

When it comes to making friends these days, it's not who you know but how many you know



# 16,000 'friends' and counting

## ► Michelle Tay

**S**OME of you may recall collecting stamps, trading cards or even Pokemon toys when you were younger.

Now, meet Singaporean sisters Nicole and Celeste Chen, aged 21 and 17 respectively, who share between them a different sort of collection: 16,000 friends.

Yes, 16,000. And counting.

The sisters represent the latest trend that has clicked with millions of youngsters globally: collecting online friends.

Computer users aged from 16 to 35 are racking up huge tallies of so-called "friends" via free online social networking sites like Friendster and MySpace. Over 100 such online friend-adding sites have sprung up in the past five years.

Never mind that, in the process of compiling these daisy chains of cyber "friends", the digital pals rarely – sometimes never – actually meet face-to-face.

It's just the "body count" that matters.

"It's a kind of cheap thrill, a popularity contest to see who can have the most number of 'hot' or pretty friends," says Celeste, who alone holds six Friendster.com accounts to accommodate her cache of 5,760 online friends.

Celeste – who admits that she really only knows about 400 of them – claims that she and her sister may have had as many as 30,000 "friends" at one point, if they include another account that got closed down recently.

She goes on to boast: "I get 10,000 profile views a month", attributing her popularity to glam photos of herself in micro-mini shorts and videos of herself hip-hop dancing that she posts on her personal profile page (see story below).

By profile views she means the number of online users in the same network who have checked out her online profile, on which she has listed personal information like her hobbies and interests, as well as posted photos of herself.

Another Singaporean teen adding amigos in a way those of his parents' generation could never have imagined is Temasek Polytechnic student Vicnan Tannirselvam, 19.

He has nearly 500 friends on Friendster.com, but admits to knowing only "maybe 20" in real life. He also has accounts on Thefacebook and various other special interest networks, where he has friends numbering anywhere from 10 to 100.

It's a far cry from pre-Net times – remember those? – when people made friends at school, work or social gatherings.

These days, you just scan the online social network sites you have joined and, if you like someone's personal profile, add them, with a mouse-click, onto your friendship list.

The main objective is not to find an attractive member of the opposite sex to go out with, although there certainly are a number of online dating websites for this purpose.

Experts say the friend-trend frenzy arises from today's culture of instant gratification.

Users feel that having a lot of "friends" is an indicator of their social skills and attractiveness, says National University of Singapore sociologist Gui Kai Chong.

He points out: "It's easy to expand social networks online because there are few costs involved. You also have the benefit of exercising choice and discretion, like 'I only add people who look decent, or people with similar interests'."

Older folk might tut-tut at the unreal nature of a friendship made on a computer screen.

But associate professor Ang Peng Hwa, chair of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, says: "People derive value from belonging to a network, be it to share music or whatnot.

And online identity allows the younger set to portray themselves as something different from real life."

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– Friendster marketing director Jeff Roberto on profiles with flashy content

Indeed, Friendster marketing director Jeff Roberto told LifeStyle on a recent visit to Singapore: "On such users' pages, you will find profiles with content that's a little flashy. Typically, those people are out there because they want to expose themselves, in a 'I'm hot, look at me' way."

But exposing yourself online has its hazards, such as attracting cyber pests who can send lewd messages, track you down through your service provider address or even steal your identity.

However, friendship "lists" are not for some who, while tech-savvy, view genuine friendship as an activity involving sharing someone's lives over time, and in 3-D.

Private investor Chan Kwai Sum, 32, has 258 friends on Friendster and 22 friends on Thefacebook. But he says of the sites: "They are a good way of keeping in touch, apart from SMS and e-mail. They remain just tools to facilitate my networking and are definitely not a way to meet new people."

He notes: "It's a paradigm shift among the younger set these days that friendship can be further cultivated virtually."

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How many 'friends' do you have, and can online relationships be considered real friendships? Send your views to stlife@sph.com.sg