

Most global dating websites don't have screening process

Local sites seem to be more stringent but there is no standard policing

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WHILE online dating sites have become increasingly popular, how strictly they are policed varies from site to site.

These websites have come under the spotlight after a 41-year-old man was hauled to court this week for raping, sexually assaulting or molesting 22 women he met through SpeedDate.

A check by The Straits Times found that locally owned sites have more stringent screening processes while such safeguards are almost non-existent among global sites such as SpeedDate.

Eteract.com, a locally based online dating site, has several layers in place to screen new members.

They are required to enter their NRIC numbers during registration and these are then verified for authenticity against an in-house system. Once a week, these NRIC numbers are checked against a Registry of Marriages (ROM) database to ascertain their holders' marital status, said Ms Violet Lim, chief executive officer and co-founder of Eteract.com.

The site also has a team in place to screen every profile that has been posted. "If any profile appears to be strange or dodgy, we will disapprove the profile," said Ms Lim, who also owns dating firm Lunch Actually and online dating site eSynchrony.

The Eteract.com site, which has some 19,000 members, has

seen the number of its users double in the past year. About 60 per cent of its members are male.

Ms Lim said that while it is not possible to screen members with the same vigour as she does for an offline matchmaking agency, she has tried to transfer as many of those safeguards as possible to her online services.

"We came from an offline space and we know that in order for a good experience, we need to emphasise verification and security," she said.

Likewise, another local online dating site, Who Works Around You, also checks its members' marital status against ROM records for verification.

There are, however, no such screening processes on international sites such as Match.com and SpeedDate. In fact, SpeedDate states in its terms of use that it does not conduct background checks or "otherwise screen members registering to the service".

Most online dating sites do have features that allow users to flag another member for inappropriate behaviour, though. However, how thorough the follow-ups are vary again from site to site.

When a user is flagged on SpeedDate, the site claims it takes a screenshot of the chat, which is sent to a team for investigation.

Who Works Around You co-founder Betty Goh said its members can report another user through e-mail. If the complaint is valid, a warning will be sent. Af-



Online dating websites have become increasingly popular and most have features that allow users to flag another member for inappropriate behaviour. However, the follow-ups vary from site to site. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

ter three warnings, the non-compliant user will be banned.

Similarly, Eteract.com said it will ban a user if there are three or more complaints against him or her. The site will also inform oth-

ers who have been in contact with the person. Close to 3 per cent of its members were banned from the site last year for various reasons, said Ms Lim.

One user of online dating ser-

vice eSynchrony, who wanted to be known only as Iris, said she has been on two dates since she joined the site in May.

The meet-ups were arranged by the company only after both parties "approved" each other via the website - a function that adds a layer of security.

"I have long working hours and no time to meet new or interesting people," said Iris, who is in her 30s and an executive in the financial sector. "I hope I won't be single forever," she added.

Social media experts believe that ultimately, the safety of those who use online dating services lies in their own hands.

"What digital channels have done is shift power from the hands of a few gatekeepers and place it in the hands of each individual," said Dr Michael Netzley, an assistant professor of communication at Singapore Management University.

He said apps like SpeedDate are gaining popularity precisely because the barrier to joining and dating is increasingly being lowered.

"With that shift comes a responsibility to look out for your own well-being. The gatekeeper is no longer there to do it for you."

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