create categories if any data fell outside of the established ones. Findings are based on multiple sources of convergent evidence and the data was collected systematically. Participants are able to misrepresent their own subjective experiences online and may even be untruthful about their online use of deception. By gathering data from multiple participants as well as gathering information from various sources of literature the impact of this is hopefully reduced.

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be transferred onto other contexts or groups. Many theorists argue that generalisability is an illusion in qualitative research due
to the small sample size and the highly specific nature of each study’s sample and context (De Vos, 1998). Guba does, however, refer to the applicability or transferability of a study. The degree of similarity and the goodness of fit found in other contexts and with other populations are important when deciding whether a qualitative study is transferable. All the present researcher can do to allow for future studies to assess the transferability of the findings of the current study is to provide a rich and detailed description of the findings that can be used in comparisons later on (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability refers to the extent to which similar studies would find similar results for the same population. This is similar to the concept of reliability in quantitative research, and may not be as applicable to qualitative research. This is due to the notion than multiple subjective realities exist and that this may limit the stability, or sameness of findings between settings (Guba, 1981). In the present study, the researcher made use of supervision with two experienced research supervisors who independently reviewed the categories during data analysis. According to Silverman (2005), high reliability is reached if two raters sort data into categories in the same way. By making use of peer evaluation, the researcher could assess the dependable of the findings.

Conformability refers to the scientific and objective nature of the findings. This freedom from bias means that the researcher did not allow personal opinions, preconceptions or assumptions to influence the analysis of the participants’ responses. In this way the data obtained and findings reached are a reflection only of the participants’ views within the context of the research conditions (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By making a thorough investigation the researcher simultaneously overcomes and risks bias. The established theory on the research topic may cause the researcher to view the data through the
lens of that theory, but at the same time challenges the assumptions held by the researcher before collecting data. The research supervisors were relied on to challenge the researcher’s conclusions. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), neutrality is achieved when credibility and transferability are established. Detailed notes of the researcher’s biases and assumptions were kept to maximise reflexivity.

5.8. Ethical Considerations

According to the Code of Conduct for psychology researchers, no research participant may be harmed by a study. Participants may not be forced into taking part in research and have the right to informed consent. Participants were informed via an emailed information letter. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and well as their right to end their participation at any time. The information letter clearly described the purpose and details of the study. Participants were given ample opportunity to ask questions about the research before and after the study via email. Research results were made available to participants via email after analysis was complete and no deception was used. The researcher ensured participant confidentiality and anonymity by limiting identifying information present on reports and records. The website used for data collection was protected and only the primary researcher had direct access to the raw data.

Due to the online nature of the study, signed consent forms were not a practical possibility. Participants were informed about the study via an information letter in an email and given ample opportunity to communicate with the primary researcher for further information. Participants provided consent by following instructions in the information letter for accessing the questionnaire online and accessing a link only available in the information letter.
Participants were made aware that they were able to exit the data collection procedure at any time by simply closing the browser window.

Many negative opinions sometimes arise around the issue of online socialising, such as the addictiveness, violent content and the potentially socially damaging aspects of the interaction. Due to these opinions, it is possible that participants may experience the feeling that they are being attacked, blamed, accused or labelled as addicts, violent or even socially inept and shut in. The researcher needs to take care to treat participants with tact and sensitivity and must attempt to eliminate potential harm and distress (Whitley, 2001). After the data was collected, debriefing opportunities were made possible over email. Participants were given an opportunity to give feedback, ask questions and any damage caused by the study could be discovered and hopefully resolved (Whitley, 2001).

5.9. CONCLUSIONS

Qualitative data was gathered via an open ended online questionnaire. Participants were gained via snowball sampling and consisted of sixteen computer literate individuals from around the world. Data was analysed thematically and the results are summarised in the following chapter.


Chapter 6 - **Results and Discussion**

### 6.1. Introduction

The present chapter aims to provide a description of the results found during the study and to discuss these findings in relation to the literature review. Several main themes were found during data analysis and each are discussed in the chapter along with their respective subthemes. A thematic analysis was done on the responses of 16 participants from different countries including South Africa, America, Canada and Russia. All participants are computer literate and regularly engage in social interaction online. The study made use of both men and women between the ages of 20 and 56. All participants have completed high school and most have completed tertiary education. The aim of the study was to explore the subjective experiences of these participants with regard to their identity within the context of intimate online relationships.

### 6.2. Results

The flowing table summarises the themes and subthemes present in the findings.
Participant responses varied widely amongst a set of common themes. Participants generally reported that how they expressed their identity online was influenced by various factors. These included the nature of the online environment as well as the nature of the relationships that participants found themselves in online. The main themes are described in more detail below.
6.2.1. **Aspects of the Virtual Environment**

Participants reported experiencing the Internet as an environment that is separate and distinct from the offline environment, often referring to the offline environment as the ‘real’ world. Reference was made to the lack of face to face cues and limited access to ‘real’ world information that leads to a great degree of anonymity. This anonymity protects people from being known and grants them a great deal of freedom without consequence while socialising online. Simultaneously, this anonymity is seen to increase individuals’ ability to deceive, which places other individuals at risk. The risk is not only limited to personal safety, as participants indicated that they are weary of trusting contacts that may mislead them. Individual are also concerned that they may develop a relationship with someone they actually do not know at all due to the anonymity.

Participants’ sense that they are not in the ‘real’ world while online has lead to interesting responses whereby reference is often made to contacts, the environment and even about themselves that suggest that participants view these as not real. Some participants appear to dissociate to some extent from themselves, the others and the environment and tend to view aspects their interaction as a simulation of reality.

6.2.1.1. **Preserving the Anonymity**

“... I choose not to share any personal information and prefer to stay as anonymous as possible. In such cases my identity only goes as far as expressing interest in one topic or another.”
Anonymity is seen as one of the primary characteristics of online socialising (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). This was clear in the present study as all participants referred to the effects of the online anonymity on their interactions. Everything from self-disclosure and deception to identity formation and social anxiety are reportedly modified by the faceless online environment. Participants expressed that they value their online anonymity for a variety of reasons such as protecting their privacy, maintaining a sense of mystery and hiding undesirable traits. Other studies on online socialisation have yielded similar findings (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001; McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

“... and the anonymity of online interaction allows me to take certain risks without coming to actual harm.” “I was willing to share emotions and problems and suck online because of the anonymity of it all.”

According to participant responses, anonymity is achieved by limiting what information is made available and by making use of pseudonyms. The anonymity provides privacy, a sense of safety and a buffer for rejection and social anxiety. Personal risks are experienced as easier while online as the consequences are reportedly less harmful. Furthermore, the Internet is experienced as granting participants more freedom to be unusual and some participants experience online contacts as being more accepting than strangers would be offline. This may be comparable to a reduced experience of conditions of worth leading to a greater ease of self expression as posited by Rogers (1951).

“With no one being able to judge my appearance, it allows people to come to know the real me.” “I don’t see skin colour, race, etc. Which is how it should be.”
An interesting paradox is that research on anonymity has found that anonymity can actually enhance the process of getting to know others in a meaningful way due to a greater ease of self-disclosure. This has to be considered against the detrimental effects of the greater ease of deception (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Gonyea, 2004; McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). Participants reported having a great deal of freedom in terms of what information they make known, leading to both an ease of deception and truthful self-disclosure. One participant expressed the thought that being able to hide aspects of themselves that are overvalued offline actually increases the potential for real intimate relationships to develop. This correlates with Self Theory, which attributes the development of pathology such as low self esteem to conditions of worth in the social environment (Rogers, 1951).

6.2.1.2. The Risk of Internet Socialisation

“I don’t trust easily online, I have doubts about who else people are chatting to.” “...I’ve been lied to [online] a lot. I don’t trust easily.” “I was once deeply hurt when a contact disclosed private information on a chat room.”

The freedom to deceive and withhold information has been found by a recent quantitative study on online friendships to have a negative impact on the development of trust (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). Participant responses in the present study were consistent with these findings, as many reported being careful to trust online. An additional dimension that emerged in the present study is that some individuals had to learn to be more careful through difficult
experiences. The anonymity of the Internet reportedly provides a false sense of security that may lure individuals into disclosing too much too quickly.

“...one must remember that people don’t always give a true reflection of themselves.”

There is a great ease of deception while online that gives an individual the freedom to create false personas (Gonyea, 2004). Many participants reported that trusting contacts online too soon is naive due to the lack of knowledge about that person. Individuals are still vulnerable online and some choose to limit what they disclose and who they trust in order to deal with this vulnerability.

6.2.1.3. Detachment from the ‘Real’ World

“Online conversations don’t feel intimate to me. The aspects of reality that are stripped away online cannot be substituted in text and I need them to connect with people.” “Online chatting is beside reality and not a part of our true lives.” “...it is easy to share as you don’t have to deal with people because they remain anonymous.”

Throughout the study some participants made statements that suggested a degree of detachment from the interaction. This impersonal characteristic of Internet communication has been mentioned in other research on computer mediated communication (Walther, 1996). Contacts were sometimes referred to as faceless characters or virtual people. One participant reported that chatting online is like talking to a screen. Another stated that expressing feelings online is like writing in a personal diary. People are reportedly easy to ignore while online and conversations don’t have to be taken seriously. Participants expressed that
emotions are easily hidden, negative evaluations lack impact, hostility from others is easy to ignore and that the power of social norms are reduced. This suggests a decrease in the power of conditions of worth (Rogers, 1951) and a potential increase in detachment.

“...with my online personalities being more like acts or lies I cannot consider anyone who likes me for them, to truly like me.”

The online environment has been found to contribute to the loss of a consistent sense of self. Individuals become less privately self-aware and in a sense, start to lose their identity (Postmes & Spiers, 1998). Although most participant responses did not indicate this, three participants reported not being committed to expressing their true selves online, instead taking on false identities. Most participants reported being vague with strangers while online, taking on a neutral, abstract identity that serves to protect against unwanted attention. Considering this, there may be a degree of detachment from one’s own characteristics, views and beliefs. Self Theory indicates that when an individual tries too hard to live up to a false self concept, that they may become incongruent and miss out on their true self needs (Rogers, 1951).

6.2.1.4. The Nature of Online Communication

“It is fun, easy and a great way to keep in touch.” “In most cases the fact that the person can simply stop being online, or delete Mxit and disappear also makes relationships seem more frivolous or less substantial.” “...I don’t consider it overly serious. It lacks personality and is generally quite hollow. I prefer real conversations to virtual ones.”
Participants provided mixed reports regarding the nature of online communications. Most viewed the Internet as a very useful social tool. Some find it too impersonal and are dissuaded by its limitations. These views are reflected in related studies that found that although the Internet has many drawbacks for communication, there are often ways to compensate for these (Walther, 1996; Suler, 2005). Participants reported that the Internet allows inexpensive, convenient and immediate communication anywhere in the world. Contact can be regular and occurs across multiple mediums, making it versatile.

Limitations such as potential for online communication to be inauthentic, frivolous and impermanent were also pointed out. A commonly experienced drawback of Internet socialisation is its apparent impersonal nature. There is a clear lack of face to face cues such as body language, facial expression, physical presence, touch and eye contact while socialising online (Walther, 1996). Participants reported similar experiences, and expressed that text can be perceived as cold and messages are easily misconstrued.

“People can be extremely hostile online, but it is more amusing than anything and it’s very easy to just ignore someone since they have no impact on me or my life.”

One participant reported demanding immediacy in their communications. Contacts can be pressured to disclose at a fast pace and individuals can feel that conversations are pushed into uncomfortable areas. Communications can also be quite explicit and is often pushed to extremes. Additionally, the online context provides others with an opportunity to speak their minds freely, even if this means prejudice and hostile comments. Vulnerability can be exploited and trust can be broken online with consequences for the betrayed individual.
6.2.2. PERCEPTIONS OF OWN ONLINE IDENTITY

Participants differed widely in terms of their perception of their own identity. Genuineness of online identities became a common theme, with thirteen participants experiencing themselves as genuine online. Three participants admitted to blatant deception and deliberate use of false personas. Another theme that emerged is the gradual development of a fluid real self within the anonymity of the Internet. This development is experienced as being influenced not only by the anonymity, but also by the trust and self-disclosure in the relationships that the individual is in. This fluid true self is seen by some participants as changing depending on the context, with different characteristics becoming apparent at different times. The online environment tends to reduce social anxiety and this in turn may lead to a more open self expression.

6.2.2.1. The Natural Development of the Real Self

“I’m always honest about who I am, what you read is what you get.”

Self Theory suggests that people are freer to express their real selves when they are free from the conditions of worth inherent in social interaction (Rogers, 1951). Participants report a reduced impact of social expectations while anonymous online and a corresponding ease of truthful self expression. The research on Internet socialisation has found that the anonymity may lead to a freer level of self expression and may create an atmosphere in which it feels safe to be oneself (Bargh, Mkenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). Participant responses did reflect this finding to some degree, but identity formation online appears to be more complex.
Many participants reported a process of exploring their online self in the online social context in order to eventually find a true self. According to Self Theory, individuals develop a self-concept through interpersonal experiences that is very fluid and is constantly changing and adjusting to the social milieu (Rogers, 1951). Fourteen participants reported that they found it most easy to express their real selves within the safety of an intimate online relationship, suggesting that not only the anonymity, but also the trust and intimacy in the online relationship play an important role. This means that the real self will develop naturally along with the intimacy, trust and self-disclosure of the relationship the individual is in.

6.2.2.2. Perceived Genuiness of the Online Selves

Studies on online socialisation and online dating have found that individuals tend to view themselves as authentic online with deception used sparingly for safety reasons or to create a good impression (Bargh, Mkenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). Most participants confirmed these findings, with thirteen reporting feeling that there is no significant difference between their online and offline real selves. Some participants acknowledged a difference in the expression of their identities online in that some qualities were easier to convey than in offline interaction. Most participants reported initially withholding information about themselves and gradually sharing as more trust and intimacy develops. This is not generally viewed as dishonest, as a partially revealed true self is still a true self.

The recent study on online friendship has found that deception can be more sinister and that individuals need to be careful while socialising online (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006).
Participants acknowledged the ease of deception and false personas while online and most reported taking precautions to deal with this. These precautions include withholding identifying information, maintaining anonymity and gathering information for a period of time before arranging face to face contact.

6.2.2.3. Multiple Aspects of the Same Online Self

“I do have more than one [identity], but they are all one in the same.” “I am not sure, I think I come across however I feel that day.” “I regard myself as being honest and straightforward. Though different aspects of myself show themselves, I have never attempted to present myself as different to who I am.”

According to Self Theory and Social Identity Theory, individuals have a fluid identity that changes based on the context. This leads to a multiplicity of identities that can each be considered genuine (Rogers, 1951; Rogers, 1959; Tafjel, 1982). Research on online dating suggests that individuals online may present their true selves differently depending on the context and that individuals can be quite strategic about what aspects they choose to express (Whitty, 2007). This may even lead to the development of false online identities (Suler, 2005). Although most participants reported not having multiple online identities, they did acknowledge that different characteristics did find expression at different times. Three participants reported deliberately creating false online identities, but all other participants experienced the various aspects of their identities as genuine.

“The online me is very much me, but differs in that he is the extraverted parts of my personality...” “I think hiding behind a pseudonym had a tendency to allow people to be a
little more bold and brazen. I know it made me a little more outgoing and outspoken than I tended to be in real life.”

The freedom from consequences and the reduced impact of social expectations while socialising online has been found to reduce individuals’ inhibitions and has lead to a freer expression of self (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Most participants experienced their online selves as being very open, honest and trustworthy. Greater feelings of confidence and more daring behaviour is possible online. Participants reported finding it easier to be assertive, direct and straightforward in their communication and one participant termed this powerful persona his ‘Super Self’. One participant reported wanting to come across as formidable online. Participants reported allowing their interesting, ‘silly’ and fun characteristics to express online with one introverted participant reporting finally being able to be more of an extravert.

“I attempt to be reasonable, objective, understanding and honest. I think through what I say, points of view or arguments or feelings, and try to present things in a balanced, mature, generous and accepting way. Probably because I do at times respond emotionally and wish not to do so!” “I withhold information to be more mysterious” “I come across as daring and intelligent. I would like to be viewed as such and am proud of having portrayed myself so to some.”

According to Self Theory, individuals crave unconditional acceptance (Rogers, 1951). Creating a good impression and gaining acceptance is an important consideration when socialising online. Some participants reported feeling more self assured and confident online due to being able to create a better impression of themselves. Participants had differing ideas
about what impression they would like to create but some qualities came up more frequently than others. Importance was placed on coming across as intelligent, educated and eloquent in their writing and language use. Qualities such as being free, fun, creative and humorous are also highly valued by some while others reported wanting to come across as reasonable, mature and balanced. Other qualities that are reportedly valued include politeness, patience, caring, independence, enthusiasm and understanding. It is the opinion of the primary researcher that these may constitute online conditions of worth.

“Depending on the context, I change aspects of my identity. When in games or game-related chat rooms I tend to put on a more masculine persona in order to avoid any attention.” “People I don’t know well I am rude to because I find them annoying sometimes.”

Some participants reported taking on more aggressive or rude qualities in order to ward off unwanted contacts. In such cases information is given that will hopefully alert others to rules and boundaries. Participants reported sometimes taking on a vague, neutral identity in order to appear uninteresting or non-committal. Both these approaches may be viewed as ‘defensive selves’ that may be a necessity for safe online socialisation. These responses indicate that some online personas serve a protective function. One participant reported trying to remain as vague as possible while trying to learn as much as possible about others. This would allow them to decide who to be more open with.

“I do not feel a natural connection with persons online, thus I feint or simulate one. This often requires stepping onto their ground and away from my usual personality traits.” “I am fond of my online persona as he is free from the bonds of social norms and standards. He can say anything.”
A few participants reported experimenting with their identities by use of online personas. This is reportedly done in order to explore the social setting as well as for fun and excitement. These ‘experimental selves’ allow for an exploration and a deeper understanding of self, others and the social situation. Social norms, expectations and boundaries can be discovered, tested and even violated. The role experimentation inherent in adopting personas may even contribute to the process of exploring one’s true self.

6.2.2.4. Social Anxiety in an Online Setting

“Because it's faceless, I find that there is less anxiety in sharing very intimate thoughts and feelings, because it’s easier to be rejected by people who I meet online.” “My body has been a problem in the past. I am constantly anxious that as soon as people know what I look like they will reject me.”

According to a study on online attraction, social anxiety can be reduced by the online context (Levine, 2000). Participants confirmed these findings as many reported that the anonymity of the online environment can reduce and even eliminate the social anxiety that can be quite severe in the offline context. This is a common theme in research on online socialisation. Some participants reported that this anxiety is most reduced online in intimate relationships and with familiar contacts. Different kinds of social anxiety were experienced by different respondents. According to Self Theory, individuals learn to evaluate their own worth by internalising conditions of worth from interactions with other people (Rogers, 1959). Despite the reduced impact of negative evaluations, participants reported a variety of conditions of worth in the online context that contributed to feelings of social anxiety.
“I am proud of my online selves. Even if only pretend people they are powerful and generally better liked than actual me.” “I try to come across as polite, educated, well spoken and honest. I would like others to view me as stated above.”

The Internet can reduce the social anxiety experienced by individuals. Despite this individuals still crave the development of an identity that is acceptable to others (Miller, 1995). Conditions of worth are internalised from others and can become an individual’s measure of self esteem. Social cues from others may lead individuals to develop unrealistic perceptions and expectations of themselves (Rogers, 1959; Rogers, 1951). Participants clearly reported qualities they would desire to be perceived as having. These include intelligence and education, good verbal and social abilities, honesty and dependability as well as assertiveness and daring. Most commonly, participants expressed a desire to be accepted for who they really are and reported wanting to simply be themselves online. A problem that some participants experienced is that the ease and speed at which online disclosure takes place can generate anxiety as this would leave an individual feeling vulnerable and at risk. Online gamers that took part in the present study reported feeling pressure to perform well in the game and to not let other team members down.

“I was also afraid that he would be disappointed by my appearance as he hadn’t seen me in 4 years.” “I try not to be someone I’m not as I usually want to see the person face to face and I don’t want them to then experience me as something or someone I am not.” “The anxiety comes into play when the relationship goes from being online to being real, meeting the contact for the first time.”
Research on online dating has found that individuals are particularly anxious about their first face to face meeting with a contact. Individuals tend to make use of some deception in order to establish a relationship, such as using older photos or misrepresenting weight. This means that individuals are worried that their contact will be disappointed or will feel lied to (Whitty, 2007). Participants of the present study have made similar responses. Efforts are reportedly made to ensure that the contact is prepared for undesirable qualities. An additional related concern has to do with the rapid development of intimidating levels of intimacy online. Participants reported that offline there could be awkwardness and unrealistic expectation for the intimacy to continue developing at a fast pace.

6.2.3. **Self Presentation Online**

Participants reported that the anonymity and asynchronicity of the Internet allows a careful, considered approach to impression management. Participants are free to withhold information, deceive or disclose truthfully. Some participants reported trying to balance these in order to be truthful while still appearing interesting. The use of withholding and deception is reportedly reduced in intimate online relationships and individuals feel more at ease to be themselves.

6.2.3.1. *The Ease of Impression Management*

“...easier to verbally express what I think and feel clearly and honestly when communicating with intimates online due to the fact that there is time to think things over and change or clarify what has been written before sending.” “In text messaging there is enough time to make eloquent statements and thus make them more impressive or poetic.”
Research on online communication has found that the asynchronous nature of online text based communication allows individuals to carefully manage their impressions by taking time to formulate replies. It has been found that individuals on online dating sites generally try to find a balance between being their true selves and trying to appear more attractive and interesting. This may occur to such an extent that deliberate deception is used in order to create façades that are contrary to one’s self perception (Suler, 2005; Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001 Whitty, 2007). Participants in the present study made similar responses, reporting that impression management is much easier online than offline.

Individuals have more control by being selective about what they include in messages and how the messages are phrased. Information can be changed and clarified before being sent to others and individuals can rely on their writing ability to create an intended impression. One participant reported that one is more relaxed in intimate relationships and that fewer efforts are made to carefully manage an impression. According to Self Theory, an individual who is attempting to maintain an unhelpful self concept may make use of defences in order to deal with the incongruence generated by not simply being one’s true self. These defences take the form of denial, distortion and the adoption of façades and lies (Rogers, 1959).

“[Personas] are also a great toy, a way for me to test social situations, be ridiculous. I generally try to push the limits with them.”

A study on the use of photographs in online dating sites has found that individuals are sometimes strategic in terms of how they present themselves online (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001). Three participants of the present study reported being very deliberate with
their impression management online by making use of deception and carefully controlling self-disclosure. This would give rise to distinct personas that may be far removed from an individual’s real self. Other participants described their impression management as happening less consciously and with less active deception. By simply choosing to withhold some information while expressing certain characteristic a distinct persona can emerge that is experienced as an honest representation of self.

6.2.3.2. Perceptions Regarding Deception

The limitations of online socialisation are widely written about. One such limitation is that deception is possible online to a greater extent and with a greater ease than in face to face situations (McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). Participants of the present study had interesting views on deception. Most reported that they made use of very few deliberate, active deceptions. More passive deception in the form of simply withholding or hiding information is used. This passive form of deception is regarded as acceptable to respondents, appears to be a norm while socialising online and is not viewed as dishonest.

“I only tell people what is relevant without sounding like I’m intentionally leaving important facts out. A bit of manipulation is apparent, but not to the person I’m conversing with”

A study on self representation on online dating sites has found that individual’s are aware of the value and importance of honesty while socialising online (Whitty, 2007). People often choose to deceive in order to protect themselves emotionally and physically, and will generally be more honest and open once trust has been developed.
Participants of the present study reported that most deception was used with strangers and served a protective function by maintaining anonymity. Personal or exploitable information such as real names, contact details, occupational and financial information and addresses are either withheld or misrepresented. Some women reported pretending to be men in the online gaming environment in order to attract less attention from intrusive male players.

Some information is regarded as very sensitive and some participants chose to limit displaying this information, particularly in public forums. The kinds of information that individuals appear to withhold for this reason include appearance, weight, age, financial status, race, family information and feelings. One participant reported that weight is overvalued offline and would stop people from getting to know them. For this participant, the online environment provided an opportunity to hide their weight and appearance until some trust and intimacy has been developed.

“In the same manner that a real life relationship may initially be based on withholding of information and putting the best foot forward, an online relationship may initially be based on this kind of dynamic.” “I also try to seem excited and hide the longing sometimes because I don’t want the other person involved to miss me or feel down.”

According to Self Theory, even an honest individual may feel uncomfortable with their negative self perceptions which may lead to them resisting full self-disclosure (Rogers, 1959). Eleven participants reported that while developing intimate relationships online, they started by only disclosing essential information and withholding other information, especially information that would lead to negative evaluation and true vulnerability. One participant
reported that this added to a sense of mystery. As the trust and intimacy develops, disclosure would become less vague and more open. Two participants reported hiding their longing for a romantic partner while they are separated by a great distance in order to make their separation easier and to protect the significant other. Another use for deception reported by one participant is to limit or delay intimacy that can develop at an intimidating speed online.

“I often feel like I am acting online. I make use of extremes and explicit concepts to compensate for the lack of personality in text messaging. I crave significance in my conversations and the methods I use to push messaging towards this sometimes make me feel like I am not being genuine.”

Three participants reported making use of deliberate deception and manipulation in order to achieve a variety of ends with contacts. They reported adopting false personas and experimenting with these identities in online social settings. Sometimes they would simply be experimenting with a role that they were not used to. Other times they would try to see how far they could push other individuals. This is reportedly sometimes done for amusement and other times to boost self-confidence. The ease of switching personas and the impact this has on interaction is reportedly fun and amusing and the Internet is seen as a toy.

6.2.3.3. Self-disclosure and Free Expression Online

“But I only reveal my full personality in real life. My online revelations are a little more restrained, as I’m not entirely conformable sharing some things with people I’ve never really met face to face.” “I never reveal too much intimate information about myself, my family, or
where I live. I establish trust by being honest and polite and clear about what is acceptable and not.”

Research on online dating has found that individuals initially make use of withholding information until trust has been developed (Whitty, 2007). Many participants of the present study reported viewing online self-disclosure as following the same tenets as offline self-disclosure. Self-Disclosure is seen as dependent on the quality of the relationship and the level of trust. These are experienced as progressing naturally over time, starting with broad general chatting. Participants reported initially talking about broad information such as interests, music, pets and movies. This would slowly develop to deeper sharing of personal information such as personal flaws. All participants reported the need to be careful with information at first. One participant reported trusting too easily when first starting to socialize online and learning through a difficult experience to be more careful. Active deception is generally not used, but rather the withholding of certain kinds of information such as identifying or personal information.

“Because I feel that online conversations should be purposeful and more than small talk I often push them into uncomfortable areas. I freely give certain information that would be kept secret in usual conversation and also demand a certain immediacy from my contact.”

“In the first year we started to become very intimate, talking about things we had never spoken about face to face. It felt very comfortable sharing things with him which I had never spoken to anyone about. I didn’t feel embarrassed to tell him things as I didn’t know if I would see him again. It felt safe.”
Research has found that although online self-disclosure increases gradually with the development of trust, the rate at which disclosure becomes deep and intimate can be much faster than in offline communication. Due to anonymity, self-disclosure is not as threatening (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Suler, 2005; Whitty, 2007; Zacsek & Bonn, 2006). Some participants in the present study reported relying on their natural intuition and past experience when developing trust. Trust is developed through mutual self-disclosure of intimate thoughts and feelings as well as through honesty, politeness, assertive boundary setting and consistency.

For some, trust has already been built in offline interaction with the contact if their relationship was not initiated online. Face to face contact is generally seen as important for increasing the level of trust and five participants reported only truly trusting a contact once this point has been reached. A certain level of trust needs to be developed prior to when the face to face contact is arranged, suggesting that a period of safety within the anonymous Internet environment is also important for the trust to develop.

According to most participants, once trust has reached a deeper level, particularly within the sense of safety of intimate relationships, disclosure becomes much deeper. Less information is hidden and disclosure becomes less vague. Although self-disclosure develops gradually, participants reported that this progression can be rapid and many participants reported that disclosure is easier online than offline. It is also reported that deeper sharing bolsters intimacy. One participant did express the viewpoint that some topics are either too sensitive or too complex to discuss online and would be reserved for face to face meetings to avoid misunderstanding or harm.
“Sometimes it’s easier to be more open online. I generally express myself better in written word anyway.” “I generally feel I’m best at communicating when I can actually talk over a voice program.”

Research on online identity formation and online groups has found that individuals find it easier to express themselves online due to the safety of the anonymity and lack of consequences (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002; McLeod, Baron, Marti & Yoon, 1997). The present study produced similar findings. According to participants, emotions can be experienced intensely online and that, despite limitations, the Internet provides adequate opportunity for meaningful self expression. Different individuals prefer different methods of expression while online, from text to voice and video. One participant reported that expressing online can even be therapeutic.

The abovementioned limitations include a lack of face to face cues such as body language, voice tone and the inherently impersonal nature of pure text communication. Emotions can be carefully packaged or withheld online in order to protect oneself or someone else and the Internet provides a buffer that takes the bite out of intense emotions. Participants referred to a variety of tricks and expressive techniques used online. These include the use of smiley’s and other emoticons, using voice applications (see VoIP in chapter 2), typing techniques, honest disclosure and poetic language. One participant referred to the novelty of having a permanent text record of whatever is expressed online.
6.2.4. **Online Relationships**

Sternberg’s (1986) Triangular Model of Love refers to the three main components of love, namely intimacy, passion and commitment. Participant responses regarding their online relationships revealed data that is comparable to these three components. This suggests that meaningful relationships may exist in a similar, yet not identical fashion online as in the offline context. Online relationships were found to comprise of a combination of intimacy, passion and commitment. Intimacy is seen as the characteristic that is central to a deep, meaningful relationship and reportedly has the most impact on self development and representation.

6.2.4.1. **Prevalence and Quality of Online Relationships**

“I have many online relationships of no significance and a few of great quality and importance to me and the way to maintain those relationships are online because of disparity in distance usually.”

Many different kinds of relationships occur online, according to respondents. Some have a very low level of intensity, such as acquaintances. These are contacts that are met briefly and infrequently and in which very little sharing of information occurs. It may be a stranger in a chat room or another player in an online game, and participants don’t see these as important to them. According to the triangular model of love, such relationships fall into the category of non-love (Sternberg, 1986).
If individuals meet each other in this way a few times they may develop a casual friendship online in which case a small amount of information is shared. In this case, liking is developed, which is characterised by a degree of intimacy in the absence of passion or commitment (Sternberg, 1986). Individuals don’t make big efforts to meet each other again. Most participants report having many acquaintances and casual friends that they run into while socialising online and that they are often likeminded people frequenting the same sites or online applications. Due to the impermanence of the online environment, these contacts are constantly disappearing from particular online environments and being replaced by others.

“Chatting about real issues and playing online together for 8 hour long periods at a time. Learning more about them in a week than I’d learn about my real friends in a year due to the close virtual proximity of the friendship and how we interacted.”

Many participants reported playing online multiplayer games, particularly massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG’s). These were described in more detail in chapter 2. Players of these games report developing relationships with other players that can become intimate. Participants form particularly strong bonds with players in the same guilds (teams) as themselves as they are often in frequent and lengthy contact while playing.

According to the Triangular Model of Love, this relationship is marked by deeper levels of intimacy and commitment. This kind of love is labelled a true, committed friendship (Sternberg, 1986). The communication usually revolves around the content of the games, such as discussing tactics or guild politics, but can become more personal. An interesting component of these relationships is that players report having to make a sizeable commitment
to the team in terms of time and skill. Players expect each other to arrive on time for sessions and to perform their in-game roles as well as possible.

Most participants reported developing a small number of deep, intimate relationships of great importance, viewing these as unique occurrences rather than the norm. These contacts often become long term friends who make committed efforts to stay in contact, mostly through regular email and chat. This would be another example of a committed true friendship. Some participants reported trying to avoid too much intimacy online, viewing it as incomplete if it is not practised in person. Most of these relationships are either started offline or if they were initiated online, are eventually pursued offline as well. Face to face contact seems to be a natural “next step” for participants if it is possible, and reportedly strengthens the relationship. One participant reported having intimate friendships only in the online environment and that these relationships are experienced as deeply meaningful and important.

“Since the start of this virtual contact I have visited him for a month in the country where he lives and the possibility of becoming life partners is being discussed. No decisions have been made by me and the outcome is not certain at this time.”

A small number of participants reported either initiating or maintaining romantic relationships online. In all these cases, face to face contact and the establishment of trust were described as a high priority. Depending on the success of these relationships, they can be long term and deeply committed and participants report that although the online environment has shortcomings, it can be a valuable tool for developing and maintaining the relationship. According to the Triangular Model of Love these relationships are marked by a
degree of passion and may or may not consist of commitment and intimacy (Sternberg, 1986). When intimacy is present with passion, as reported by a few participants, the love can be described as romantic love (Sternberg, 1986).

6.2.4.2. Cyber Intimacy

Intimacy refers to an emotional investment in a relationship and is widely associated with an increase in truthful self-disclosure as a means to increase mutual understanding and caring (Aron & Westbay, 1996; Gonyea, 2004; Sternberg, 1986). Participants in the present study reported that intimacy is developed by getting to know the other person and allowing oneself to be known. The intimacy builds over time along with trust and can be rapid and intense. Honesty and eventual face to face contact is perceived as essential to most participants. One participant reported actively inhibiting the level intimacy until after a face to face meeting was made. Participants express that as intimacy increases, social anxiety reduces and more open disclosure and deeper intimacy becomes possible.

“Online conversations are never genuine to me. I speak truly and consider my contacts to be truthful, but I never take online conversations overly seriously. Because of this I don’t consider my intimate online relationships complete. I always endeavour to meet important contacts in person.” “...it becomes frustrating because there is a need to be in the same room and truly connect one on one.”

Studies show that there are a variety of drawbacks to online communication that may inhibit the development of intimacy. These include the impersonal nature of the conversation, the lack of face to face contact and the ease of deception (Gonyea, 2004;
Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). Some participants agreed that the online environment inhibits the development of intimacy. The impersonal nature of the Internet is made worse by the lack of face to face contact. Physical distance is seen to present a barrier in online relationships and contributes to a degree of uncertainty about the future for the relationship. Five participants felt the intimacy is only real once face to face contact has been established. One participant reported that a very intimate online relationship can completely lack intimacy as soon as offline contact is made. The potential for deception and façades are just too threatening for some to fully trust their online intimate contacts.

“...varies from deep conversations to general chatting. I tend to feel closer to those I can speak to online, especially when speaking more freely.”

Intimacy is seen as very reliant on the level of truthful self-disclosure that occurs between individuals as intimate relationships allow people to show who they are (Gonyea, 2004; Sternberg, 1986). Studies have found that the Internet can foster strong intimacy that develops quickly due the anonymity (Bargh, Mkenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; McCown, Fischer, Page & Homant, 2001). Intimacy is seen by some participants as being directly related to the level of truthful disclosure and trust.

Just as the Internet provides an environment in which individuals feel comfortable to quickly disclose very personal information, so too does it create the potential for the rapid development of intimacy. The Internet provides a close virtual proximity to contacts, bringing people together despite great physical distances. Participants reported that getting to know others online is very easy as the anonymity encourages sharing. The sites and online applications may provide a shared context for individuals. This shared context provides
shared history and experiences as well as a shared frame of reference. This is particularly prevalent in the online gaming context where players share a history of activities.

“The closest online relationship I’ve had, I believe, has also been one of the most important relationships in my life so far.”

Undesirable aspects of the self are easier to display in intimate relationships where trust has been established. This may occur in the online context where intimacy is obtained in unique ways (Bargh, Mkenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). A few participants reported that the intimacy and trust built online is very dependent on the individual. If one is ready to disclose honestly and openly then intimacy can develop on a very deep level. One participant reported greater degrees of intimacy online than offline.

For some individuals, the Internet removes the barrier of prejudice. Facts about themselves that may have previously dissuaded others from getting to know them can be withheld online until some trust and caring has already developed. A few participants reported that a relationship need not necessarily culminate in a face to face meeting and that a relationship can be satisfying, deep and emotional even if it is only maintained online.

“The relationships were of a good quality and were generally around the content of the [online game]. One friend relied on me for social support through her divorce.” “...but some were more intimate and involved the sharing of personal problems.”

A key component of intimate relationships, according to some participants, is that individuals provide each other with social support. Emotions, problems and serious issues
are expressed and discussed online, providing valuable emotional release. This seeking and providing of support creates a sense of connection and can be seen as a valuable component of intimate online relationships. According to the Triangular Model of Love, social support is a primary characteristic of an intimate relationship (Sternberg & Grajek, 1984).

6.2.4.3. Cyber Romance

“I have also pursued romantic relationships with people I met online, one of which resulted in a two year relationship.” “Due to the fact that we are not physically together, physicality, attraction or sexuality does not get in the way of exploring who the other person really is.”

Passion refers to the romantic and sexual component of a relationship that serves as a motivational force (Aron & Westbay, 1996; Sternberg, 1986). Anonymity plays a role in that it may reduce anxiety around sexual acts, rejection and vulnerability (Gonyea, 2004). Mixed opinions in the research for and against online passion exists, with some arguing that it is too risky and impersonal, while others argue that the Internet dating facilities can cater to individuals’ dating and safety needs (Gonyea, 2004).

A few participants reported initiating or maintaining romantic relationships online. Some are frustrated by the impossibility of face to face interaction. As the romance and passion, or the expectation thereof in the relationship naturally develops, so too does the need for physical presence, eye contact and touch. One participant reported only disclosing romantic feelings once trust has been established. Passion may become a motivating factor in the relationship and a few participants reported pushing for romantic and sexual exchanges
The lack of passion online, according to two participants, may have a positive effect on the development of intimacy as individuals are not overly distracted by sex.

“I have tried to lure her into cyber sex, however, that did not work.” “So now, 6 months later, we actually have had telephone sex once, semi successfully, and our [communication] is much more explicit.”

Studies show that online dating is gaining popularity and many erotic and romantic exchanges can occur online (Gonyea, 2004). Some participants reported maintaining romantic relationships online. A few participants were in long term, committed online relationships at the time of the study. For some the significant other was met offline and due to physical distance after one moved away, the relationship had to be pursued through telecommunication. Two participants reported meeting again online after decades of separation and deciding to pursue a romantic relationship. A small number of participants have tried online dating. Some romantic exchanges that occur online according to participants include exchanging doting sentiments, flirting, explicit, or erotic chat and cybersex. According to one participant, cybersex can be uncomfortable at first but can be enjoyable.

6.2.4.4. Maintaining Relationships Online

“Gaming is supposed to be done for fun, not become a second stressful job.”

Studies on online socialisation have found that many individuals successfully maintain online relationships and move these relationships into the offline context (McKenna, Green &
Commitment is regarded as a potentially strong component of online relationships (Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). Commitment refers to the decision made by two people in the short term to love each other, and in the long term to commit to, share and maintain a relationship (Sternberg, 1986).

Participants report that the Internet offers persistent companionship with other individuals and enables people to have regular contact and communication. Not only romantic relationships, but also friendships and even family relationships are reportedly maintained online. An interesting occurrence in the online gaming context is that individuals are expected to make a sizeable commitment to their team. Participants report that commitment is an essential component of MMORPG’s and that players need to be punctual and dependable. Time needs to be sacrificed for the team and players are expected to perform their roles in the game world.

6.3. CONCLUSION

Online identity is a complex construct and is reportedly affected by the online context as well as the relationships an individual is in. Participant responses reflected on how the anonymous, somewhat impersonal nature of the online environment can impact on self representation and identity in several ways. Many factors made truthful self-disclose and free exploration of identity more possible, while other factors detracted from the perceived realness of online identity. Although most respondents did not experience themselves as having multiple online identities, there was a clear theme of certain characteristics emerging at different times in different contexts.
Participants reported that trust, self-disclosure and intimacy developed gradually online but at a much faster pace than offline. As these elements grow deeper and more significant, participants report truthful self expression becomes easier due to a reduction in social anxiety. Social anxiety exists in the online context, but is perceived as less impactful than in offline interaction. This suggests a somewhat decreased importance placed on conditions of worth and a resultant smaller reliance on defences such as denial, distortion and deception. Safety becomes a larger concern for participants and information is initially sparingly volunteered.

In this way the true self develops from a guarded, somewhat withheld self to a disinhibited free ‘super self’ online that may in some cases be freer than in the offline context. Free from conditions of worth individuals are able to more fully express their fluid true selves inside intimate online relationships. This process is greatly aided by anonymity and distance that creates a sense of safety that some participants regarded as a false sense of safety.

The online environment is seen as a context that is free from rules, boundaries and consequences. This reportedly leads to some degree of deception, taking on of false personas and interpersonal boundary pushing and a different view of intimacy and identity than what is normally experienced offline. Particularly with strangers, people are more likely to be deceptive or even manipulative in order to meet personal need or to simply explore and have fun. Participant responses did, however, reveal that most individuals do regard themselves as honest while socialising online.
Chapter 7 - Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations

7.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the conclusions of the present study that were drawn from the findings that were discussed in chapter 6. A summary of the main findings of the study is presented in this chapter, followed by an outline of limitations of the present study and recommendations for future research.

7.2. CONCLUSIONS

The primary aim of the present study was to explore the online social identities of individuals involved in online intimate relationships. Themes that emerged from the data analysis illustrated many factors that influenced the development of online social identity. These included the nature of the online interaction and the nature of the relationships. These qualities reportedly affected the way in which participants represented themselves online. Deception and self-disclosure reportedly plays an important role in self-representation online and are affected by various factors such as anonymity and trust.

The qualities of the online environment that reportedly played a role included the anonymity of virtual interaction as well as the risks and detachment associated with this anonymity. Several other aspects of the online communication that is different from offline interaction play a role. Mixed reports from participants indicated that anonymity enhances the development of truthful self representation in some ways and inhibits it in other ways.
This means that many individuals may find it easier to be and explore their true selves while online. But at the same time, individuals can easily be deceived while online.

Participants reported making sparing use of deception online and being careful with how much information they displayed at first. Initial information is withheld and only essential information is disclosed. Truthful self-disclosure and open expression only develops with time in a trusting relationship. This corresponds to both Roger’s (1951) Self Theory and Sternberg’s (1986) Triangular Model of Love which both highlight the importance of intimacy, understanding and acceptance in a relationship. Some participants reported making use of deliberate deception and manipulation for exploration and fun.

Participants reported revealing more of their genuine, truthful selves within in the safety and trust of an online intimate relationship. This truthful self expression is reportedly sometimes aided by anonymity as this lessens the anxiety associated with the fear of being negatively evaluated or rejected. The intimacy itself is also affected by the context and can develop more rapidly than in offline interaction. This creates the potential for the rapid development of truthful self expression within an intimate online relationship.

Participants expressed experiencing all three components of the triangular model of love in the online environment. Participants often reported experienced intimacy as being dependent on the level of mutual self-disclosure and support shared online. While some reported that the Internet is not good enough to develop true and deep intimacy, many participants reported feeling high levels of intimacy while online. A few participants reported that the intimacy developed at a rapid rate and was not hampered by passion or prejudice. Passion is experienced very differently online when compared to offline and many
consider the offline context to be too impersonal and lacking in many face to face elements such as eye contact and touch. Commitment plays a significant role in many online relationships and is enhanced by the potential to have constant and instantaneous connection with contacts at any distance.

The online self is experienced as fluid and as changing between contexts. Different aspects of the self are expressed at different times and to different degrees, and each self representation is generally seen as genuine. Many participants reported having a ‘super-self’ online that helps them get past their introverted qualities. The anonymity allows participants to be more daring, assertive and helps them to feel more interesting and impressive. Most participants reported a vague ‘defensive self’ that serves a protective function. Much information is withheld until the individual feels safe enough with a contact to disclose more. A few participants reported a powerful, playful self, free from social rules and expectations. While interacting as this ‘experimental self’, participants reported deliberate deception and manipulation for fun and in order to test one’s influence over others.

The impact of conditions of worth is reportedly lessened online due to the perceived safety of the online anonymity. Participants reported feeling more free and able to be different while online. Social anxiety does come into play prior to face to face meetings in that participants reported being afraid of disappointing contacts when they meet. Some participants reported that being themselves is facilitated by the online environment while others reported that the ease of deception allowed them to take on multiple strategically played false personas. Despite the apparent reduced weight of social expectations, participants reported several qualities that are valued online. These online conditions of worth include language and writing ability, intelligence, trustworthiness, friendliness,
assertiveness, humour and being interesting. Some participants are sensitive about their
appearance and weight and choose to hide these while online until trust has developed. This
may indicate that conditions of worth are still present online, but that individuals are more
able to misrepresent themselves or withhold information in order to come across as not
having undesirable traits.

7.3. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study aimed to broadly explore social identity within the online context. The
breadth of the study may have limited the depth of information obtained. If the study was
more focused on a particular target population, such as online daters, online game players or
Facebook users, more specific information could have been obtained. Additionally, the study
included individuals who were already involved in an intimate relationship. If the study was
limited to either friendships or romantic relationships, more specific data would have been
possible. Identity is also a very complex concept that can theoretically be understood as
consisting of many components. An individual component such as conditions of worth or use
of personas could also have been explored in isolation in order to provide more of a focus for
the study.

Due to the present study having been conducted online, participants had complete
anonymity. Although reasonable steps were taken to improve validity and maintain control
over the sample, deception may have occurred. This would impact on the validity of the
findings. It is however possible that offline studies may contain similar levels of deception
from participants. Additionally, the questionnaire was completed online, meaning that the
researcher was unable to clarify questions or inquire about responses. Short unclear
responses remained unclear and potential areas for discussion could not be pursued. A potential solution would have been to gather data by using focus groups on an online forum.

A further potential limitation of the study is that by making use of a qualitative study method, it is not possible to infer clear causal relationships (Silverman, 2005). This means social identity formation and representation in online and offline contexts cannot be meaningfully compared in an unambiguous way. What participants reported as being valid for an online relationship, may very well also be valid for an offline relationship. The generalisability of findings is another limitation, inherent in qualitative research. Additionally, qualitative researchers advocate the socially constructed nature of reality. This has lead to the criticism that qualitative research is not value-free (Silverman, 2005).

7.4. **Recommendations**

It is recommended that the findings of this study be used to generate further related studies. This study can be replicated in different contexts and with different age groups for more generalisable findings. As mentioned in the previous section, the study can be more focused in its research aims and its target population. By including a quantitative element that compares online and offline social identity, more unambiguous conclusions can be reached.

Several identity types emerged from the thematic analysis that may be common among Internet users. These include the super-self, who is more daring and confident than one’s regular offline self. Another identity type emerging is a defensive online self that protects itself from danger and unwanted attention. A third self was an experimental self that exerts
its power to deceive and manipulate in order to have fun, test boundaries and explore. Further research into each of these personas or identities may yield valuable information.

7.5. **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the present study has provided the summarised experience of sixteen participants who socialise online. This qualitative, exploratory study made use of snowball sampling. Data was gathered through an online questionnaire and analysed thematically. The aim of the study was to explore participants’ experience of their online identity within the context of online intimate relationships. Concepts such as anonymity, deception and self-disclosure were of particular importance. Roger’s Self Theory (1951) and Sternberg’s Triangular Model of Love (1986) was used to conceptualise the study.

It was found that the individual experience is widely varied and that the Internet can be a unique subjective experience for every user. Online relationships can range from deeply intimate and meaningful to totally faceless and arbitrary. Anonymity reportedly played a major and varying role in the development and experience of online identity. It can provide safety from conditions of worth (Rogers, 1951) for a true reflection of self. Simultaneously it can provide the freedom from discovery and consequence necessary to fabricate and present a false self while online.

Several online identity types were described by participants and include the ‘defensive self’, the ‘experimental self’ and the ‘super self’. These appeared to change depending on the context while socialising online and many participants experienced their many online selves as being truthful expressions of parts of themselves. A factor that appeared to play a major
role in the development and expression of online identity is the level of intimacy experienced by the participants. Most participants reported a greater ease of truthful self expression and reduced need for deception, vagueness and misrepresentation while talking to an intimate contact.

The findings of the present study open up a wide avenue for future research. The Internet is becoming a more widely used social tool for the youth. The online context can have a wide range of effects on identity and relationship development. These can range from an online interaction that is deeply rewarding and uniquely liberating to a dangerous experience fraught with deception and potentially harmful situations. Identity can for some be more fully realized while online, while others may dissociate from their own characteristics entirely and elect to make use of false personas. It is the hope of the primary researcher that the present study provided online socialisers with a small opportunity to have their voices heard in the scientific community. In a relatively new field where knowledge is still developing it may be valuable to have such insights to balance the divergent and often extreme views of both the public and social scientists.
References


Appendix A: Information Letter to Participants
ONLINE RESEARCH PROJECT ON ONLINE SOCIALISATION

My name is Phillip van Staden. I am a Masters student in Clinical Psychology at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) in Port Elizabeth. In order to fulfill my course requirements, I am conducting a study on online socialization. Would you be interested in taking part in this study? The information below will give you more detail:

Name of Study: Exploring Self Concept and Social Identity in the Context of Intimate Online Relationships.

Aims: To gain a better understanding of how people view and present their identities while in online interaction with other people. Specifically, the research focuses on intimate relationships. Intimate relationships refer to any relationships that are considered close, or important to the people in them. It can be a good friendship or even a romantic relationship. There exists a certain degree of stigma and negative stereotyping around the concept of online socialization. It is a poorly understood phenomenon and I believe it would be valuable to relay the experiences of those who actually take part in online interaction to the scientific community.

What will happen to the findings: The findings of the research will be published in a treatise. It will also be presented in an article that will be submitted to accredited scientific journals. Finally, I am prepared to present the findings at a conference should this opportunity arise.

Confidentiality/Anonymity: The identities of all participants will be confidential. Your name will not appear in any published material. Your contact information will not be given to anyone other than the primary researcher (myself) and I will only contact you to notify you about the research project (i.e. time of data collection procedure, availability of findings, etc.).

What do participants need to do:

- Simply go the following url by pasting it into your internet browser address bar: http://www.formdesk.com/vstaden/mainstudy
• You will be asked to fill in an online questionnaire that covers the content related to the aims of the research

• After all data has been collected it will be analyzed by the researcher and you will not be required to do anything else

• Once the findings have been assembled you will be emailed a brief summary of the findings

• If you have any issues or questions you are welcome to email the researcher at: naka.4242@gmail.com before or after taking part in the study

**Participation requirements:**

To participate in the study you should:

• Be 18 years old or older

• Have finished high school

• Have access to the internet

• Frequently engage in online social interaction i.e. Mixit, Chat, Facebook, MMORPG’s, Online Dating, etc.

• Have or had at least one intimate/important/close relationship that is or was maintained exclusively online. This relationship can range from friends to romantic to life partner. The only requirement is that you experience it as a relatively close (intimate) relationship.

• Be literate in English as all data collection and correspondence will take place in English.

Thank you for taking the time to read this message. If you know someone who might be interested in this study, please send this letter to them.
Appendix B: Pilot Study Questionnaire
Pilot Study Questions

i. Briefly comment on your online relationship/friendship history by referring to the quality, functions or course of the relationships. Please add any details that you may feel will help us understand the nature of the relationship.

ii. Describe your personal experience of online socialising. Please include as much detail as possible.

iii. Describe your experience of your own identity online? (Describe how the online environment affects your identity and how you portray yourself. Is the online version of you the real you? Is it more or less real than your offline identity?)

iv. Describe how you feel about your online identity. Do you like who you are online, and why? In what ways would you like to be different while online? What things about you while online would you like to keep the same?

v. Please describe your experience of intimacy with your online friends or significant relationships? (How does the online environment enhance or negatively affect your emotional connection with others?)

vi. Describe your experience of your own self-disclosure online? What kinds of things do you or don't you share openly, and how does the online environment affect this?

vii. In what ways do you use deception online? What kinds of things do you lie about or hide online and how does the online environment affect this? What kinds of things are easy or difficult to lie about or hide while online?
Appendix C: Main Study Questionnaire
Main Study Questions

The questions from the pilot study were adapted in order to generate the main study questions. These were:

i. Briefly comment on your online relationship history by referring to the quality, functions or course of the relationships. Please add any details that you feel may help us understand the nature of the relationships.

ii. Describe your experience of your online identity/identities and how this relates to your real/genuine self.

iii. If you have more than one online identity, how do they differ from each other and how do you manage them?

iv. Describe your experience of your online identity/identities when you are communicating in an online close/intimate relationship. Does your online identity change when you are communicating with someone you feel close/connected/bonded to and how?

v. How do you express your identity/identities online, and how does this make you feel? Does the online environment allow you to make your personality, thoughts, feelings and attitudes known to other people and is this good enough?

vi. How do you try to come across online? How would you like others to view you? And how do you succeed in creating this impression?

vii. Describe your experience of intimacy in your close/intimate online relationships.

viii. Describe your experience of social anxiety while online. Discuss how this applies to intimate online relationships.

ix. In what ways do you keep yourself safe (emotionally and physically) and how do you establish and maintain trust in intimate online relationships?

x. Describe your experience of your own self-disclosure online.
xi. In what ways do you use deception online?
Appendix D: Online Biographic Information Questionnaire
Online Biographical Questionnaire Questions

i. Gender

ii. Age

iii. Race

iv. Highest Level of Education

v. Nationality

vi. Average number of hours spent online a week.

vii. Email Address (Optional)

viii. Which of these relationships have you initiated or maintained online? Friendship, Romantic Relationship, Family Relationship, Other (Please specify).

ix. What online applications and services do you use to maintain relationships online relationships?

x. What is the duration of the longest online relationship you have been in? Please specify in years and months.

xi. On average, how many hours per week do you spend in online contact with people you are in an online relationship or friendship with?