Ephemeral and Remembered Selves: The Social Costs of Online Memories.

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Abstract

We have been studying the use of online, real-time dating sites targeted at men who have sex with men. These sites provide an interested context for examining the dichotomy of online and offline identity, and some of the challenges designers and researchers face when we try to merge these two concepts. In particular, we have found that these online personals are presented as a point-in-time representation of the individual that may or may not have much relationship to the evolving identity of the user, because these profiles are rarely updated. We discuss some of the implications of this for the design of sites, for using the profiles as a data source, and for doing research on these sites.

Author Keywords

Online Dating; Self-presentation; Profile Updates.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.4.3. Communication Applications

Introduction

We have been studying what we are calling real-time dating sites [1,4] as well as the rapidly emerging real-time dating apps genre since 2010. These sites and apps generally target men who have sex with men (MSM). Examples of these sites include Manhunt and Adam4Adam and the apps include ones such as Grindr

and Scruff, as well as apps focused on a heterosexual population like Tinder (we refer to these generically as "sites" but we will note where there are meaningful differences.) These are interesting sites for interrogation of the notion of identity and potential dissociations of offline and online identities because the users often reveal some highly sensitive information such as sexual orientation, fetish preferences, as well as information about health and drug use. It has long been recognized that the relative anonymity afforded by the online world can provide an arena where individuals can "try on" new identities [5]. However, the ultimate goal of these sites is to meet in person. This means that eventually (and typically fairly quickly) the offline identity must be reconciled with the online presentation of self. The dating sites we investigate are typically used for a very wide range of purposes, from casual "no-strings" encounters to a more normative search for a long-term relationship. Thus the kinds of choices the users make in terms of presentation of self can potentially vary dramatically.

Research Methods

Over the course of the study we have been regularly gathering profiles from a number of different sites. In addition to the textual profiles, we have also gathered usage patterns as well as articulated social networks (where supported by the site). More recently we have also added survey and interview studies with the users of the sites. Our broad research goals are around ways that these sites can be used to enhance overall community health, with an emphasis on HIV and drug use risk-reduction. However, issues of identity have been a natural extension of this work.

The data set we have collected contains extensive longitudinal data about users' profiles, and how these profiles change (or do not change) over time. Other work looking at on-line dating profiles (e.g. [1,3]) has focused on a single point-in-time of a profile, without considering how these profiles may change, evolve or even disappear over time.

Findings

One surprising finding has been the relatively short life of online dating accounts. For instance, on one site, the median life of an account is roughly one week. Although we have no way of measuring this directly, there is some evidence that rather than updating a profile to reflect new or changed identity, people will delete (or let go dormant) an account and create a new one. Our initial qualitative investigation suggests that some users delete and create new accounts as frequently as every few months. Some sites are designed to make creating an account more "expensive" either literally by charging a membership fee to access certain features, or figuratively through mechanisms like social networking features that preference a user maintaining a single account. On these sites, we do see a longer tenure of use of the same profile

Our initial analysis of profiles over time showed that profiles are surprisingly *static*. Changing or updating a profile does not happen very often. There is some evidence that when profiles are changed, controlled vocabulary fields (e.g. from a drop-down list, like preferred meeting location) are more often changed than free text fields (e.g. "About myself"). One of the more common factors impacting profile updates is travel; users will frequently update their profile when

they are in a new city with information about their location and availability. However, both of these factors are minor influences on the updates of profiles, especially compared to the relative short life of accounts.

These two findings set up an interesting tension: online dating profiles seem to be effectively "disposable," and it is almost easier to create a new profile than to update an old one. (Of course, setting up a new profile can be a way to escape an identity a user no longer wants to be tied to or social interactions that the user no longer wants to engage in.) Thus dating sites continue to offer the kinds of exploratory environments where users can "try on" facets of identity, described in early Internet research. This is a contrast to more traditional social networking sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn, where persistence is part of the expectation of the use of these sites and is rewarded through a denser network of contacts. If dating sites are a venue for play with self-presentation then how might this type of play be affected when dating sites begin to rely on these less "dynamic" and more "socially costly" venues for verification such as, for example, Tinder?

Discussion

In the real-time dating site context, talking about an "online identity" is an interesting challenge. If we conceive of self-disclosure online as "identity work" in the same sense that people manage disclosures in real life, that is, an evolving presentation of the self, in response to both one-to-one interaction and larger social changes, then the kinds of disclosures we see on dating sites are serial rather than evolving. The identity that a user creates for themselves on these sites is instead a snap-shot of the person at a particular point

in time intended for interaction with another such snapshot of a potential sexual partner. The real-time aspect of these dating sites however suggests that the online snapshot must be close enough to the kind of offline identity the user is ready to present in-person for the sexual encounter to occur. Thus the profiles as these become created and then discarded are most likely aligned with ongoing current changes in the users' life and conceptualization of the self rather than representations of a promise of a future ideal self as some have previously proposed [2].

There are very few platforms (if any) that allow for ongoing disclosure of identity that could potentially supporting evolving of new relationships beyond exchange of personal messages or email. Some sites do allow a kind of process of increasing disclosure in the form of revealing new pictures as the interaction progresses online. It is not clear what value users could derive from these kinds of features, what influence (if any) this might have on persistence of profiles and whether such features make possible different sorts of relationships on dating sites. Even though this is a design issue with the sites, it is not clear that a different design which might allow for selective and evolving disclosure of more parts of an identity would be an effective solution. This is an area for future work.

This brings up a question of ephemerality versus persistence. Our data illustrates that in the dating site context, profiles are for the most part ephemeral. Our intuition and initial qualitative data suggest that people are more likely to delete a profile than to update it. In simple terms, deleting a profile is a way to discard a kind of past along with certain social relationships connected to that past[2]. Yet our digital lives outside

of dating are now highly dependent on sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook that make it very socially expensive to delete a profile, to restart anew, to leave the past behind in part because of the significant cost of re-forming the social connections accumulated over time and the risk that those links will not be renewed. In the dating context, the choice between discarding and maintaining a profile is an interesting empirical question that needs more exploration.

In addition, the persistence of information accumulating on sites such as Facebook or Instagram, however, may be the source of increasing tension and confusion. The long history of these sites, especially for people who are now entering their second decade of use on some may become more of a bug than a feature. The embarrassing party pictures from a college spring break are obvious instances of this kind of data. But even the more subtle disclosures begin to tie a user to an online identity that is heavily weighted towards the past, rather than the present. As lives and selves evolve, not everything needs to be kept and remembered.

Acknowledgements

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