

Judging You by the Company You Keep: Dating on Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

This study examines dating strategies in Social Networking Sites (SNS) and the features that help participants achieve their dating goals. Qualitative data suggests the SNS feature, the friends list, plays a prominent role in finding potential dates, verifying credibility, and validating ongoing relationship commitment levels. Observations of how study participants use the friends list may provide design implications for social networking sites interested in facilitating romantic connection among their users. More broadly, this research shows how subtle user-interface design choices in social computing software can have a profound effect on non-trivial activities like finding a life partner.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interface – Web-based interaction.

General Terms

Design, Human Factors

Keywords

Social networking sites, online dating, internet dating, MySpace, Friendster, friends list, top friends

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates how people use SNS for dating. What features unique to SNS do people use in their dating strategies? Why do people choose to date on SNS rather than online dating sites? What are their behaviors and perceptions of dating on SNS, and how are these different from online dating sites? Using qualitative data from twelve interviews, we examine the strategies participants use to find potential dates, verify credibility, and validate ongoing relationship commitment levels.

The primary focus of this paper is on the friends list and how it influences dating strategies on SNS. Dating in online environments has been reported extensively in past papers [10, 11, 12]. We reference existing literature for SNS history, feature

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functionality, and concepts that may explain SNS dating behavior such as identity, self-representation and social capital. While there are many SNS today, the study data come from two well-established sites with critical mass and widespread popularity: Friendster and MySpace.

1.1 Friends List: My Friends are Top Friends

The friends list is the public display of one's entire social network in which the connections are reciprocated. A friends list can be comprised of hundreds of friends, but only a subset of these friends appear on the front page of a member's profile. This selective display of friends is called "My Friends" in Friendster (Figure 1) and "Top Friends" in MySpace (Figure 2). For simplicity, we refer to the selective display as Top Friends for either site. Top Friends is an area of a member profile that displays a select group of friends arranged in the order the member chooses. Because only a finite number of friends can be Top Friends, being included in Top Friends is perceived to be an expression of how important their friendships are.

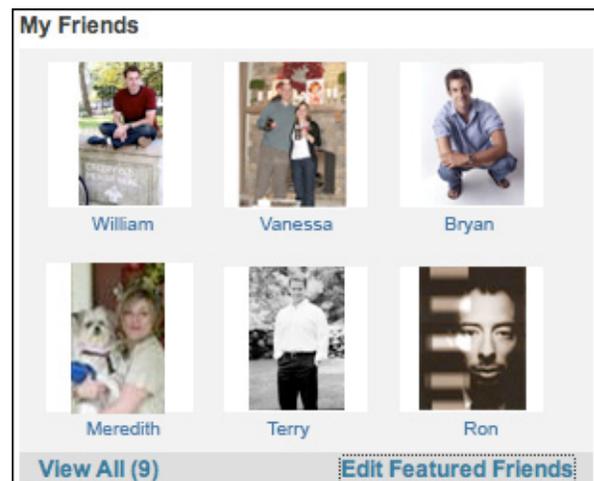


Figure 1: Friendster Friends List

Images have been obtained with permission. Names have been changed.



Figure 2: MySpace Top Friends

Images have been obtained with permission. Names have been changed.

2. SOCIAL NETWORKING AND DATING

People have been searching for love on the web using dating sites such as Match.com since 1995. With the entry of dating sites like Yahoo! Personals in 1997 and eHarmony in 2000, among many others, 16 million adults used online dating sites in 2005 [21]. But not as many people are using online dating sites in recent years. Ten percent of internet users visited at least one online dating site in 2006, down from 16% in 2005 and 21% in 2002 [2]. An industry expert, David Evans of Online Dating Insider, attributes the traffic decline to the increasing popularity of SNS [14]. According to Hitwise, social networking traffic increased 11% from January 2007 to February 2007 [26].

Not all online dating experts agree. Nate Elliott of JupiterResearch does not blame his industry's decline on SNS. "Social networking isn't the culprit. Online dating sites need to offer more special discounts to lure visitors back." He believes people who date on SNS are not the people who would pay for a subscription on a dating site [2]. To understand how online dating and social networking are related, we provide a brief history of Friendster.

In 2002, Jonathan Abrams launched Friendster as a dating site. Perceived as the first widely adopted SNS, Abrams' premise was that people would rather date their friends' friends than strangers. He wanted to take the "sleaze factor" out of online dating. "I wanted to create an alternative for people who prefer a different approach. There's a social context. It's collaborative. You don't use a pseudonym. It's not as anonymous." Friendster became an online hangout phenomenon with 2 million subscribers within 7 months [20].

People created profiles in Friendster and invited their friends. Once they had a network, they broadened it by looking up old friends and adding new people they met offline. Although Abrams established Friendster primarily as a dating site, it was the social networking component -- the ability to browse others' friends list and see to whom they were connected -- that users found

compelling [20]. boyd discusses how people were indeed dating through their connections, but they were also interested in connecting to new people they would never meet offline. In order to connect to a more diverse group of people outside of their network, members soon began creating fake characters, celebrities, icons, and bands, which came to be known as "Fakesters." One such Fakester was the television character Homer Simpson. "Friending" Homer Simpson (adding him as a friend) was not only connecting to other people with a shared interest in the show (and to their friends), but it was telling the Friendster community something about who you are [4, 5]. However, adhering to the original purpose of Friendster (meeting and dating people your friends know), the creators deleted the Fakesters' accounts, severing the social networks that were connected through them [4].

MySpace launched in 2003 with emphasis on social networking rather than dating. Unlike Friendster, MySpace imposed no restrictions on who created profiles. People found ways to hack the code to make their profiles more expressive. When they changed the layout, colors, styles, and added music and video, MySpace let them [4, 5]. Celebrities, icons, and bands whose profiles were deleted on Friendster created profiles in MySpace. Bands, in particular, played an important role in MySpace from the beginning. Small, local bands finally had their own website where they could showcase their music, share concert dates, and grow their fan base. Millions of new members joined MySpace, attracted to the music of indie bands, the ability to download their music for free, and the opportunity to interact with them [4, 6]. On leaving Friendster for MySpace, a participant commented:

I committed Friendster suicide in 2005. I resisted getting on MySpace until I realized all my friends were checking MySpace ten times a day and not logging into Friendster unless I sent them messages. It's like they were having a party without me on MySpace. But then, I think the music really sealed the deal for me. (Annie, 31)¹

When she first joined MySpace in 2005, Annie spent much of her time looking for new music and planning to see local bands. Today, she uses MySpace as an extension of her social life. She logs in several times a day, replies to messages, leaves comments, reads blogs, and less frequently, updates her profile with new photos. Most people remember MySpace having its origins in music, but today, it is a site that people join because it seems everyone is on it. MySpace has over 160 million profiles (www.myspace.com) and is the number one visited SNS site that accounts for 80% of all SNS traffic [28]. With so many people hanging out in one place, it is easy to see how people are using it to date.

3. METHOD

In order to study dating behavior on SNS, we interviewed twelve people who used Friendster or MySpace for dating. Other participant criteria included age (older than 18), length of membership (more than three months), time spent on SNS per week (more than 2 hours), and life stage (post college or currently

¹ Information about our participants has been changed to protect their confidentiality.

not in college). Eight women and four men who met the above criteria became the purposeful sampling group.

We used several methods to recruit participants with varied levels of success: direct messaging through Friendster and MySpace, posting a notice on Craigslist, word of mouth [1], and snowball sampling [16]. Not surprisingly, word of mouth personal introductions from friends of friends proved most effective.

Because there has been little research on the topic of dating behavior on SNS, we took an inductive approach by allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than starting with a hypothesis [16]. The interview was semi-structured with open-ended research questions about participants' SNS dating history, such as how they meet potential dates, assess compatibility, determine credibility, and develop the relationship. All participants allowed us to access to their profiles on Friendster or MySpace during our interviews (which sometimes meant adding the authors as a friends because their profiles were set to private). We encouraged participants to share other relevant thoughts pertaining to dating on SNS. Eight participants who used online dating sites in the past frequently compared dating experiences and perceptions of both sites. We conducted ten telephone and two in-person interviews that were 60 to 90 minutes long. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

4. PARTICIPANTS

Of the twelve participants interviewed, eight were female and four were male. They were from urban areas of five states. Their SNS memberships varied from 6 months to 3 years and dating experiences on SNS ranged from dating one person to four people. Seven participants had also used fee-based online dating sites in the past. The age ranged from 26 to 36, and 30 was the mean.

We excluded undergraduate students who have a ready-made social network – classmates at school who, if engaged with SNS, are more likely members of Facebook. According to boyd, their SNS participation differs from adults' participation in SNS. Students prefer to socialize with people they know while adults find value in socializing with strangers [5]. Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield agree that students use SNS such as Facebook to learn more about people they meet offline, and are not likely to use the site to initiate new connections [22]. A female participant explained the reason she joined Friendster:

I had moved here from Chicago. I didn't have a lot of friends here. I wanted to meet people in general, but definitely not from work. It's not like in school where you have to do a project with three people and you end up [becoming] friends. I also wanted to meet people for dating. (Stephanie, 31)

Stephanie described the difficulty of making friends without the context of college and hoped to meet new people using Friendster. The study sought participants past the school life stage who did not depend on the school social network and were regularly engaged in meeting new people on SNS to expand their social connections.

5. FINDINGS

The interview data offers insights to how people use SNS for dating. Specifically, the paper examines how the Top Friends

influences dating strategies in four areas: 1) self presentation, 2) finding dates and determining credibility, 3) evaluating relationship status and commitment levels, and 4) maintaining relationships after the romance is over.

5.1 Self Presentation Strategies for Dating on SNS

Erving Goffman wrote that audience and context influence how people present themselves [17]. This notion of audience and context resonated with participants who had used both online dating sites and SNS for dating. They spoke of mediating their identities to accommodate the two audiences and contexts.

Participants described the differences in their self presentation strategies given the following; when performing for a singular audience of potential dates in the context of online dating where reliability of identity cannot be verified by others, and when performing for a varied audience of friends and potential dates in the context of social networking where reliability of identity can be verified by others.

5.1.1 Reliability of Self Presentation Influenced by the Friends List

Profiles from online dating sites and SNS display similar information; demographic details (age, location, gender), photographs, description of who they are and who they would like to meet. This collection of information provides a picture of Marc, a 27 year-old runner whose favorite painter is William Blake. Marc has carefully crafted the cues he is giving and giving off [17]. The reference to Blake as a painter rather than a poet inadvertently gives off the impression that he has discerning appreciation for the humanities. A photograph of Marc at the Marine Corp marathon directly gives the information that he is physically fit. But is he really who he claims? What incentives does Marc have to ensure the impression he gives is a true presentation of him?

How accurately Marc portrays himself is influenced by audience and context. Members of online dating sites construct their identities by carefully analyzing the cues they give off [10]. Even with the best intentions to present an accurate impression, it is easy to prevaricate when the audience is composed of strangers. Members of SNS construct their identities for an audience of people they know; knowing friends will read the profile description encourages honesty in self presentation [9]. Participants who have used online dating sites and SNS commented how the Top Friends influenced their profiles:

My MySpace profile is more me. It says I'm a single mom who loves my kids, the beach, and tells bad jokes...my two best friends are on there too and they write on my page the bad jokes I tell them when we're hanging out shopping and stuff. They say how bad the jokes are. We all get a good laugh. But I can't say I tell bad jokes on the dating site. (Beth, 36)

There's a different level of credibility associated with Friendster when you have people backing you up. If your friends are connected to you and are reading it, you don't want to say all kinds of different things. Friends would give you a hard time if you are too serious or taking yourself seriously. My profile on [the online

dating site] is not the person I put forth on Friendster where everyone can see. I wouldn't say the same things. One is totally geared toward dating and the other one is more casual. If I knew my friend found out my handle on a dating site, I would be uncomfortable. (Matthew, 32)

Participants did not perceive the differences of their profiles as misrepresentation, but rather as identity management that must be negotiated for the two distinct audiences and contexts. Participants felt they needed to be 'real' or authentic in their SNS descriptions or risk ridicule from their friends. In effect, SNS friends encourage honesty, thereby increasing reliability of participants' identities.

5.2 Finding Each Other

The participants report two reasons for searching profiles on SNS. First is to support or expand existing connections by looking for people they know offline. Second is to meet new people they normally would not meet offline. Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield refer to this type of searching as social browsing [22]. In the context of dating, participants act as social browsers, searching for new people they want to meet offline. One participant talked about meeting new people on MySpace: "I've always dated a lot before MySpace, so it's not like I solely depend on it. But MySpace lets me meet a whole bunch of different people I wouldn't meet everyday. It's definitely expanded my horizons." She added she would have never met her current boyfriend offline even though they share an interest in science fiction.

When asked about how they look for dates on SNS, participants described social browsing in two ways. Several participants browsed through their friends list, allowing interesting profiles to lead to others. Others searched by criteria, specifying characteristics they were looking for. Adding keywords filtered the results further, yielding a smaller number of potential dates. Searching by criteria in SNS works the same way for online dating sites. To understand more about searching by criteria, see Fiore [11]. This section describes how the friends list is used to look for dates.

5.2.1 Browsing by Friends List

Six participants met their dates while browsing through Top Friends. Blake recalled the connection was two degrees apart (they shared a friend in common).

Jeanine found me via my friend Meg, who was in the band with me. I didn't know her [Jeanine] before, but she saw me on Meg's friends list. She sent me a picture and a message. (Blake, 30)

Blake is a musician who checks his MySpace profile several times a day. He receives many messages from fans as well as from women who are romantically interested in him. Blake says he is selective in his responses, sometimes not replying at all. He often dismisses generic messages, like the one he received from a woman who complimented, "You have nice eyes." Jeanine's message was just as generic. "I like your jacket," she wrote, referring to a photo of him wearing a vintage jacket from the 1920s. Blake had heard the exact line before and found it unoriginal. But Jeanine knew Meg, and Meg was in his band. He and Meg had been playing together for two years. They loved

jazz, collaborated on new music, and supported each other outside of the band. Blake trusted Meg; she had social capital. Even though the messages, "You have nice eyes," and "I like your jacket" were similarly uninteresting to him, Blake decided to respond to Jeanine because of her connection to Meg.

Other participants met through connections more than two degrees apart, meandering from one profile to the next, allowing photos, comments, and interesting descriptions guide which profile to explore.

I would browse around from one of my friends, and then go off on a tangent. Oh, that person looks interesting. Then you look at their friends, and then at some point you don't know how you got there. It might be a friend of a friend of a friend...At the time when I found Grace, I had done that. I feel like I would have some association of who she was if she was a friend of a friend. I would know, hey, she's such-and-such's friend. But she was more removed than that. All I know is that I clicked on interesting links. (Matthew, 32)

I used to go to the Standard² a lot. That's how I met Thomas. It was some connection through the Standard, somehow. I ended up on one person or another. I wish I could remember exactly how I got there, but I was just clicking along for a while. He was connected to someone who was connected to the Standard, who was connected to me. (Stephanie, 31)

Stephanie elaborated on her browsing habits on Friendster. Prior to meeting Thomas, she actively looked for dates by using the search page. She had a search strategy that cast a wide but selective net so she can see the all possible prospects who still met her criteria. She selected different combinations of desirable attributes, sometimes with or without keywords. Disappointingly, she found no profiles worth pursuing in the eight months she had been a Friendster member.

At the time, the epicenter of Stephanie's social life was a neighborhood bar called the Standard. It was her "third place," a comfortable hangout where she was a regular [27]. The day Stephanie saw Thomas' profile; her starting point was a message from a friend from the Standard. Many clicks later, she stumbled upon Thomas' profile. He was wearing a costume, and his headline reflected a sense of humor she found attractive. Even though Thomas was many degrees away, her fondness for the Standard and Thomas's loose connection to it made him interesting. The tie through the Standard was enough for Stephanie to send Thomas a message, the first contact she initiated on Friendster. At the time of submission of this paper, the couple reported they were still dating.

5.3 Determining Credibility

When assessing the credibility of a profile, participants scrutinized the person's interactions with his or her friends. They felt that understanding friendship connections can help determine the person's credibility. A female participant said, "You can tell so much from looking at their friends. This guy messaged me. All

² The Standard is a neighborhood dive bar located in a small urban community.

his friends were girls in bikinis. He's not all that cute, but all his friends are girls in bikinis? He wasn't interested in me. He's just collecting faces. I'm like, no, you can't have my face." She decided he was not credible because of the superficial connections to women who were not substantial friends.

5.3.1 *Strength of Ties as Indicator of Credibility*

Connections can also be thought of as ties between friends. Participants looked for evidence of strong ties that signaled close friendships as an indicator of credibility. The notion of tie strength was first described by the sociologist, Granovetter, who wrote that strength of a tie is a combination of characteristics such as frequency, trust, support, and reciprocity [19]. Participants looked for these characteristics when evaluating potential dates. Blake gave examples of a strong tie and a weak tie.

I'll look at their comments that other people leave. You can tell a lot by the comments by how personal they [the comments] are. So not like, "Thanks for the add!" but more like, "Hey, dinner was so good yesterday. We need to talk outside of work more often." This is a real person. There are pictures of her with her friends, which means she's social. If someone leaves a comment on a picture, I check that out too. She has friends. This is a real person with a life. (Blake, 30)

Blake's strategy for determining credibility was to examine all points of interaction between friends, including the comments they leave for each other on the main page as well as the comments on individual photos. A generic, impersonal message is a weak tie, while a message that hints at affection is a strong tie with characteristics of trust and support. Another participant had a similar approach to assessing a person's credibility, but she was more attentive to weak ties:

If you look at his Top 8 and it's guys and girls, they are dressed kind of like him, they like the same random beer, or they have pictures together doing random [stuff], you can tell a lot from a profile. If the guy has one friend who is Tom, you just delete their message, because you know they're married. If the guy has 200 comments from guys and girls from his Top 8, he's fine.

But if 150 of them say, 'Thanks for adding me' that's not good. If 150 comments are from 150 different people, that's not good. If all his pictures are of him and they're taken from his phone, that's not good. I mean, that is clearly not your friends. Dude, where are your friends? Who are you? What are you about? You can tell from the comments if they're actually friends or not. (Annie, 31)

Annie first talked about the signs that indicate strong ties, such as having a mix of men and women as friends who have similar tastes (fashion and beer), evidence they socialized offline (photographs taken together), and high activity of commenting from them. She pointed out the signs that indicate weak ties, such as having only one friend, Tom Anderson, a cofounder of MySpace who is automatically added to all new member profiles. Tom as the only friend is an indication of a new member who has not added personal friends. Other signs of weak ties include infrequency of comments from the same friends, indiscriminate acceptance of friend requests, and no photographs taken with

friends. Annie's conclusion that absence of strong ties signaled absence of credibility was echoed by her questions, "Who are you? What are you about?"

5.4 Validating Relationship Status and Commitment Levels

Once participants began dating people they met on Friendster or MySpace, they referred to Top Friends to better understand their ongoing relationship status. They looked for two cues; reciprocity (am I in your Top Friends?) and symmetry (you are number one in my Top Friends. Where am I on yours?).

5.4.1 *Top Friends Reciprocity and Symmetry*

Participants not only expected to see their profiles on their partners' Top Friends, but they also expected to occupy a similar position on it. As one female participant stated, "The Top Friends tells me where I stand." She placed her boyfriend of four months in the number one position of her Top Friends. She was pleased to be number two on his. When asked about the discrepancy, she said the number one position was given to his younger sister, a gesture she found very sweet. Being second after his sister was understandable and acceptable. "But if some other woman who is not family is ahead of me, that would take some explanation," she added.

Marc dated a woman he met through MySpace for several months. A few weeks into their relationship, she moved him from the first row to the last row. Marc understood this order change to mean she was losing her affection for him.

During the 'on' phase, she was number two on my list, and I was probably like two or three on hers. I don't remember, but I was definitely up there. Then we had an iffy phase where things were degrading... I went somewhere from the top half to the bottom half, like fifteenth or sixteenth place. (Marc, 27)

Although Marc did not remember the exact position he occupied on her Top Friends, he was aware that she had moved him down significantly. Marc said the change occurred when they were in the "iffy phase," and he knew "it was going downhill." Despite his own demotion, he kept her at number two on his Top Friends. He considered moving her down but did not want to give the impression that he "cared that much or even noticed the whole Top Friends thing." When the relationship ended a few weeks later, they removed each other from their respective Top Friends.

Beth questioned her boyfriend's commitment level when he took her off his Top Friends completely. She was surprised to find Brad had replaced a few people in his Top Friends with women she did not know. In her place was a much younger woman posing seductively.

I was so mad I couldn't see straight. I said, wait a minute, before I pick up this phone, let me send him an email. So I messaged him and said maybe I need to pose like that to be in his Top 8. He put me back. We never talked about it afterwards. (Beth, 36)

Beth commented Brad's actions gave her a glimpse into a part of him she did not like. She was saddened that he was becoming "one of those guys who thinks having hot girls on his Top Friends is cool." Brad caused a great deal of tension in their relationship

because his Top Friends did not show reciprocity when Beth was looking for verification of his commitment to her.

Most participants added their partners as friends when they started dating. When the relationships became more exclusive, participants promoted their partners to Top Friends. However, Blake, the musician, did not promote Jeanine to his Top Friends.

I never put the women I'm dating on my Top Friends list. Because they're really not friends....This is very intentional. I'm making a statement that my friends came before you and they will be here after you. Everyone knows this about me. If I suddenly put Jeanine in my Top Friends, I would never hear the end of it. (Blake, 30)

Blake's decision not to put Jeanine on his Top Friends was a deliberate articulation of the importance of friendships over girlfriends. Blake's Top Friends is truly reserved for his top friends.

5.5 Maintaining Connections When Romance is Over

Of the twelve participants interviewed, six were still dating the same partners in March 2007. The participants, whose romance did not last, spoke of the positive and negative effects of remaining connected through Top Friends.

5.5.1 Positive Effects of Maintaining Connections

Participants who spent time getting to know their dates before meeting in person found that maintaining the connection to each other eased the awkwardness of the break up. Several participants spoke of communicating with people for up to two months before the first date. While they were interested in dating and did not want to "play email tag forever," they did not want to feel pressured into meeting too soon. Craig talked about how the four weeks he and Gina spent getting to know each other allowed them to stay friends after they broke up.

There's no urgency to meet next week, like there is on a dating site. She said in her Friendster profile that she liked vodka. I picked up on that. In my message, I said the best vodka I ever drank was in a small bar in Croatia. That's it. If she wrote back, that's great, but if she never wrote back, that's all right, too. It's not like I put myself out there, you know?

But she wrote back the next day. For about a month, we talked nonstop about how we love to travel and where we want to go on our next vacation. I could have taken that and run with it, right? I could have said something like, 'Hey, I'll take you to that bar in Croatia where I had the best vodka of my life.' but that would have ruined everything. (Craig, 35)

During the long acquaintance period, Craig and Gina communicated electronically, sending and receiving lengthy emails and engaging in marathon instant messaging sessions. By the time they met for the first date, Craig knew that Gina drank grape Kool-Aid until college, hated her braces so much she pried them off, and thought about moving to Seattle to be closer to her mom. The dinner conversation was easy and fun, similar in tenor to their emails. On their fifth date, Gina told Craig that she

thought of him as her good-looking cousin. Craig was crushed because he had grown to like Gina more since they started dating. His resolve not to contact Gina crumbled within a day; he missed the daily emails from her. He sent a message to Gina on Friendster, "I better be the best looking cousin you have," to which Gina responded, "I only have girl cousins." Their easy repartee was possible from the four weeks they spent getting to know one another prior to dating. They built up enough social capital that when romance did not work out, they were able to fall back into their pre-date friendship. Craig and Gina continued to communicate by email and remained on each other's Top Friends for about a year. When Craig started dating someone seriously, he and Gina gradually lost touch.

5.5.2 Negative Effects of Maintaining Connections

Contrary to Craig's experience, when Beth and Brad broke up, she removed him from her Top Friends. She even deleted him as a friend, knowing MySpace will erase all evidence of their interaction with each other on the site. She was taking all possible measures to erase Brad from her MySpace profile. Beth complained the difficult part about breaking up on MySpace was no matter what she did to disconnect from him, they were stubbornly connected through the friends they had in common. Through these friends, Brad was always available, only one degree away.

His friends are my friends on MySpace, but this is really awkward, and I can't communicate with them. The breakup is so hard because he's so available. I want to check his profile all the time. Who's in his Top 10? Did he break up with me for someone on his Top 10? What's he been saying to these girls on his Top 10? (Beth, 36)

The connection made him too accessible, and Beth found herself "checking up" on Brad by looking for changes to his profile, blog entries, photos, and Top Friends. As part of the checking up activity, she browsed their mutual friends' profiles, looking for comments from Brad to help her piece together what he has been doing recently. Beth admitted using the connections to engage in game playing that often accompanies break ups. She wrote carefully crafted comments on mutual friends' profiles hoping to get Brad's attention. As Beth shared her story, she remembered a friend teased that Beth was "on the verge of having a Glenn Close moment³ on MySpace." The comparison of Beth's behavior to the Glenn Close character's alarmed her greatly. A three-week break from MySpace helped her move past Brad. When Beth returned to MySpace, she decided not to communicate with their mutual friends. Their connection to Brad might resurrect memories of their painful breakup, or worse, her behavior.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Participants repeatedly referred to dating on SNS as a "natural" way to meet people. The notion of intention played a role in why participants found dating on SNS natural. The intention of SNS is to connect to existing friends and meet new ones—two social activities people engage in real life.

You can say with MySpace or Friendster, you're on here to hang out with friends. You don't have to make it

³ Beth is referring to the movie, *Fatal Attraction*, in which Glenn Close plays a vindictive mistress who stalks the married man who jilted her

about dating. See, my married friends are on there, so it's not about dating. You're on here to meet people, even though most of the people on there are doing it for dating. But you don't have to say that. That's the big thing. I can say my motivation is nothing. I just have a MySpace profile, and if some cute person happens to contact me, so be it. There's less pressure involved. (Stephanie, 31)

SNS provides the social context for people to meet in ways they would in the real world. They meet potential dates through fellow band mates, like Blake, or through a local bar, like Stephanie. The feature in SNS that provides the social context is Top Friends. Similar to how friendships exhibit strong ties offline, strong ties are more explicitly expressed in SNS because every interaction among friends is displayed for others to see. Participants instinctively look to these interactions to help them assess the compatibility of dating prospects through all aspects of relationship development.

Designers of social networking sites may be surprised at the extensive use of the Top Friends feature for self presentation and evaluation of potential dates. Participants who date people they meet on SNS struggle to express what their partners mean to them on Top Friends. Many find themselves altering their Top Friends choices to meet the expectations of their partners. Participants have friends in various social circles who are meaningful in different ways. Offline, these friendships may be articulated privately with appropriate degree of affection. Online, the friendships are public and unnuanced. Top Friends does not currently distinguish the friendships from romantic relationships, and participants are left to reply on basic cues such as the order and length of time they stay on their partners' Top Friends to understand their relationship standing.

User-interface design choices in social computing software can have a profound effect on non-trivial activities like finding a life partner. For example, is a friends list alphabetical, or is the order determined by the user? This may seem at first glance like a low-level detail, but we have found that people pay attention to such details and use them to convey a surprising amount of meaning. In this research, we observed in detail how subtle interface design choices influence self presentation, finding dates, determining credibility, evaluating relationship status and commitment levels, and maintaining relationships after the romance is over. As designers, we must meet the challenge of improving the design features to help users negotiate and express the subtleties of meaningful relationships.

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