

Chapter XV

Understanding and Facilitating the Development of Social Networks in Online Dating Communities: A Case Study and Model

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ABSTRACT

Online dating is a big business, allowing people from the comfort of their own home to view and read about potential mates all around the world. Different dating sites offer different services. However, it is not yet commonplace for Web sites dedicated to dating to use the social networking tools used by popular online communities, such as those that use the personal homepage and message board genres. The ecological cognition framework (ECF) provides a theoretical model regarding online dating communities' behavior and relationship development. A model based on the ECF is proposed and provides a basis for developing online dating services that effectively support relationship development. Two investigations are presented in this chapter, one that uses a case study approach to identify and describe online dating services from the perspective of a specific case and another that assess the effectiveness of existing online dating services based on the guidelines developed from the case study. The case study provides a useful insight into the nature of social networking from the perspective of a specific case, which led to guidelines for developing e-dating systems that when evaluated showed that the most popular social networking services also score well against the criteria proposed in those guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

According to Dvorak et al. (2003), people have always found ways to meet on the Internet, with online dating being a big business, allowing people from the comfort of their own home to view and read about potential mates all around the world. Through *virtual worlds* such as multi-user-dungeons (MUDs), they can interact, talk and compete against others in an online environment. According to Quansah (2004), different dating sites offer different services, though it is not yet commonplace for Web sites dedicated to dating to use the social networking tools offered by popular online communities. Liebowitz (2003) argues that social networking is a powerful way to bring people closer together suggesting social networking tools are ideally placed to enhance dating Web sites. According to Kuriansky there are a number of advantages to dating online, including the immediacy, the cost, access, practicing social skills, learning verbal expression, developing relationships, accessibility and control. Immediacy is beneficial because opportunities are just a click away, as the user can be writing a document or surfing the Net then switch to e-mail or instant messaging. The computer can cost less than phone calls, and with some services the dating is free. Access to the services is efficient whether wireless broadband or simple dial-up. Online dating allows the practicing of social skills as the user can make mistakes knowing they will never see that person again. It allows for the learning of verbal expression, as when the user types on their profile or in messages they practice expressing themselves in the way they want to. Computer contact can also help foster the friendship that is the basis for a long-lasting love by allowing the time and safety for a relationship to grow. Those who cannot get out of their locality due to accessibility restrictions can also benefit from online dating as they can keep in touch with others at a

distance. The user is also in total control of where, where and with whom they connect, especially if the service uses the Circle of Friends.

The Circle of Friends method of social networking, developed as part of the VECC Project (see Bishop, 2002) has been embedded into several social networking sites. The benefit of the Circle of Friends over earlier technologies is that it puts the user in control. The first Web site to use it for dating was *Friendster* in 2002 when there were only a handful of sites using the technology, including *A Guide to Robin Hood* and *Northern England* and *Llantrisant Online*, although according to Kim and Aldrich (2005) there were at least 30 social networking sites based on the Circle of Friends in 2005.

Social networking tools often form part of online communities and it has been argued that these communities have the potential to radically transform social interaction and community formation (Lutters & Ackerman, 2003). There have been definitions of online communities based on the forms they take from Web sites that provide facilities to discuss particular subjects or interests to groups of people communicating using instant messaging tools (Bishop, 2003). Hunter (2002) defines an online community as a group of people who interact with each other, learn from each other's work and provide knowledge and information resources to the group related to certain agreed-upon topics of shared interest. There exists a possible technical definition, which could be that an information system is an online community if those that use it have to go through the Membership Lifecycle identified by Kim (2000).

Understanding how people develop relationships and the role of social networking technology such as the *Circle of Friends* in enhancing the dating experience requires a deeper understanding of human behavior.

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