BOOK REVIEW

Social Networking Communities and eDating Services: Concepts and Implications

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Celia Romm-Livermore and Kristina Setzekorn
Social Networking Communities and eDating Services: Concepts and Implications
Information Science Reference
ISBN: 9781605661049
424 pages
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The uniqueness of this book lies in its coverage of a wide range of topics and a collage of contributions from authors of different disciplines depicting both academic research and practical applications. The authors come from diverse fields such as psychology, political science, management, marketing, information technology systems, cross-cultural researchers, sociologists, media studies to name a few. In addition, the book is one of the first ones of its kind in offering a myriad of results and opinions about relatively new phenomena of social networking and e-dating services. In Social Networking Communities and eDating Services, editors Celia Romm-Livermore and Kristina Setzekorn have divided the book in two major sections: 1) social networking communities and 2) e-dating services. Each major section is then divided into sub-sections moving from individual to group level and finally to societal or global level analyses.

The authors are from many countries such as Australia, Canada, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In the articles that are included in this book, the diverse body of writers offers a range of research methodologies: from exploratory overview through convenience sampling to statistical analyses to content analysis to ethnography. Some of the articles include intercultural studies involving countries such as China, Japan, and India.

Social online networking communities have not only become popular all over the world but have also gained much commercial attention when Google acquired YouTube for $1.6 billion dollars in 2006 and recently Facebook reported having 175 million members as of February, 2009. Social networking community was one of the main vehicles utilized successfully by the Obama presidential campaign to reach potential voters. Employers are using this venue for recruiting. Not only academic research in this field is needed but availability of diverse expert opinion in one collection

DOI: 10.4018/jep.2010102207
such as the editors have provided in this book is value added work.

The first sub-section of the social networking part has two chapters on motivations for joining social networking communities and exploration of behaviors after joining. Chapter 1 is written by Harsha Gangadharbatla where five motivational factors are described. However, the noteworthy finding in this research based on a paper-pencil based convenience sample survey is a possible difference between male and female motivation for joining, i.e., Internet self-efficacy level versus a need for belonging, respectively. While the author acknowledges the limitation of the study (a convenience sample), several managerial implications are identified in the context of increasing membership, targeting promotional messages among others which also should invite further scientific academic research. In Chapter 2, Liu et al., provide a mechanism to match individuals to each other without revealing their identities based on characteristics reported by individuals as social profiles on web based communities. The authors use algorithms matching self-reported profiles of individuals in the databases and infer “a semantic fabric of taste.”

The second sub-section consists of six chapters depicting group-level dynamics in social networking communities. The editors present Nina Ziv’s work in Chapter 3 about mobile virtual networks. The author uses three case studies to gather data to show how users of these networks can provide valuable information to companies on existing products, development of new products and marketing to potential new users.

Jonathan Bishop presents his analysis on the use and influence of avatars for social interactions within these communities in Chapter 4. The author uses an ecological cognition framework to shed light on this relationship. In the next chapter (5), authors Ducheneaut and Yee explore the nature of players of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) by collecting data on the most popular MMOG, World of Warcraft. They find that most players experience a “collective solitude” as they play surrounded by, not with, other players. The authors discuss possible relationships of such online behavior prevalent in MMOGs with “real world” behavior.

In Chapter 6, Sylvie Albert and Rolland Labrasseur talk about the influence of community development networks on innovative projects basing their discussion on a change management framework where the researchers themselves take the role of change agents. The authors also present ideas for policy makers on how to manage community networks over time.

In the next chapter (7), Pippa Norris uses survey data from the 19-nation European Social Survey (2002) to demonstrate the impact of electronic-based social networks on social and political activism. The author finds political efficacy, age, education, region and civic duty are the most influencing factors of political activism while the next most predictor is the use of the Internet.

The next article is the last chapter (8) of this sub-section. It is an exploratory study based on action research study performed by Geib et al., on two real-world professional communities, a learning network and an expert network. The authors wanted to determine the factors influencing community activity and community output. Both of these networks began with face-to-face communication and then evolved partially into the electronic form. They authors find that face-to-face is still their primary mode of communication in both cases while the community systems are only utilized as support mechanisms.

The first article in the next sub-section, Social Networking Sites for Teenagers and Young Adults, is authored by Maryann Mori. She provides a thorough description of how teens (the Internet generation) utilize social networking sites as an integral part of their social, moral, educational and political lives. The author uses secondary data (including demographic statistics) to point out the importance and profound effect of online social networks on the Internet generation that may help us better understand
how to educate and/or target marketing efforts for this group.

In Chapter 10, Tamara L. Wendel uses primary and secondary quantitative data combined with qualitative information collected from interviews with college students and university administrators to demonstrate usage of social media by the various groups. In conclusion, the researcher offers several recommendations for university policy makers how to utilize social networks in the university environment.

The purpose of the study in Chapter 11 by Katherine Karl, and Joy Peluchette is to explore the relative impact of “inappropriate” postings on job candidates’ Facebook profiles on hiring decisions by employers. Users of Facebook uploaded postings including negative work-related attitudes, profanity, and comments regarding alcohol abuse, use of drugs and sexual activities. The study was done with a convenience sample of 148 graduate students from two medium-sized universities. Respondents to the survey indicated that all five types of information were relevant to hiring decisions and that they would be unlikely to pursue candidates who posted such information. However, female candidates were more likely to suffer negative consequences in terms of hiring than were male candidates. Also, although negative work-related attitudes and drug-use were considered relevant to hiring decisions, respondents were more likely to pursue candidates with profiles containing information related to sexual activities, drug use and profanity than candidates whose profiles contained negative work-related attitudes and alcohol use. The limitation of this study is in the selection of the respondents, some of whom may not have had any actual hiring experience. Future research in this area is needed.

To bring the discussion of social networking communities to a global level, in Chapter 12, Max Kennedy and Toru Sakaguchi attempt to develop a connection between cultural traits and the definition of trust as it applies to information posted on social networking systems. According to the authors, trust in the context of social networking communities may be associated with the degree to which the culture is high (or low) on individualism and uncertainty avoidance. The suggestion is that members of cultures that are relatively high on individualism and low on uncertainty avoidance (such as the US) are more likely to trust social networking services and accept the exposure that social networking services imply than members of cultures that are low on individualism and high on uncertainty avoidance (such as Japan). The authors use a case study by analyzing a social networking service, Mixi, from Japan in detail. They then identify the necessary features for a social networking service to be successful in Japan.

In Chapter 13, Celia Romm-Livermore and Gail Livermore use a concept analysis method to explore the differences between virtual and real worlds and how these differences can predict clashes between the two. They discuss a number of situations where virtual and real environments can clash. The authors then provide suggestions on what society can or should do regarding such clashes. This last paper of the first part (on social networking) of the book is a conduit to the second part, i.e., eDating.

Considering the relative paucity of research oriented articles in the field of eDating, the next section’s collections nicely add to the topic about people (couples) who first met through cyberspace or computer-mediated communication. The first article in this section (Chapter 14) is authored by Linda Jane Coleman, and Nisreen Bahnna who explore current practices and strategies used by marketers of eDating services. While they do not attempt to develop or even to test any model, they examine various secondary data sources and document demographic and psychographic segmentation approaches used by providers for developing niche marketing strategies. The authors look at many of these eDating service networks that are relied upon by people in finding matches within groups of similar race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, similar taste and preferences for companionship, commitment or conversation.

Jonathan Bishop’s case study research on eDating (presented in Chapter 15) focuses on
the individual aspects of this process through the use of the Ecological Cognition Framework (ECF). The chapter presents two investigations. First, online dating services are identified and described from the perspective of a specific case (an individual eDater). The findings from this particular case are then utilized to assess the effectiveness of existing online dating services. To shed more light on the individual’s perspective with eDating, the next chapter (16) attempts to shed light on the differences between the development of online relationships as opposed to face-to-face relationships. The author, Monica Whitty, makes the reader aware of the gap in scholarly research on these types of comparisons between the new and the traditional modes. After developing a model for the various phases of online courtship, Monica Whitty proceeds to compare her work with Givens’ (1979) on a traditional mode for building a romantic relationship. The challenges and benefits associated with each of the modes are reported as being very different. The author suggests that online dating services pay attention to these differences for improving the eDating experience.

The section on How eDaters Behave and Evolve ends with Chapter 17, in which Celia Romm-Livermore et al. present the eDating development model based on previous empirical research. The model points out the changes that male and female eDaters go through during eDating. Based on the authors’ empirical research in this area, they utilize those results that supported all of the model’s hypotheses, indicating that: (1) male and female eDaters follow different stages in their eDating evolution; (2) the behaviors that males and females exhibit as eDaters are different; and (3) the feedback that male and female eDaters receive from the environment is different too. In conclusion, the authors welcome more scholarly research in this important field as eDating is most likely to evolve and even become a factor in reshaping society in general.

The final sub-section of the book presents work concentrated on one of the most popular areas in the industry, i.e., the matrimonial eDating segment in developing countries. In Chapter 18, Sudhir H. Kale and Mark T. Spence report on a study based on a content analysis of 238 advertisements from online matrimonial sites from India, Hong Kong and Australia. The authors explored the influence of cultural differences in people’s self-description in online personal ads in the areas of love interest, marital status, educational status, physical status, intellectual status, occupational status, entertainment services, money, demographic information, ethnic information and personality traits. Their research provides some support for the suggestion that culture influences how people describe themselves in online ads, while certain anticipated cultural differences are not supported by the study.

The last chapter (19) acquaints the reader with possible sociological changes happening in India in the context of arranged marriages with the increasing popularity of eDating web sites. Nainika Seth and Ravi Patnayakuni utilize the ethnographic approach to study the role of these web sites in this important traditional process which existed for thousands of years. They offer suggestions that matrimonial web sites may now have implications for family disintermediation, cultural convergence, continuous information flows ease of disengagement, virtual dating and reduced stigma in arranged marriages in India.

In conclusion, this edited book presents practical research and theoretical concepts about various professional, work and more personal connections happening in cyberspace through social networking communities and eDating. In addition, the book informs the reader about and points out the need for more scholarly and scientific research in an area where the line between the virtual and the real world is blurred. In my opinion, this book is one of the first that may be a good candidate for supplementing graduate level reading material in courses from diverse fields such as marketing, management, sociology, psychology, political science, information technology, and research methods.
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