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Love For Sale: Virtual Lovers Rental Services in Indonesia

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Abstract. The way interpersonal relationships, particularly romantic ones, are formed has gradually transitioned to the virtual realm. Digital communication media now serve as platforms where users can meet and establish relationships without the constraints of physical distance and face-to-face interactions. The phenomenon of Virtual Lovers, originating in China, explains how individuals offer services as virtual partners to accompany clients. This relationship can be understood through the concept of Mediated Relationship, where romantic relationships flourish without contextual limitations, using digital communication as the primary medium. This study aims to explore the virtual communication process and interpersonal relationships of a Virtual Lover in their profession. Using a constructivist paradigm and a qualitative approach, this study aims to examine the experiences and values of Virtual Lovers in situational romantic interactions with their clients. It was found that a Virtual Lover communicates with their client in a situational romantic relationship, engaging in conversations or sharing stories about life's problems. Virtual Lovers create a self-profile reflecting how they wish to be perceived through virtual communication. This exchange of information builds familiarity and trust as their knowledge of each other deepens. Despite not meeting face-to-face, Virtual Lovers feel their persona as a talent is distinct from their real-life self, where talent must listen attentively and adapt to the needs of their clients. Agencies acting as intermediaries between clients and talents enforce various regulations to protect the privacy and security of all parties involved.

Keywords: *Virtual Lovers, Romantic Mediated Relationship*

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INTRODUCTION

The search for partners in today's era has undergone a shift toward virtual methods (Murti and Handoyo, 2023). Innovations in interaction and relationship-building have transformed from conventional to digital communication technologies. The novelty of communication media enables individuals to communicate without regard to distance or constraints of face-to-face communication (Perdana and Dewi, 2022). Alongside technological advancements, social media has also rapidly evolved, allowing the process of getting to know and establishing relationships, traditionally initiated face-to-face, to now occur virtually.

The unique phenomenon of virtual relationships emerged in the year 2020, when a social media platform, Bilibili, in China, was filled with content creators uploading vlogs narrating their experiences of hiring virtual lover services (Kejie Yi, 2021). It is known that predominantly female consumers would hire and pay for a *Xuni Lianren* (Virtual Lover) and communicate online via chat or phone (C. Scott Brown, 2019). This phenomenon is described as a virtual lover service that allows clients to converse with their virtual partners according to their needs and desires. The hired Virtual Lovers will behave according to the client's requirements, whether seeking a romantic partner or just a friend to fill the void in their daily lives.

Originating from China, the Virtual Lovers phenomenon has also garnered attention in Indonesia (detikJabar, 2022). Several agencies are offering this service, one of which is the Instagram account @Kanore_id, providing virtual lover rental services for both virtual and face-to-face dates (Kanore_id, 2021). While Kanore_id offers ondate (online dating) and offdate (offline dating) services, there are also services limited to virtual dating or ondate, such as the Instagram account @Sleepcall.able. Virtual lover rental services, including sleep calls and confessions, offer sleep calls, chats, voice notes (vn), reminders, picture posts (pap), gaming sessions together (mabar), movie dates, virtual lovers, and partner tests, all of which are available in various packages or bundles (Sleepcall.able, 2024). Currently, Sleepcall.able exclusively focuses on ondate services, meaning clients will only utilize the service online through various platforms such as WhatsApp, Line, Telegram, and others. The talents working as Virtual Lovers must meet specific requirements and competencies. The requirements include minimum or maximum age limits, physical and mental health, good behavior, single status, attractive appearance, and maintaining privacy as well as positive content while working (kanore.id, 2021).

Hardey (2004) introduced the concept of a new form of interpersonal relationship associated with digital communication, known as Mediated Relationships. By utilizing Information and Communication Technology (ICT), traditional methods typically involving face-to-face meetings or intermediaries such as matchmaking agencies have been abandoned (Koike and Loughnan, 2021). Through digital communication, users can connect relationally and emotionally without contextual limitations, thereby enhancing their interpersonal interactions (Campbell, 2022). Digital communication through text or voice is also considered more feasible for couples to maintain their relationship compared to face-to-face communication. Virtual communication participants can feel an increased sense of closeness when partners exchange text messages in the form of writing, photos, or emojis, which can be done at any time and situation. ICT facilitates users to connect

with strangers with the aim of building a particular interpersonal relationship, especially romantic ones. Starting with an initial contact opening where information transparency and trust are established, eventually leading to intimacy in the relationship towards physical meetings. For instance, online dating sites, through computer mediation, offer individuals the opportunity to search based on physical criteria via database search engines (Oluwole, 2018). The site is built on the assumption that users will evaluate others based on their interests and preferences while simultaneously advertising themselves. Hardey also proposes several principles that happen within Mediated Romance Relationships (Hardey, 2004). First, the nature of ICT with its rich messaging capabilities allows virtual romantic relationship participants to construct profiles and present themselves to other users. Through such descriptions, individuals can construct how they wish to be perceived and what they desire from a romantic relationship with others. Secondly, the exchange of messages containing information aims to build mutual trust. Getting to know and having a sense of belonging to each other, through deeper understanding, gradually fosters trust as the relationship develops. Thirdly, the virtual construction of descriptions and self-profiles will show different impressions compared to actual face-to-face meetings. When interacting virtually, whether through voice or image, the impression created will not be the same as when seen directly with one's own eyes. From there, the truthfulness will be tested whether someone's expectations of their virtual partner will be fulfilled and the relationship will deepen, or whether unmet expectations will lead to a decline in the relationship (Timmermans and Courtois, 2018). Regardless of the association between mediated romantic relationships and ICT, the perspective of the Mediated Romance Relationship concept that the researcher will bring to this relationship is to view the relationship rather than the media used. The aim is to keep this study focused on the actors in the relationship, not on the messages or media used within that relationship.

Several previous studies exploring this phenomenon have been conducted by Tan and Xu (2020), who viewed the Virtual Lovers phenomenon as a business requiring high communication skills and values online. Acting as real partners, they are paid to provide comfort and alleviate their clients' frustrations, which gradually shifts into a production relationship (Tan and Xu, 2020). Tan, along with Shi (2021), also found that women have now transformed into a new social form. This happens as women are no longer constrained but have become more confident in expressing their desires and spending more money to fulfill these desires through virtual communication (Tan and Shi, 2021). In their latest research, Tan and Xu (2022) also observed that Virtual Lovers are not highly valued because they only sell affection, while material needs such as household chores are not something they can provide. Tan and Xu assess that this job should not become more than just a job, considering it is difficult to anticipate the transformations that may occur due to the new needs and potential in the future (Tan and Xu, 2022).

Building upon the existing background, the researcher found that Virtual Lovers navigate situations and interaction contexts for romantic relationships through digital communication. To execute this, Virtual Lovers communicate and engage in situational romantic relationships with diverse clients according to their individual needs. Therefore, the researcher has formulated the research problem into the following research question: How do Virtual Lovers communicate virtually and engage in situational romantic relationships as providers of virtual girlfriend/boyfriend rental services? The research question is delimited to the scope

of online virtual girlfriend/boyfriend rental services in Indonesia, as well as other criteria to attain the required research subjects.

RESEARCH METHOD

The paradigm utilized as the researcher's perspective is the constructivism paradigm, wherein a specific message or phenomenon is constructed by involving the subjectivity of the individuals involved in the message or phenomenon (Butsi, 2019). This research used a descriptive research type with a qualitative approach, aimed at providing a comprehensive explanation of virtual communication and interpersonal relationships of a Virtual Lover as a provider of virtual girlfriend/boyfriend rental services (Hardani, Juliana Sukmana, and Fardani, 2020). This research focuses on examining the phenomenon from Edmund Husserl's phenomenological tradition, where humans perceive truth as something shared through experiences within social life (Arif Al Wasim, 2020). Experiences and knowledge related to virtual romantic relationships are primarily obtained through the subjective views of Virtual Lovers. These experiences shape meanings that are manifested in behavior, identity, and language for interacting within social groups.

The object of this research is the process of interaction and communication within romantic relationships in the phenomenon of virtual girlfriend/boyfriend rental services. Meanwhile, the subjects of this research are individuals who are currently offering or have previously offered services as Virtual Lovers. The criteria for research subjects are as follows:

1) Currently or previously providing virtual girlfriend/boyfriend rental services, either independently or under the auspices of an agency or specific group;
2) Currently or previously providing virtual girlfriend/boyfriend rental services for at least six months;
3) Aged between 18-40 years, the range of young adulthood where physical and psychological development has peaked;
4) Residing in Indonesia;
5) Utilizing communication technology as the medium for virtual communication with clients of the virtual girlfriend/boyfriend rental service;
6) Willing to be research informants, considering the privacy data and experiences of the talents in this service.

The researcher identifies sources that meet the specified criteria in the required number using purposive sampling through social media. This purposive sampling, which involves selecting samples based on specific criteria, is followed by snowball sampling to broaden the range of relevant informants from the initial contact (Razali et al., 2023). The researcher aims to find informants with varied experiences in communication and relationships as Virtual Lovers. Due to limited access to data because of agency regulations, data collection is conducted virtually through voice calls and documented via voice recordings. This is due to agency rules protecting the privacy of their talents, prohibiting them from meeting face-to-face and revealing personal identities to the researcher.

This research analyzes the collected data using Miles and Huberman's analytical technique, where the researcher reduces the data, presents the data, and then draws conclusions from the existing data to address the research question (Novelita, Luthfie, and Fitriah, 2019). This analytical method enables the researcher to present

detailed data aligned with the research problem, simplifying the data into a more comprehensible form.

RESULTS

Through the criteria and data collection methods used by the researcher, three informants were identified: Tiffany and Jude, who are Virtual Lovers, and E, the manager of the virtual girlfriend/boyfriend rental service agency Sleepcall.able. Sleepcall.able is an agency that provides various virtual girlfriend/boyfriend rental services, such as chat, phone calls, sleep calls, virtual movie dates, and gaming sessions with talents, offering a range of service packages and prices.

Tiffany, a 24-year-old female talent from Central Java, works as an electronics vendor administrator in her daily life. She has been in this profession for almost a year but has only been with the Sleepcall.able agency for about two months. Initially, Tiffany, who was unemployed and felt idle, also did not have many people to talk to, which eventually led her to enter the virtual girlfriend rental service profession. In a week, Tiffany can receive 2 to 3 clients, each with 1 to 2 hours of phone calls. The clients Tiffany typically meets tend to be more active in initiating conversations and sharing stories; thus, Tiffany spends more time listening and responding to their stories. Not only men but some female clients choose Tiffany and even place repeat orders to continue sessions with her. Typically, Tiffany will use the first 10 minutes of the session to assess the character of the client she is facing, and then follow the flow and behavior of the client as the conversation progresses. As a talent, Tiffany positions herself as her client to fully understand what her client needs from the ongoing session. Tiffany has encountered clients who expressed comfort and stronger feelings towards her, but such interactions are not allowed by the agency. Tiffany's response to this is to redirect the topic and then report it to the agency. From this profession, Tiffany realizes that each client has different behaviors, so the way she handles them also varies.

Jude, a 26-year-old male talent from Jakarta, has extensive experience as a virtual boyfriend in various agencies for a long time. Inspired by the actor Jude Law, Jude has a personality that enjoys listening and does not speak much, is humorous, romantic, and simple. After working at the Sleepcall.able agency for over 8 months, Jude has handled many clients through various services. Initially, Jude wanted to find additional income with minimal effort and then discovered this profession through platform X, known as the most extreme side hustle-seeking platform. Jude typically allocates his time from 7 PM to 1 AM every day to provide virtual boyfriend services through chat and voice calls. Starting from clients who simply want to talk or chat, clients can spend up to 3 hours on the phone with Jude. There aren't many specific requests, but sometimes there are those who need Jude to be a romantic and attentive figure like a boyfriend. Jude himself believes that as a talent, he must be professional in interacting with and safeguarding his client's privacy, as well as following the client's wishes to tell their stories and providing responses to those stories. What is discussed during his session with the client will remain within that duration and will not be disclosed even after the session ends. Although there is a possibility of developing a sense of comfort that crosses the boundaries between talent and client, Jude chooses to stop such possibilities and redirect them to a more appropriate and professional scope between a talent and a client.

In addition, E, as the owner of the Sleepcall.able agency, has been operating the virtual girlfriend/boyfriend rental service for more than 8 months. Sleepcall.able provides various virtual girlfriend/boyfriend services, starting from chatting, phone calls, sleep calls, gaming sessions together (mabar), movie dates, and many more, with different durations and costs. Moreover, there are bundled packages that offer both chat and phone call services within a few days at special prices. To avoid sounding formal and to respect the client's privacy, the agency does not require clients to fill out any special forms, not even with their names or needs. The reason for the establishment of this agency comes from E's awareness of the high suicide rate in Indonesia, which he believes occurs due to the need to be heard, not always requiring a solution. In this agency, there are more than 50 talents, and clients can typically choose talents based on availability and willingness to take orders. When a talent agrees and the client makes a payment, the talent will contact the client to conduct the session. There are also standard operating procedures (SOP) in place; if a talent takes a client's order without the agency's intermediary, both the talent and client will be blacklisted from all Sleepcall agencies. This rule also applies to violations related to indecency, such as requests with sexual context (18+). E personally establishes a rule within the agency and among its talents that no diagnoses should be made regarding what clients share or experience; they are only to listen and provide advice if necessary. When clients place orders, they often include specific requests such as a particular talent with a distinctive voice, romantic behavior, ability to play guitar, proficiency in certain games, and more. However, Sleepcall.able has not yet fully expanded to video calls due to E's concerns about the privacy and security of its talents, especially in face-to-face encounters. By consistently providing the best service from both talents and the agency, the hope is that clients using Sleepcall.able's virtual partner rental services can find assistance, feel more at ease, and continue to use the service consistently and in the long term (repeat orders).

DISCUSSION

The profession of Virtual Lovers involves two parties, namely the talent and the client, communicating virtually through text and voice, wherein there are discussions with specific contexts and situations desired by both parties. These discussions may involve daily life stories, discussions on a particular topic, or expressions of grievances and issues typically actively shared by the client with the talent. Therefore, talents tend to listen more and respond to what they hear. However, it is not uncommon for talents to take the initiative to initiate conversations to maintain a pleasant interaction between themselves and the client.

The interaction begins when the client has placed an order for a session with the talent. The talent will then contact the client through the agreed-upon media, such as chat, voice call, or sleep call, among others. During the session, both parties can exchange messages freely while still observing unwritten boundaries and rules, such as respecting privacy, maintaining communication ethics, and not imposing their will on each other to discuss a certain topic.

When the session has concluded as ordered, the client will be asked to provide feedback on the session, and the interaction ends there. The talent will professionally safeguard the client's privacy by not inquiring about the client's

identity unless the client voluntarily and consciously discloses it. However, clients are not permitted to inquire about their identity or other personal matters regarding the talent for the privacy and security of both the talent and the agency. In the event of a violation of existing rules, the talent or client has the right to express their concerns, and the agency will take appropriate action according to the existing SOPs.

Speaking virtually with someone unknown beforehand poses a daily challenge for a Virtual Lover's talent. Often, there is a sense of awkwardness in the initial minutes of the conversation, but this is the time for talent to read the situation and the character of the client they are facing. An approach that can be taken is to position oneself as the client while subtly prompting them to actively initiate the conversation. From there, the conversation becomes more interactive and enjoyable, leading to a sense of comfort in sharing stories or simply exchanging news virtually. Some clients also make specific requests regarding the character or behavior of the talent, such as a talent who shows romantic and attentive traits akin to a virtual partner. These requests are fulfilled through attention to the client's daily life, listening to their grievances, and adopting a romantic attitude towards the client. It is also possible for sparks of romance to emerge between the two parties, but this is a boundary maintained by the talent based on professionalism, to avoid unnecessary personal feelings between the talent and the client.

E, as the owner of the agency, acknowledges that the possibility of romantic relationships between talent and their clients cannot be ruled out. The large number of talents under the agency's legal umbrella makes it impossible for E as the sole owner and manager to embrace and oversee all talents to act following the rules, especially since there is no written contract binding the agency and the talent. The agency, as an intermediary between talent and clients, can only provide rules, but what happens between talent and clients is entirely in the hands of both parties. If there is no expression from the talent or the client that they are in a relationship, there is nothing the agency can do about it. E believes that there may indeed be talents who eventually form relationships with clients, but if there is no evidence of this, E and the agency cannot follow up on the violation. However, E also believes that this may not happen because talents are primarily oriented towards earning income. For instance, in a case where a client wants to have further conversations with a talent due to comfort and a desire to know more about the talent, the talent directs the client to repeat orders with the most comprehensive and expensive services available, which indirectly and professionally can make the client feel close to the talent.

Hardey, with his concept of mediated romantic relationships, reveals three (3) principles within it. Firstly, participants in virtual romantic relationships can leverage the richness of TIK media messages to construct the desired image of themselves. Talents such as Virtual Lovers can build their characters virtually through a persona, they want their clients to encounter when engaging in a session with them. The persona is formed from a specific role model reflecting the qualities and behaviors one wishes to embody. When it comes to building self-image, Tiffany tends to position herself entirely according to the needs and desires of the client, even asking directly rather than guessing what the client wants. If the client requires Tiffany to be cheerful and talkative, she will adjust herself accordingly during the session, and this applies when there are specific requests from the client. Unlike Tiffany, Jude adopts the persona of actor Jude Law, characterized by being a good listener, romantic, humorous, and simple. When facing clients, Jude tends

to listen and observe more, avoiding imposing storytelling on the client. As a talent, it's important to adapt to the situation and the client's needs during the session. Therefore, regardless of the self-image constructed by the talent, it is aimed at fulfilling the needs of the clients they encounter.

Secondly, the exchange of virtual messages aims to foster a sense of knowing, belonging, and trusting one another. The sense of knowing and belonging develops as individuals deepen their knowledge and experience of each other. The more someone learns about another person, the closer the relationship feels between them, and the more trust one has in the other person. For Tiffany, most clients do indeed feel comfortable during conversations, but this only occurs when clients are willing to open up to alleviate anxiety and find relief. The trust and comfort of clients towards talent may not immediately emerge entirely, as ultimately talent is also human and has flaws. The decision of whether to trust talent lies entirely with the client's freedom. If the client wishes to speak, talent will listen, and vice versa. Talent can only strive to make the conversation enjoyable so that the client feels comfortable speaking during the session. Similarly, Jude does not exert much effort to make his clients feel comfortable speaking during the session but rather allows the conversation to proceed entirely according to the client's wishes. As a talent, Jude listens more and responds according to what his clients talk about. Beyond that, Jude does not force clients to talk about a certain topic as he believes that every conversation entirely belongs to the client's rights and desires.

Thirdly, the way someone describes and presents themselves virtually shows a difference in impression compared to their real-life presence. Virtual Lovers, as talents, use pseudonyms that are usually different from their real-world identities, such as names, ages, and professions. Virtual interaction through text and voice limits talents to express themselves, resulting in impressions formed based solely on verbal understanding without visual cues, making it difficult to form a complete impression as in face-to-face interactions. Tiffany feels that there is certainly a difference between herself as Tiffany, a talent, and her real self. She, as a talent, is someone who actively listens and responds, adapting to clients as well. Especially because of the demand to be skilled in acting to adjust to clients, Tiffany can do many things to make clients comfortable and encourage repeat orders, such as playing games together, listening to complaints, and even singing and playing musical instruments. As for Jude, he, as Jude the talent, is not much different from his real-world self, but this job demands him to speak more than just observe and listen. This makes Jude portrayed as a man who observes and listens, yet can be attentive, romantic, and humorous when needed. However, it's difficult to talk about the difference between the virtual impression and the face-to-face impression, as clients can't meet in the real world intentionally. This is because of the agreement between the talent and the agency not to have meetings with talent outside of orders, so clients can only know talent through virtual sessions, and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

Originating from China, Indonesia has also joined the phenomenon of Virtual Lovers with numerous agencies offering virtual boyfriend/girlfriend rental services. These services provide various virtual communication sessions with agency talents, such as chatting, voice calls, sleep calls, and even movie and virtual

game dates. One such agency is Sleepcall.able, offering a variety of services at varying prices. As Virtual Lovers, talents offering virtual boyfriend/girlfriend rental services utilize virtual media to communicate with their clients in specific contexts, situations, and time frames according to the services selected and ordered by clients through the agency. Through the data collection process, the researcher met with three (3) informants, two of whom are talents named Tiffany and Jude, while the other is E, the owner and manager of the Sleepcall.able agency.

Tiffany, a female talent who has been in this profession for over a year, is known for her pleasant personality and active listening skills with her clients. Beginning from boredom with her daily life, Tiffany embarked on becoming a Virtual Lover. In a week, Tiffany can handle two to three clients through chat and sleep calls, which undoubtedly provides a decent income for her. As a talent, she believes that adapting to clients' needs is the key to excelling in this profession. Tiffany has encountered various special requests from her clients, and she agrees to them as long as she is capable and does not violate agency rules.

There's also Jude, a male talent who has been a Virtual Lover for almost a year. Jude describes himself as someone who listens a lot, humorous, simple, and romantic. Amid his quarter-life crisis, he chose to dive into becoming a Virtual Lover and found comfort in working easily while earning decently. To handle one client, he can spend up to four hours conversing and listening to them. Jude emphasizes professionalism in every session as a talent, the topic being discussed with the client will not leave the session, and the entire conversation must align with the client's wishes without any pressure from anywhere.

A Virtual Lover and their profession, filled with virtual communication and behavior akin to a virtual partner, can be applied in the principle of mediated romantic relationships according to Hardey. Firstly, the rich nature of virtual messages allows Virtual Lovers to construct and present themselves to clients. Tiffany and Jude construct their self-profiles according to their respective role models, yet they remain oriented toward adapting to their client's needs. Secondly, the exchange of information between both parties fosters a sense of mutual trust. The sense of knowing and belonging is cultivated through mutual understanding. Interaction between talent and clients tends to be unidirectional, with clients speaking more and talent listening more. However, it's important for the talent to maintain the conduciveness of the session so that the client feels comfortable conversing with the talent and the talent can better understand how to respond to the client's stories. Thirdly, the descriptions and self-profiles built virtually will show a difference in impression compared to actual face-to-face meetings. This does not fully apply, considering clients and talent are not allowed to meet face-to-face based on privacy and agency rules. However, the talent themselves acknowledge that their true selves differ from their portrayal as Virtual Lovers. Tiffany, for instance, engages in a lot of acting while working, making it difficult to see her true self while on the job, as she must position herself according to what the client desires. Jude himself sees that he doesn't differ much from his true self, just quieter, listens, and speaks more to respond to his clients. Overall, talents as Virtual Lovers communicate virtually in the context of situational romantic relationships by building self-profiles, establishing trust, and creating appealing impressions according to their client's needs, regardless of the context of the relationship and further meetings between them.

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