Position Paper
WS#15. “Scientists, designers seek same for good conversation”: A Workshop on Online Dating
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Introduction
Online dating is one of the hottest Internet industries today. The entry rate of new competitors into the market shows no sign of slowing. The promotions and marketing associated with online dating systems combined with increased attention from the mainstream media has served to reduce the stigma previously associated with online dating. The relatively low barriers to entry have attracted both start-up and more established Internet businesses to the online dating space with hopes of capitalizing on the projected growth and popularity.

As researchers and designers we must serve as the advocates for the users of these systems. By claiming to offer the chance for companionship, commitment, physical intimacy, or friendship online personals systems create a visceral emotional reaction to those who use them. Online personals users who fail to meet people whom they consider worthy of a connection, or otherwise have a poor user experience may be subject to feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and sadness, and ultimately lost revenue and a poor word-of-mouth reputation for personals providers.

Studying online personals behavior
Given the highly personal nature of online personals systems, the study of user behavior is very complex and challenging. Interaction with online personals systems does not occur in an emotional vacuum. Each visit to an online personals system is accompanied by the user’s expectations and hopes of achieving his or her goals. What are the best approaches to understand the natural experience of interacting with an online personals system? What is the role of emotion and prior experience, on- or offline, in expectation setting and satisfaction with online personals in general and during a particular visit? What are different user expectations of online personals systems and are there determining factors that influence these expectations such as prior experience, stories from friends, or marketing promotions?

What are effective mechanisms for building rapport and trust with research participants? Does gender, race, or age influence the ability of the researcher to build trust and establish open and honest communication with research participants, or is the participant’s personality and comfort discussing their dating experiences the determining factor? Is it reasonable to expect to be able to establish such rapport within a single study session, or must it be built slowly over a period of time?

Common market research and product design methods have their limitations to developing a deep understanding of user behavior on online personals systems. Online behavior tracking software provides insight into the objective behaviors of users, but such data is unable to provide insights into the motivations behind their behavior. Focus groups rely on the ability of participants to articulate their emotional desires and needs and the courage to do it in a group setting. Discussions about online behavior occurring outside of the user’s natural context and away from the personals system are limited by memory, the tendency to summarize and generalize, shyness, and a tendency to seek comfort in the collective opinion of the group. Traditional usability testing methods also fall short of truly understanding the online personals user experience. While involving end-users as partners in the design process is extremely important to design intuitive, easy to use, and satisfying products, the context in which many of these activities occur is not representative of the user’s natural environment.

In order to fully understand and appreciate user behavior on online personals systems a combination of methods must be used. I believe the ideal approach involves visiting users in the places they most often interact with the personals systems they use and collecting information at different intervals in time. Because of the deep emotive connection to online personals, observation at the site and in the moment users interact with an online personals system is a key consideration. This places the participant in a comfortable and familiar environment that will help
to stimulate their memory, and encourage demonstration or real-time observation of the online personals experience. One of the shortcomings of this method is that only the activities recalled or exhibited during the particular visit are available to the researcher. The ethnographic study provides simply a snapshot of the user’s experience. In such a highly subjective and emotionally charged activity valuable data and insights may simply not be available.

In order to help overcome this particular shortcoming a temporal element needs to be incorporated into the study of user behavior. Diary studies, follow-up site visits, or periodic telephone interviews provide a useful means to expand the perspective of user behavior, expectations, and goals as they change over time. These methods cast a larger net for capturing experiences that may not have revealed themselves over the course of the site visit, including extended communication or off-line meetings arranged through the system. The process through which users identify potential matches, communicate with each other, arrange an in-person or telephone meeting, and ultimately determine the potential of a particular match occurs over an extended period of time that cannot be observed in a single sitting.

**Self-expression, searching, matching, and communicating**

A common criticism of online dating systems is the difficulty assessing the personality and potential chemistry of someone found online. This represents a challenge for online personals systems as they compete with offline alternatives. The common online experience of reviewing ads and drawing conclusions based on the written summary or selected descriptors does not provide the same cues afforded in offline meetings.

Online dating systems have attempted to overcome this challenge using a variety of mechanisms. Some systems offer users the ability to append video or voice messages to their personals ads. Yet these features do not effectively simulate the offline interaction where the give and take of conversation or the behavior in a social setting provide important clues about personality and the potential for a deeper emotional connection. Two-way matching, where the user and the ad poster’s criteria are compared side-by-side is another common attempt to help users assess compatibility. However such comparisons are often limited by the formatting of the information that makes the comparisons possible in the first place. These types of features function more as criteria checklists rather than as effective gauges of compatibility.

The type of online personals system may also hamper self-expression. Free systems tend to provide less oversight and review of the content provided in personals ads. However, subscription (fee) systems tend to review submitted content to identify abuse and inappropriate content, adding a cost to the business. The use of form fields with predetermined content provides a more economical alternative to the review of free-form explanations, but sacrifices opportunities for greater self-expression.

Some online dating systems now offer personality tests and compatibility matching formulas based on the “science” of clinical experts in an attempt to overcome these limitations. These systems create a very different user experience. Instead of manually specifying their search criteria and evaluating the results, users place their faith in a formula developed by a so-called clinical expert based on their responses to an extensive personality test. These systems claim to promote quality over quantity and to offer a better system than mainstream personals systems. It remains to be seen if users prefer to place control in the hands of a matching formula rather than maintain their control of the searching and evaluation process.

Online personals systems also provide a variety of search tools and functionality to allow users to parse through the hundreds or thousands of potential matches. However the design and capabilities of these search tools are dependent on the type of information available in the system database. The data and its format do not always reflect the needs of the end user.

Almost all online personals systems obscure the matching criteria used to generate search results. While this decision protects the proprietary algorithms, it also hampers the ability of users
to understand the logic behind their search results and modify it to better support their goals and strategies. This approach also makes it more difficult for users to recover from errors committed during the search process. Without a clear feedback mechanism users are unable to realize potential errors in their search criteria and effectively alter their strategy.

Safety, Honesty, and Community

Though online personals may have shed much of its early stigma, users still maintain a degree of skepticism and suspicion of people they meet online. The skepticism influences the systems they choose to use, their evaluation process, and their decision to communicate and ultimately to arrange a meeting with another member. This concern is exacerbated by the lack of community on online personals systems. Without a community of users to establish and enforce the norms of the group, the personals service provider is tasked with policing the system. Since the provider is not an actual member of the community, its oversight is limited to only the content of the ads and reports of inappropriate behavior.

Reputation systems have been incorporated into other online experiences, particularly auctions and shopping, but not to online personals. The site Friendster.com, one of the leading social networking services, provides a testimonial system where other members of the service are able to write testimonials about their friends. In order to submit a testimonial both people must have a profile on the system. Is this model transferable to an online personals system? How would testimonials work and would they serve to discourage users from participating on the service or increase the already existing pressure to present an attractive presence online?

About the Author

I am the User Experience Researcher for Yahoo! Personals. In this role I work with a cross-functional team to design and develop Yahoo! Personals, Yahoo!’s online dating system. My responsibilities span the product development process. I collaborate with market researchers to conduct exploratory research to understand user goals, needs, and dating behaviors. I work closely with interaction and visual designers to implement a user-centered design process consisting of participatory design activities and prototype evaluations. I am also responsible for conducting usability evaluations to ensure that the product and its features are easy for people to use and comprehend. I deliver the results of my research to product managers and designers to ensure that Yahoo! Personals provides a useful, usable, and satisfying experience.

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