
Online Dating as Pandora's Box: Methodological Issues for the CSCW Community

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CSCW '15 Companion, Mar 14-18 2015, Vancouver, BC, Canada
ACM 978-1-4503-2946-0/15/03.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2685553.2699335>

Abstract

As a socio-technical phenomenon, online dating has significant appeal to researchers interested in various aspects of human-computer interaction – presentation of self in online environments; norms of disclosure and deception; and the extent to which technological design informs dynamics of human relationships. With these many facets of socio-technical practice come important and complex methodological questions, where both the sensitivity of the topic and the specific technologies being studied can introduce practical and ethical obstacles. This panel brings together scholars across human computer interaction, communication, information studies, and Internet studies to examine methodological issues that have arisen in their own work on online dating, with the objective of broadening these issues of ethics and methods to the wider CSCW community.

Author Keywords

Methodology; online dating; ethics

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous; K.4.2 Computers and Society: Social Issues

Introduction

In this panel, we assemble an interdisciplinary collection of scholars who have encountered methodological challenges while investigating varying facets of online dating. Our aim is to use these experiences researching online dating to open up a discussion that addresses a wider set of methodological issues encountered while studying online behavior of a sensitive or intimate nature. (For a definition of sensitive research, see [4].) In other words, we use our expertise with researching online dating to speak to broader methods issues of concern to the CSCW community.

The CSCW community continues to address issues of research ethics and methods [1, 3, 5, 6, 7], including how to respect participant privacy and confidentiality; working across industry versus academic environments, which may have different methodological norms and processes; and managing social and emotional boundaries in the context of conducting sensitive research. Drawing on experiences with investigating online dating, panelists will explore these dynamics and tensions, organized by themes in the following sections.

Themes and Key Challenges

Participant Recruitment

Recruiting participants and gathering data for studies of dating apps generally (and especially location-aware apps for casual sexual encounters) can be difficult in several respects. For example, users may be dispersed nationally or internationally and difficult to locate. Additionally, companies that develop these apps may not want their products to be studied, sometimes taking steps to prevent recruitment. Leading this discussion, Jeremy Birnholz will discuss a study of

Grindr, a dating app targeted at men who have sex with men (MSM), in order to dissect issues of participant recruitment in a grounded way.

One reasonable strategy for recruiting study participants from apps like *Grindr* would seem to be via the app itself, where researchers set up profiles and then reach out to potential participants through the app. However, *Grindr* does not permit recruiting (“soliciting,” in their preferred terminology) participants via interaction on the app and explicitly blocked attempts to do so (by shutting down the profile of one of the researchers, as well as contacting the researchers’ Internal Review Board). *Grindr* similarly opposed offers to place paid advertisements with calls for participant recruitment on the app because some studies have portrayed the app negatively in the past. This led to recruitment via other more generic LGBT venues (such as email lists at universities and *Craigslist*), but this approach excludes *Grindr* users who wish to keep their sexual identity secret, live in areas that lack highly visible queer communities or active *Craigslist* participation, and users who simply do not pay attention to those sources. This struggle to recruit participants generates questions of how best to navigate issues of studying app users that may perceive academic research negatively. Beyond the specific context of online dating, panelists’ comments will speak to broader issues of how users are conceptualized in HCI research [2].

Deception

The interview process nearly always demands empathy and interpersonal skills, but some topics introduce additional complexity. One particularly challenging interview topic is deception: namely, asking

participants to reflect upon (and admit) stigmatized behavior such as lying on an online dating profile. Additionally, participants who engage in deception in interpersonal contexts may also do so during the interview itself. All of the panelists have been involved in designing, conducting, and analyzing data from interview projects focused on self-presentation in online dating contexts—many with a focus on deceptive practices. The panelists will share some of the strategies they have used to elicit candid responses from participants about deceptive behavior and some of the challenges common to research related to online identity work more broadly. These strategies include working to appear non-judgmental as an interviewer and incorporating reflexivity into the interview process, encouraging frank reflection.

Institutional review

In many research institutions, the review process for human subjects research does not always keep pace with technological change, which can be deeply frustrating for scholars working on CSCW-related processes. Online dating draws together (at least) two sources of potential complexity for IRB approval: the discussion of sexuality and dating typically constitutes sensitive research and additionally, studying online platforms can be a difficult topic to navigate at institutions where Review Boards may not be up to date in terms of understanding online interactions. Our approach in addressing these difficulties is two-fold, offering both concrete strategies that researchers have developed to position their work as ethically sound and academically necessary, and also addressing issues that researchers should be sure to consider, even if the IRB does not raise them. This discussion topics aims to spur thinking about how research into online dating opens

up issues applicable to a much larger body of CSCW research.

Intersectionality

Online dating platforms have diversified significantly over the last decade from a web-only interface to a range of platforms, such as mobile and geo-location. Matching formats have also broadened, from *see and screen* formats that allow users to browse through a database of available profiles to formats that use increasingly complex algorithms for matching daters. This diversity raises several important methodological challenges when the scope of inquiry is not a single site, but rather the role of a given site, community, design feature or tools in a larger ecosystem of platforms. These include assessing how daters experience the site or its matching procedures and to how they form mental models of the dating experience. Drawing on experiences from researching online dating, we use this panel to demonstrate how a seemingly niche research topic encompasses a range of platforms and factors that shape both online (and offline) interaction.

Panelists

Jeremy Birnholtz is an associate professor in the Communication Studies and Electrical Engineering/Computer Science departments at Northwestern University. Most relevant to this panel, he has spent the last 3 years involved in studies of *Grindr*, a location-aware dating app for gay men, with funding from the Sexualities Project at Northwestern University.

Nicole B. Ellison is an Associate Professor in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. Her research addresses issues of self-presentation, social

capital, relationship development, and identity in online environments. Her research has been funded by the National Science Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Most recently, she has been studying the relationship between *Facebook* use and social capital processes, the use of social media in organizations, online dating participants' self-presentational strategies, and the role of social media for supporting college-going activities among low-income and first-generation youth.

Jeff Hancock is a Professor at Cornell University in the Departments of Communication and Information Science, where he is also Chair. His research has focused on the psychological aspects of online dating, especially around self-presentation, deception, language, and most recently on how algorithms play a role in people's understanding of online dating.

Jessa Lingel is a post-doctoral research fellow at Microsoft Research. Her research concentrates on information inequality and technological distributions of power. Her most recent work investigates countercultural communities and relationships to online technologies. In this panel, she will draw on her qualitative and interpretive research on online dating sites geared specifically towards people living with sexually transmitted infections.

Doug Zytko (moderator) is a PhD candidate at New Jersey Institute of Technology. His recent published work has revolved around interviews conducted with users of the popular online dating system *OkCupid* concerning their impression management and

formation behavior on the system. He is currently investigating impression management and formation behavior used or advocated by online dating coaches in an attempt to distinguish between online dating struggles that are due to human behavior and those due to deficient system design.

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