

*How Online Relationships Have Shaped Me and What They Mean to me and Others.*

*An Autoethnography on the Significance of Online Friends.*

*By*

*Andile Thenjiwe Ngulube*

*1600218*

*University of Wales Trinity Saint David's*

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“Turn your face towards the sun  
Let the shadows fall behind you  
Don't look back, just carry on  
And the shadows will never find you” (Fenty. R., Baker, G.,  
Carvalho, T.:2015)

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to showcase the significance of online relationships and the positive and negative impacts it can have on an individual. I found writing this paper difficult as though I felt extremely insecure and in doubt whether someone would care about my story or what I had to say. Another challenge that came with this paper was that it is an autoethnography, a study about myself and that is relatively daunting as for I have to separate the researcher from the self, I would like to think I did myself some kind of justice. The methodology for this paper was also challenging as for it was an autoethnography, there was not actually much specifically on what I was writing about even though there were pieces of literature that came close and I am grateful for the literature I was able to find. I found that online relationships can have a significant impact on an individual and that is not always a positive thing. There are people who engaged in online relationships that have been traumatic and from their experiences, I am aware that they could encourage individuals not to partake in online relationships whether they be sexual or just friendships but for me, I am a person on the other side, I have had traumatic online relationships but they have always been outweighed by the good ones which I often feel as though society wants us to be scared of making friends online. An online person can be just as dangerous as a person on the street.

## Introduction

This paper is an autoethnography on the friendships that I have formed on the internet over the years and that they meant to me. I felt as though, it would be better to write about online relationships through one's own perspective where one can share their own thoughts and feelings in situation that I often feel as though many people have been looked down upon for. There has been extensive research done by other anthropologists on the significance of online relationships through ethnographic means but not many of them are personalised. A few research papers are written in the 2000s such as *The Anthropology of Online Communities*. Where the author talks about the normalisation of computers and the internet and what this could mean for anthropology as a whole "For anthropology and its developing engagement with new media studies, however, the nature of local transformations of and within these new global media should still remain a question for ethnographic research and analysis, and the recursive relationship between virtual and offline interactions cannot be ignored." (Wilson., Peterson., 2002:454). The recursive relationship between virtual and off-line interactions cannot be ignored and this is a statement I fundamentally agree with. Anthropology has seen individuals like the great Malinowski going to spaces such as the Trobriand Islands and written ethnographies about how the people live and interact with one another and that's all well in good, but as time has gone by, there has been this question raised by a few others including myself about whether anthropology is something that can be practised through the digital space. There has been a number of people including the likes of Bonnie Nardi, and Tom Boellestroff who have written anthropology-based pieces which are autoethnographies about their lives and experiences in the virtual reality. Digital Anthropology is on the rise and it is something I wish to contribute to. I am passionate about anthropology but I feel as though the digital space is something that is not often tapped into or is often looked down upon because it is not taken as seriously and respected.

I truly hope that for someone reading this, who has cast doubt on the importance of the internet when it comes to making friends. The one thing I hear the most is "why can't you go out and make friends?" for me I can, I have no issue making friends away from my computer and I used to ask a lot of the people I interacted with on the internet why they could not go outside and make friends, and it dawned on me. Not everyone is as confident, not everyone is as mobile, not everyone lives in an area where there's a large population of people. I also hope that I share a light into the person I am, and the people I have met as well as truly showcasing what happens when you do become close to someone and things go wrong. I have laid myself bare for the reader and for the purpose to an this autoethnography as real as it can be. It is a little daunting to talk about some raw experiences with some individual, as well as the state of my mental health. I think the most important thing I want people to get out of this is, is that no matter how dark everything seems, no matter how weak, how defeated and how lonely you can feel, there are thousands of people on the internet and a lot of them have good hearts and are willing to support you when you feel as though you have no one. I wish I could say this is how I felt but it is how I feel. I feel alone, I feel defeated and I feel as though I cannot be free, but I have friends on discord, on multiple video games and social medias who remind me that I am not alone and that there are people who care about me.

I felt as though I need to write about this because it has been such a monumental part of life. I scrambled for ideas and I had plenty, but I felt as though, if I want to heal,

should write about something that is so personal to myself. I have spent hours and hours of my life talking to people for the fun of it. I never thought I would turn this into an autoethnography. I have made friends, I have loved, and I have been loved in a platonic and none platonic way for the later part.

Researching for an autoethnography is difficult yet simple. Difficult on the aspect that not many people have experienced what I have experienced but also sometimes finding an anthropological autoethnography regarding the online relationships rather difficult. I think it is important to understand that not all relationships are the same and other people have not dealt with what I have dealt with nor have I also dealt with what others have. Researching more into digital anthropology, the most common name that pops up is Daniel Miller. There had been other works that I came across including *The Virtual Community* by Howard Rheingold. This book talks about the communities within the internet and Rheingold states “People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind.” (2002:4). This was a statement that resonated within me. I did everything I can in the real world in my virtual one just that my body is not being used and in truth I am in my room, sitting on my chair, typing all alone but I will be talking to some people as if they are hear with me and as if I have known them all my life. He then goes to say, “There is no such thing as a single, monolithic, online subculture; it's more like an ecosystem of subcultures, some frivolous, others serious.” (2002:4). The ecosystem of subcultures is reminded of me the popular site, *Reddit*. This site is a prime example of an ecosystem of subcultures in one platform. From the weird, fun and terrifying subreddits such as *r/NoSleep*, *r/babyanimals* and *r/sugarbabylifestyle*. People from all walks of life can come together and discuss their favourite topics with no judgment. Through this ecosystem, many friendships are formed. They don't have to be long lasting but long enough to leave an impression on the individual. Dr. Michael Lee Wesch, for Kansas State University has written various amount of papers including the *Human No More* which he cowrote with Neil Whitehead and was published in 2009. He stated, “It is obvious enough that the Internet presents many opportunities for diverse cultural expression, but as of yet little comparative work has been done on such themes.” (Wesch., Whitehead.,2009:12). This statement might have been correct back in 2009 but over the years, with the growth of activism not only being on the streets but taking the internet by storm, we have seen cultural movements such as *#BlackLivesMatter* and *#Metoo*. These movements have become part of our society as they create the conversation around race and sexual assault.

These topics being discussed online open a multitude of perspectives for individuals whom are not surrounded by people they can comfortably engage in these conversations with but online, debates can be sparked. One can be as open as they would like to be on the internet but are unable to do in the real world due to the repercussions being fair grater thus even online, they protect their identity and prefer to be anonymous. The book by both Monica T. Whitty and Adam Joinson “The Internet and privacy is paradoxical. Just as anonymity online enables both honesty and deceit, so new technology both threatens and provides opportunities for privacy.” (2008:130). I have been honest, and I have also been deceitful online. The decide does not need to be anything major like I am rich film star, but I am deceptive about my name which in truth is unique and my safety could be compromised. I personally believe that the internet gives us the opportunity to be the better versions of ourselves but as time goes by, people see us for who we are.

## Methodology

In a fast-developing world, relationships are developing with it too. Many people are no longer concerned about going out and meeting people in order to have human interactions. With the rise of social media, and anything connected to the internet, we open a multiverse. Individuals can have different lives in different virtual communities. From meeting the love of your life on twitter to meeting people who can shape your life in a video game, how significant are online relationships? Are the relationships as valuable as real-life ones? Can humans connect through the web without physically being in touch?

### Purpose of Study

This research paper will be a personalised account of my relationships I have made on the internet and how they have impacted me as a person. I will be critiquing and reflecting on these relationships as well as examining myself as anthropologist through an autoethnography. Qualitative research is what drives with paper. When studying a social context, researchers have often preferred using the qualitative research method in comparison to the quantitative research method. For qualitative research, data is often collected through participant observation including in/formal interviews whilst on the other hand, quantitative led research methodology involves data that has been collected through measuring of items. According to John W. Creswell “Qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, documents, and audio-visual information rather than rely on a single data source.” (2013). Similarly, for me, my qualitative research will be with the use of old text messages from discord and screenshots from my Battle.net. At the time I was unaware I would be writing an autoethnography but screenshotted for future reference. This is data collection that isn’t through interviews but mainly informal text.

### In-depth

Due to this being an autoethnography based on my online relationships which some formed in video games, from looking at my hours in *Overwatch* and my mobile game *Royal Chaos*, I have collectively spent at 1,500 hrs of my life within the space of 3 years interacting with strangers online. Some have been friends and others have been strangers in passing. The level of hours reflect the time and effort I have invested in gaming and socialising with strangers online. I feel as though, an autoethnography is a good way to highlight the significance of online relationships and these relationships have not only shaped me as a person but also shaped this document. I want to show the good side of online relationships and how they can be a positive tool for someone like myself. I also want to highlight virtual reality meeting real life and how we can be intrinsically connected even if we come from different walks of life. I find it difficult to find a medium between autoethnography and renarrative even one could argue that they are one in the same. In order for me examine and critique, I need to analyse my own internal thoughts, feelings, and beliefs especially when a lot of the document is often from my perspective as seen in the later part of this paper. The use of none conventional methods such as screenshots, shows the social setting at the time but it also means that it is not reconstructed but captures a real moment.

## History of Autoethnography

As an anthropology major, I had the constant fear of not living up to the standards of an anthropology student. My ideas were very much niche. I knew from a lot earlier on in my studies, I wanted to write something that was me and something that I was passionate about. Videogames were that and I had often talked about my friend who features on this paper on a regular basis to the point where those around me knew of him in passing. As ideas developed, I was encouraged to write an autoethnography as a therapeutic endeavour but also as a way of me sharing my experiences and the experiences of the people I have met. A good autoethnography will not only be descriptive but the author has to captivate the reader. The author also needs to be able to interpret and analyse using various anthropological approaches. This paper is not a paper built on the multitudes of different research participants but two people whom I felt as though were vital to my story but also due to the profound impact they have instilled within myself.

## Telling the story

I used vignettes as a way to tell my story, this enabled me to use my creative writing and make it as authentic as I could. The main vignette is an event from memory that I have relived with my friend and our friends. The vignette captures an event which will forever make a lasting impression. Some aspects of the vignette are written in a quirky style. I hope that as the author, the reader can capture the mood when the event happened.

## Research Design, Methods and Data Collection

Often when writing an autoethnography or just an ethnography, the author designs their research, based on the information they want to share but also design their research for example if participants are going to be found online or outside. The methods vary especially with the vignette that is showcased, the events happened whilst in a video game and some outside. The key method used was mainly verbal. Data collection: this autoethnography uses data from different sources, one being battle.net, another is discord, and the other is memory. (something about Feldman

## Literature review

For one's own autoethnography, I read a range of books and autoethnographies relating to online relationships and video games. The autoethnography is titled "*My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*" by Bonnie Nardi. Nardi describes herself as a "*High-tech anthropologist, mother, grandmother, moon gazer, game player*" on her twitter bio. As I was reading her work, I felt moved and strongly related to her words and what she had gone through as well as witnessed. She talks about the friendships she has formed and the friendships she has also lost in this virtual world. I felt so moved that I had to send her a tweet letting her know that her words had moved me. She talks about playing *World of Warcraft* and meeting people in the game and whilst I do not play WoW, I play *Overwatch* and her experiences went hand in hand with mine. She talks about playing the game on her own without friends or family and overtime she begins to meet people who take her under their wing and after that they begin to play regularly and through this, they form a friendship. This is what happened to me, I met people who were willing to help me

learn the game and us playing together became a daily thing for almost a year. The section that intrigues me this autoethnography is the honesty, love as well as the defence to the people she meets but she also attaches a certain realism where she reminds us, the readers that there are real people behind the screen. "One of my online friends was a carpenter who worked in a factory making windows. Another was an intensive care nurse. An older guildmate had multiple disabling chronic illnesses." (2010:21). This reminded and took me back to my naïve days when I first started playing games. I used to believe that all the individuals I came across were the same age as me as well as all being Caucasian but as time went by, I met a friend who was an alcoholic, I meet a friend who was only 21 years old and had been the provider of his family since he was 16 years old, battling anxiety and depression. I met a boy who was only 13 years old but was home schooled thus he didn't leave his house that often and did not have anyone to interact with unless it was a Sunday and he was forced to go to church by his family.

I met a 38-year-old man who was a stay at home father and had more than 6,000 hours logged into his *Steam* account, and I met a 32 year old woman who was single mother and had suffered trauma. Each and every individual I have met online has somewhat shaped me or changed my way of thinking. I realised that we all come from very different walks of life and here I was, someone sat in a university dorm, learning from different people what life was life if you did not grow up sheltered with your father abandoning you, your mother being emotionally and physically abusive towards you. I have grown in my chair to say the least. She also goes in further by talking about the conflicts that come from online relationships, from petty jealousy to online abuse as well as talking about the natural separation of friends overtime especially when the game is beginning to get stale due to the lack of updates and expansion packs. Nardi's methodology is somewhat easy as she states "Most anthropological fieldwork requires a budget for foreign travel and the necessity to leave home. It often requires living under difficult circumstances" as well as "My entry point to the field site was a computer on my dining room table where I sat in a comfortable chair and played for many hours. And yet this fieldwork was nearly as immersive as the fieldwork I conducted for my postdoctoral research in Western Samoa or Papua New Guinea, where I accompanied my husband for his doctoral research." (2010:29). Even though she found this easy, for me it was not. For me it was difficult as for my work relied to text messages, things from memories and screenshots. As I write this I do not even feel as though I am anthropologist because I am not out somewhere like some of my peers whom travelled all the way to Sri Lanka. I feel relatively inadequate but that's something for me, myself and I to work out...with the help of a therapist. All jokes aside, Nardi, gives World of Warcraft credit. "I believe World of Warcraft is an exemplar of a new means of forming and sustaining human relationships and collaborations through digital technology." (2010:5). To which I can agree upon, videogames and chatroom extend our human relationships, and often now, people can engage in relationships without needing to be with each other physically. Overall this book spoke to me, I laughed, reminisced and just appreciated hearing somethings that I have gone through- through someone else's words and perspective.

Continuing my research, I read another piece of work titled '*Online and offline relationships*' written by 9 different individuals including anthropologist and archaeologist, Daniel Miller, born in 1954 and is the founder of the Digital Anthropology program as well as directing the Anthropology of Smartphones, and Smart Ageing project. The paper that Miller assisted to, talks about the authenticity of humanity and even reference Socrates distaste of the use of written literacy claiming that literacy was a danger to oral communication. The paper also talks about the mediation of communication by stating "When we meet, face to face communication is thoroughly mediated by conventions and etiquette regarding appropriate behaviour between those in conversation. Rules of kinship can limit what

someone is allowed to say just as effectively as technological limits. For anthropologists, therefore, communicating online can be regarded as a shift in cultural mediation, but it does not make a relationship more mediated.” (Miller, Et Al.,2016:102) I found this quote to reflect my relationships online as I often felt as though that I need to make friends with people in the outside world so I would not be judged but in hindsight, I was not the only who was looking and making friends online. Online friends are somewhat embedded in our society as we progress with technology. One does not need to necessarily play an online game to make friends. Even before I knew what Game of War, Overwatch or Royal Chaos, I was making friends on Twitter, I even met my boyfriend on the platform. But with that said, we still find it hard to this day to tell people how we met due to the impending judgement that would be thrust upon us.

This paper then goes on to talk about another fascinating aspect of loneliness amongst the elderly in rural communities of China and mainly a hospice in which the elderly feel as though they are a burden to their families “they do not want to become a burden on their relatives and friends. As a result, there is a surprising degree of isolation and loneliness. As an applied project, this led to recommendations to the hospice for encouraging the use of social media and easy-to-use devices such as the iPad...” (Miller, Et Al., 2016:106). Often I there’s focus on the loneliness of young people due to the lack of socialising but not enough on the elderly. The paper then further states “Here many see entirely online friendships as ‘chun’ (‘purer’) relationships, since they do not incur the pragmatic demands that often feature heavily in offline relationships and are less infused by social hierarchy” (Miller, Et Al., 2016:108) as someone who has studied Chinese culture, I found this statement very relevant, outside the internet, there’s a hierarchy from how you address your superiors such as your bosses, or your elders, the use of formal speech is ingrained countries such as China, South Korea and Japan. When you take that face to face communication away, individuals in countries where a hierarchical culture is part of their normal day to day lives, people are more likely to open up and be themselves without the pressures of following through the society’s expectations. Overall, the paper was well versed and a pleasant read, the authors used language which was relatively easy to understand and discussed not only how technology can help the younger generation, but how it can help the elderly. The paper considers people of all ages and does not focus on one.

The third piece of literature I read was titled *Relationships: Creating Authenticity on Social Media* by Nell Haynes. Haynes works at Georgetown University where she is an Assistant Teaching Professor in Anthropology. Some of her works include books such as *Social Media in Northern Chile* and she has also cowritten a book with Daniel Miller Et Al, *How the World Changed Social Media*. In her *Creating Authenticity on Social Media* paper, she talks about finding it difficult to initially fit in the local Alto Hospicio community due to her “*Polish, German and English ancestry*” (Haynes. 2016:88). She further goes on and talks about her encounters with people including a local priest whom she talks about to about her project regarding people and their use of social media. The priest states “Well, I suppose it is good that people are being social, even if it is online anyway. People don’t talk to their neighbours here. There’s no trust.” (Haynes.2016:90). From my experiences, I somewhat agreed with what the priest had to say. All the times that I have spent on the internet conversing with strangers on the internet, I often felt as though I could be truly honest about myself and share my feelings without having to worry about my other friends and family finding out. It is like the essence of not being known is a safety blanket thus you can be free to say and do whatever you like. This can also be a good and bad thing as we have seen with communities incite anti-Semitic, racist, sexism and fascist views. People are more likely to open up when they know they are protected by an internet façade. The paper is very

informative deals with a range social media experiences from children declaring their love for their mothers on social media for the world to acknowledge to women in the community sharing their pregnancies.

I read book edited by Amy Shields Dobson, Brady Robards and Nicholas Carah. The book is titled *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*(2018). This book talks mainly about sexual intimacy online with Tumblr sex workers part of the study. The book also talks about the beginning of friendships through sharing Not Safe For Work (NSFW) images with others as well as those relationships ending due to people falling out, or pages being purged as we have witnessed over the last year on Tumblr where the website closed thousands of NSFW accounts and deleting millions of images which were deemed as “inappropriate”. 30 or so, out of the millions belonged to me. The book talks about the monetization of nudity/intimacy on the internet. I found this book somewhat relevant to me because from the act of posting my images on the internet, I felt confident for a time and met many women of all ages and sizes who would share tips on how to take the best ass shot, how to maximise ones safety and which accounts to block due to the harassment many women were receiving. This book talks about agency, and media production of sexting. On the *Girls and Young Women, and Intimate* chapter, Dobson states “This reframing of sexting requires that we conceptualise girls’ and young women’s agency in particular, and not assume that sexual self-imaging for girls equates with victimhood, a lack of agency, and a lack of morals or ‘self-esteem’” (Dobson.2018:95). In this chapter, Dobson is arguing against Amy Hasinoff who suggests that sexting is media production when it is not.

## Discussion

July 2017, I was home, sat alone passing time as I normally do with some video games. It was a warm summers day, but I did not feel as though I wanted to go outside. I did not see the point. I don’t have friends here in Ludlow aside from a couple of elderly neighbours who would waste their time drinking their pensions away and complain about various things including Brexit and Donald Trump. I spent the day playing games in order to tune real life and explore the realms of Tamriel, spend time running pedestrians over in Los Santos and being everyone’s favourite healer; Mercy.

Over the times of playing video games on my laptop compared to playing on a console, I had formed new friends which made it easier to deal with the physical friendships I did not have and from those relationships, I have learned, seen, and experienced so much.

My friends on Overwatch knew that the summer was going to be different, school was out, parents worked relatively less thus we all had reduced time together but that didn’t matter, the time we spent less did not change anything. I sat by my laptop in the evening with curtains drawn and the sun finally settling down. I left my reality and connected myself to another that made me feel at ease, a reality where I could be anyone out of 25 characters and not be myself. Not that being me was a bad thing, but It is nice to switch it up once in a while.

I logged into my new reality, instantly, I received an invite to a group to which I immediately rejected and waited for another to pop and accepted.

“Damn you are too popular these days, y’know” my friend Sparks had said.

“I know, people can’t leave me alone, I should charge for my time” we both laughed it off.

“What do you wanna do, darlin’?” he asked.

“Quick plaaaaaaay!” I replied with my hyped voice. No matter what time or day, I always looked forward to playing with my Friend Sparks. We had a dynamic. I would heal, he would tank or I would tank and he would heal. Perfect duo. In my eyes to say the least.

“So how are you doing, dude?” I asked.

“I’m good, just think my chest is funny. I think I might be having a heart attack.” He said. At that moment I went into a state of panic, my non-existent medical expertise were flashing. He had told me he had trouble breathing and that his chest was painful. I did not know what to do aside from tell him to go to the emergency room. My friend Sparks was an individual suffering from alcoholism. Our friendship was built on the fact that we had similar in game names (Khalsparxs, Spark42030) but also as time went by, our friendship was cemented by his person. I always saw him first as a person and not sticking him with a label that he would have to carry for the rest of his life. He was a friend that was addict and the only thing I could do was support him through it.

“I think I’m good though” he said.

“how can you be sure of that if you don’t go to the hospital? I can’t really heal you through my computer.” I joked.

“brb. I’m gonna get some water.” To which he backed out of our game and I waited, knowing it would take him a couple of minutes to come. I also did the same thing though. After a moment, I sat back on my seat and he followed.

“Yo, is you there or is you ain’t there?” he asked with his North Carolina accent.

“Yep, I’m here” I replied laughing at his relatively amusing question.

“sorry about the wait, these stairs, man, these stairs! Plus, doesn’t help that my legs are fucked”

“I know, I get winded too when I go upstairs. You need to stop smoking and getting into fights and I need to exercise more” I said.

“Amen to that” we both laughed and queued for our game.

A couple of hours passed by and I could tell my friend was intoxicated as he always was. It didn’t bother me as it would have done to others but maybe this was because I didn’t necessarily understand what alcoholism was to a certain extent, but I saw him suffering which impacted me in a way I didn’t think it would.

It became clear that he was in pain. I tried to convince him to get his housemate to take him to the ER. Even if it wasn’t a heart, my friend was an individual whose body had been put through trauma not from just consuming alcohol but from numerous car accidents he had experienced in his early life and one particular accident left him with a paralysed tongue which has been the butt of many jokes in our friendship group.

“Nah, I’m fine” he said. But he wasn’t fine, for someone who was drunk and didn’t often remember much sometimes, I felt as though in that moment he felt as a burden to those around him or just thought it was something that could pass but this time, it was very much different. My concern grew as time went, I reminded him to go to the ER again, I began to feel as though I was nagging my friend, but it was becoming frightening. Yes, it wasn’t a

heart attack but there are other othering things that could kill you and I was not prepared to have a friend die in a video game. As much as the motto “heroes never die” was popular amongst our gaming community, people do die. I felt as though I was overreacting but having had seen the escalation of his drinking during the time, we had known each other, it was enough to freak me out. My friend was aware he had an addiction and this time he wanted to quit but he couldn’t, it was not easy nor was the help readily available to drink.

“Y’know you can go anytime, right?”

“yeah I know.” He replied with shallow breaths. It was not only worrying but things overall began to get awkward, we were no longer in a duo-stack but a triple-stack with a friend of mine. I was wary of how my friend felt about people knowing private details about his life to which sadly over the next few days I ruined.

Over the course of the night, I spent 6 hours just telling him to go to the ER, but he finally gave in and asked his housemate to drive him. We said our goodbyes and I told him to keep me posted. I felt relieved that he had listened to me and did something about it but it dawned on me that his younger brother was at work thus I did the only thing I could do and that was to message through battle.net and tell him that his older brother was going to the ER and he might want to call him later on. I went to bed that morning. It would have been 2am for me, wondering if my friend was okay.

I woke up the next morning, doing the same mindless routine I always did. It was time for me to log into my game and talk to my friends and especially, Cody. I was getting into the habit of calling him by his first name, it was the same with Kaleb too and they both called me Andie. It was nice to be in that moment.

I received an invite from Cody, and I accepted as I would always do.

“Hey, I was worried about you, are you okay?” I said, trying not to sound as though I was his mother.

“I have cancer.” He replied. My heart dropped.

Over the coming days, I would become subjected to abhorrent abuse from my friend after I told another acquaintance of ours what had happened to Cody. I use the word acquaintance as for this individual as for they were not as close to my friendship group as we had been to one another. I know I should have not told anyone what was happening in my friend’s life, but he had always been open about his issues and for that I can accept the fault. I began worry and stress with the thought of my friend dying. I had just gotten to know him and the thought of him dying from Cancer broke me. I always considered my friends I met online to be the equivalent of real-life friends. They did not need to be with me physically but they were there with me whenever I needed them thus with my friend being angry just made me feel more guilt and for a time within the coming days, I thought I deserved the anger he directed at me. The relentless abuse, name calling and humiliation that I had experienced sometimes in front of my other friends was punishment for opening my big mouth but also a part of me was very much aware that my friend was not just angry at me but also angry at the fact that he might be possibly dying due to his drinking problems. We had often talked about his alcoholism and I was always willing to listen and not judge, I was always supportive and tried my best to be a good friend. As a couple of days passed, my friend’s brother finally told

me what had happened:

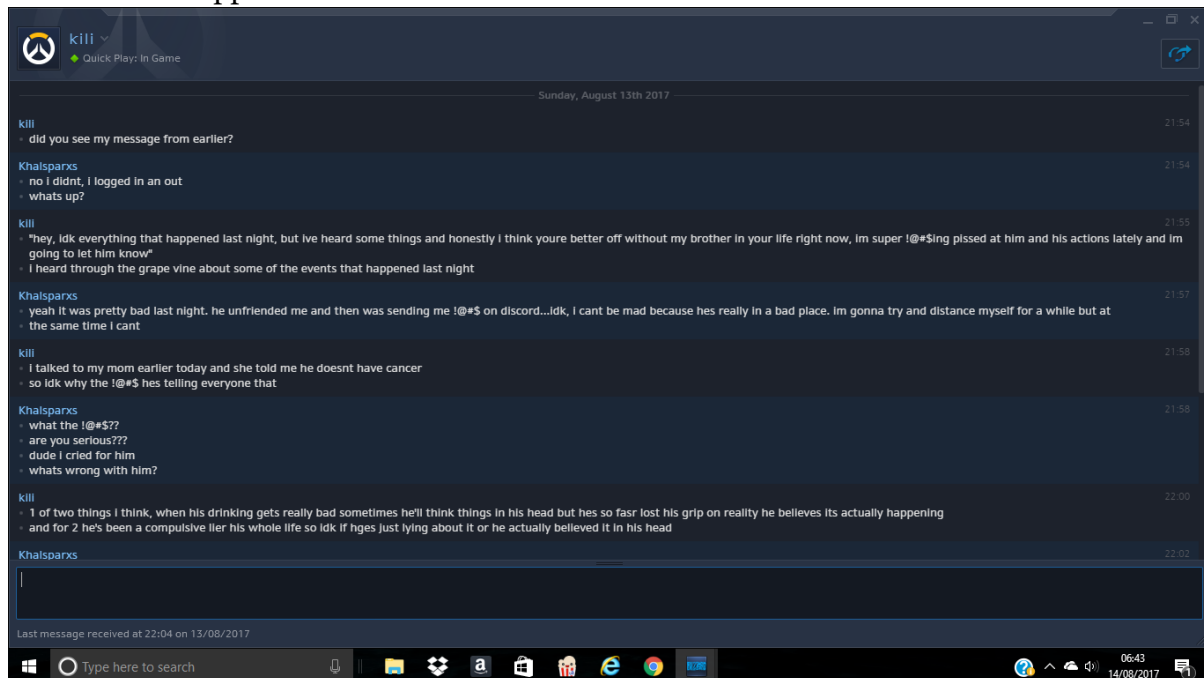


Fig.1

After that revelation, I was numb to say the least. All the worrying and guilt I had felt was for nothing. All the abuse I experienced was more so done to hurt me for the sake of it. My friend was not dying. My friend lied to me because he knew how it would make me feel. I had spent hours talking to my friend Sparks. I was always his go-to person. He knew I cared, and I did. When i care, I care, and when I love, I love and everyone around me had always known that. My friend finally had the heart to apologise to me

Sparks 08/14/2017: *"hey i just wanted to take the time to personally apologize for my BS. i cant justify what i said and wont. ive put a lot of people through needless stress and im seeing that now.. i really feel horrible for it and im gonna take the time to personally apologize to everyone. but you hurt especially cause you were like my best in-game friend and i hurt you and your trust. and i cant ever take that back. that being said i wont be back on till i can get my mind back together, probably after rehab. i hope i can make it up to you in the future and if not i understand whole heartedly. ima gonna send a personal message to everyone else to when i can catch everyone.i just didnt wanna do one big group apology cause i hurt everyone in a different way so.. i hope things work out for you and hope one day things will get better. take care."* (Sparks:2017)

Me: *"I don't even know where to begin or how to express my disappointment and my sadness. I've put up with a lot and I should have just walked away when I couldn't handle it but I stayed because you were my friend and you don't walk out of people's lives when they've made a big impact. It hurts to know that you also lied about having cancer. Kili told me and that made me so mad because I forgave you because I didn't want to be mad at someone who's sick and going through a difficult time but alas, im not angry. I am heartbroken, disappointed and I feel like I have lost a friend and I really feel like I lost something in my life that made me feel happy when I was having a bad day, I knew I could just be play with you but I realise sometimes you took advantage of my emotions. You knew what pissed me off and you also knew that I cared for everyone and everything and you took advantage of my support. You'd apologise for being horrible to me on discord and then in game you'd just do it again and make me feel shitty but no matter what. I still*

*couldn't leave because once again, you don't walk out of someones life especially when they have made a big impact on you.” (Khalsparxs:2017)*

I had finally had enough, and I really did believe that my emotions were taken advantage of. I found that this piece above demonstrated a tough time in or friendship but the apology he initially sends to me, for me, humanised my friend in a moment he was at his darkest. His reflection of how he had treated me but also the ability for two people who have never met to be able to be vulnerable in front of one another. From the fears of our friendship ending, to the open discussions regarding my friend's state of mind and his suicidal thoughts. As hurt as I was, I did not have the strength in me to be mad anymore. What my friend had done was wrong, but he was my friend who mattered so much to me.

As time went by, and as close as Cody, Kaleb and I had remained, our other relationships with our friends would break down but that never made me feel bad because I hadn't lost them so other relationships ending were to be expected. I started playing other games where I met a group of different women. One encounter was with a woman named Jaki. It was crazy how close we became in a short amount of time. This online relationship taught me a lot more about myself than I would like to admit but also the fact that I could be seen. For the longest time I always felt that I was overlooked and not many people saw the real me or saw the struggles that were going to come to my life in the coming months. As closed off as I made myself seem, I was letting people get to know me. With the mounting stress of University and the self-doubt I was starting to feel, alongside the unhappiness I was feeling with my love life, my friend Jaki was starting to notice that I was an individual who boxed in a lot of my emotions.

“I know that you bottle your emotions and when you get frustrated, you don't know how to contain it” Jaki had said to me. It was true, I kept a lot of my emotions guarded and I have always been like this since I was a child. I learned quickly that I would never be understood or taken seriously. As the time passed, and we had gotten to know each other, I had learned that my friend suffered a lot of emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her adoptive mother and biological father. We shared experiences of the abuse we had gone through. I told her the time I went through whilst I was living with my aunt in Africa and how it made me feel. It was good to share to someone the anger, bitterness and the sadness I had inside me from not being believed when I spoke out about my abuse.

“I believe you.” She said to me. I instantly felt at ease. As the months went by, she would often give me pieces of advice.

“There's nothing with going to get help.” She was right, there was nothing wrong with getting help but a part of me did not want it. I felt ashamed of asking for help. I felt ashamed for ever thinking that there was something wrong with me but as time went by, it was clear that I needed help. I shut myself down. I did not eat, shower or leave my bed from 4 days, I was not myself. The only person I talked to during those dark few days was Jaki. I had become such a regular part of her and her daughter's life even though I felt alone a lot of the time, I had people that cared for me but none of them were here to ever hold me when needed. Jaki is a significant part of my life. If it was not from our daily chats, I don't think I would have ever put myself in therapy and I believe that I would still be in that dark state. I am not healed now, but the pain, the bitterness and anger are emotions I am trying to overcome.

My friendship with Cody has shown me plenty of ups and downs. I could never be angry at him and for the lie he told me. Even though it was not cancer, it was still alcoholism and it was a disease that brought out the worst in my friend when he was suffering. I am aware that I'm making excuses for him in order to excuse the way he had treated but I feel as

though, we all have to go through testing times with friends and family. I have never been an individual who focuses on perfect relationships, as I have grown up, I have witnessed people living in bubbles especially when it comes to online relationships. There's this facade of nothing but jokes and giggles with your online friends and in some cases that's true but in experience people who shape you.

My experiences with Cody showed me what addiction was and what it did to people and families. I saw someone who was so desperate to stop drinking but he had to in order to stay alive. I saw my friend hallucinating and it would often scare the life out of me but with this, my friend also taught me what it is like to have a group of friends online and that no matter where you are in the world, you were not alone and most importantly standing up for yourself especially in a male dominated game such as Overwatch were women would often be shamed for playing simple heroes such as Mercy or for just being able to play a game. On the other hand, my friendship with Jaki has taught me to speak up when something is bothering me but also the fact that once again, like Cody, I am not alone even in moments when I felt as though I was invisible. I can be a prideful person, but Jaki would often offer to send me money to buy bread, but I always declined because she is a single mother with a 3-year-old. With Jaki, I felt as though I had no right to complain about food shortages. In truth I had my mum, and the rest of my family whilst she didn't have anyone but her daughter and was on disability in the US. I appreciated her understanding of my struggles and it if it was not for her, I know I would not be in therapy. These relationships can have no meaning to some, but for others like myself, every interaction I have online I relatively appreciate.

At a time, I can only describe as being prone to unhealthy decision making mainly with the relationships, I formed due to my low self-esteem and one of them was with a married man or two. The first one was strange, his wife about it, encouraged it and it was all good until they started having their own marital problems and I was suddenly in the middle of it. The wife never blamed me or did the husband, but I felt as though I was the problem or the catalyst that lead to the problem. Everything in that relationship was relatively straight forward and it was not purely sexual. As things began to go wrong within his relationship, he began to depend more on me to fulfil his emotional needs. He was never good at affection but at the same time he was. He used to call me by my pet name that only my family uses and to me that was intimacy in its purest form. As his relationship was breaking down and her finally moving out, his mental health deteriorated and was prone to rage induced blackouts. This led to him increasing dependency on me but even with that- I had a soft spot for him.

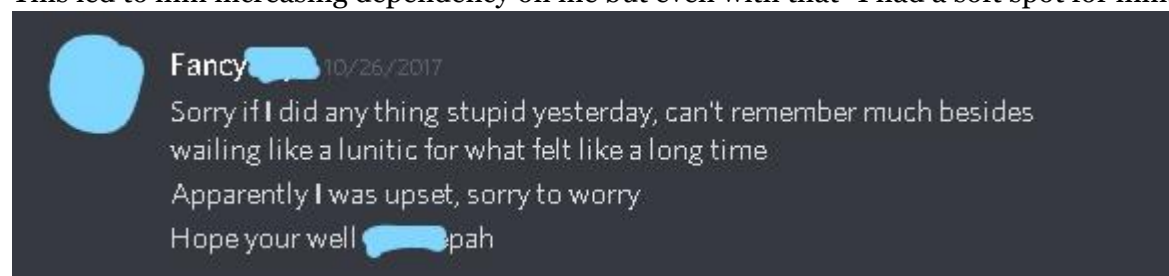


Fig.2

I am a person who does not blame others for my own mistakes. My life and my decisions are made by me and for me. From this particular relationship, I learned numerous things including what this kind of dynamic does to people but also how when in this kind of relationship, when your spouse is not there anymore to give you the intimacy your crave, you look for it somewhere else and when you do, you want more. This was the second time I felt as though there was over dependence on me by an alcoholic because people knew that I was

an affectionate person. He was a functioning alcoholic, but he was beginning to lose control. I was not filled with regret in this situation, myself and this particular person had good times together. I remember when we used to watch *Rick and Morty* together through a shared screen. We once binged *Castlevania* together. Even though his wife's first initial interest in me was purely sexual, with him, it was just hanging out. Over time, with everything that happened, I ended it with a sour tone. I hope he is okay where he is and is getting the help he needs. Another thing I got from that relationship was my personality type. My friend had told me of this personality test thing and I gave it a shot. I learned he was an ISFL (Introverted Sensing Feeling Judging). People with this personality are often described as "often unappreciated, at work, home, and play..." (Butt., Heiss). This oddly enough made sense, he felt unappreciated in all aspects of his life and I was there to fill that void. I also learned that I was an ENFP (Extraverted, Intuitive Feeling Perceiving) which meant "ENFPs can be the warmest, kindest, and most sympathetic of mates; affectionate, demonstrative, and spontaneous." (Butt., Heiss). Even though I had put myself in this situation, I stayed an put up with it because I didn't want to hurt my friend when he was already hurting. I was supportive through and through but also not because I was doing it solely for him, I was doing it to fill my own emotional needs when they were not being met by my physical partner.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I found that online relationships, can be meaning to individuals like myself. The internet has given many people like me who are suffering from various mental illnesses to be able to communicate with those around them, but it has also given those who are not mentally ill a platform to meet other people with similar interests. The internet gives us something that reality cannot give and that is anonymity. In the book *Truth, Lies, and Trust* by Whitty and Joinson regard anonymity as "This anonymity allows the persecuted, the controversial, and the simply embarrassed to seek information ± and disseminate it ± while maintaining their privacy and reputations in both cyberspace and the material world" (Sobel, 2008:14). Maintaining this privacy in both the digital and private space means that both cannot cross paths. I have often seen this in cases when people make throwaway accounts on various websites. I have also learned that sharing real identity within this digital space is a scarred act.

Out of all the people I have meet on the internet, there are only two who are on my Facebook. It is important to acknowledge the significance of individuals sharing and allowing access to something like Facebook. It is not just even Facebook but sharing something like sharing a selfie within your close group of friends. It is always nice to see who the other person looks like on the other side of the screen. We can have multiple personas online. I have lived life with on the internet with various names such as "Khalsparxs" and I do not mind, it's what I answer to but it is also nice to take your own online identity away and be addressed by the name people in the real world call you and I often found that being called "Andie" by my online friends was nice. It was personal and I did not mind that. I see questions such as "I have an online friend I've been talking with for months now and I don't know his name. What do I do? Are there any tricks that'll make him say his name?" (Quora:2015). The need to know someone's name after a few months of talking is very much normal. I remember the day asking my friends Cody and Kaleb their real names and after I only ever called them by their gamertags when there were other individuals with us whom

they did not share this with. It was up to me to respect this. I understood the significance of them sharing their names with me and I did the same, but we never shared last names as for we knew that we still had a long way to go before we could ever share anything like that. From this research, I have found how we as people live through mask when it comes to our online lives and that is perfectly fine, we need to be guarded off and there's nothing wrong with being guarded off. The internet allows us to be anonymous without too much question and it works for a time until you start making friends and even when you do make said friends, one does not intend to develop trust. The mask on the internet can slip and I have learned that in the right situations, that is not an entirely bad thing. The key thing I have also learned is how truly diverse online communities and personas are. From meeting women who are 58 years of age playing mobile games to pass the time and make friends in order to help them overcome cancers.

I have used my time on the internet to truly reflect on what life is. I can see outside my window and see people and each person has a story to tell and there are people who are willing to listen to that story. I would like to listen to the stories people on the internet have to tell me. From overcoming alcoholism to why they are in love with a book series to why they cannot leave the house. There are so many forgotten people who need human interaction and I believe that human interaction does not need to be primarily physical, but it can be through the web. For me, when I felt alone, when I felt suicidal, and felt as though I was being eaten alive by depression, I had people who were willing to give me encouraging words but also truly able to talk to me about my feeling as why I was feeling the way I was. I still standby the fact that if my friend Jaki had not encouraged me to go into counselling, I would have not received the help I did because I was very apprehensive. I have found the internet to shape out world and culture not only when it comes to our friendships but to what we can do as a society and the conversations we can have without needing to be with each other. If we had a more positive reaction towards online relationships whether they be sexual, platonic or for fun, there would be more of a positive conversation regarding the topic.

There is often too much focus on relationships formed on the internet going wrong especially with the rise of the prolific *Catfish* tv show which started as a movie following Nev Schulman and his relationship with an online girlfriend whom he thought was the same age as him but in hindsight, was a female in her 40s with various health issues who had created multiple personas to keep her relationship with Schulman intact. I used to tell people that I was too trusting and I am. I will always advocate promoting internet safety for everyone, but I also think it is fair for us to talk about the positive effect it has on those it has helped. I am one of thousands of people who have learned so much from people and for that I am grateful. As we progress as a civilisation, technology has become intrinsic to our lives and it will continue to do so. Human connection throughout the next several years through the internet will become more complex especially with impending 5G launch which is said to change how we do everything. We are at a point of no return even with the high levels of scaremongering we see every day regarding technology and some of it is true, but my generation has never lived life without technology like this. We have never lived life without the internet and as the years go by, we become more attached, more in tune and this can be seen with platforms like twitter, where hundreds and thousands of fans can generate over a million tweets in an hour all in conversation of a TV show airing its final season. These online interactions may not be significant to one another, but they are significant on a larger magnitude of how ingrained the internet is to us and it will continue to do so.

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