

danah boyd
Online Personals CHI Workshop Position Paper

Social networking has been the latest craze to hit the online personals domain. Based on the success of *Friendster* (and arguably *Ryze*), many traditional online personal sites are either adding social networking to existing services or adding it as a secondary application. From eMode/Tickle and AOL's *Love.com* to Match.com's recent announcement of upcoming social networking services, it seems as though everyone is jumping on the bandwagon. Yet, this phenomenon within the online personals domain must be deconstructed based on its theoretical validity, purported successes and structural viability.

The articulation and public presentation of social network data is not a novel idea. Even in popular tools, *Friendster*'s functionality almost mirrors *SixDegrees*, a service available in 1997 to connect people. Yet, *Friendster*, with all of its popularity and media hype, purports to solve the primary failing of *SixDegrees*: it has defined a purpose for users to connect. Although many users do not realize it, *Friendster* specifically defines itself as an online dating site. *Friendster*'s popularity, media attention, and venture capitalist interest is what has motivated the vast majority of other services to invest in social networks. Nowhere is this more blatantly announced than by the name that *Hot or Not* chose for its social networking dating site: *Yafro* (Yet Another Friendster Rip-Off).

In this brief workshop position paper, i will outline ... For the sake of brevity, i will not thickly describe *Friendster* and its various uses but only highlight selected usage scenarios as appropriate. An overview of *Friendster* is available in the form of a position paper for the Intimate Computing Workshop at Ubicomp '03 (<http://www.danah.org/papers>). Reflexively, it is important to note that i have been an active participant-observer amidst both *Friendster* users and the social networking software creators. I have organized six focus groups of various relevant social groups and have interviewed or surveyed over 200 people on various aspects of their *Friendster* usage. I have tracked the meme through the media and through the viral discussions on mailing lists, blogs and IRC channels. I have spoken with users who have auctioned off their social network on *eBay*, programmers who have scripted the data for visualization purposes, and protesters who have challenged the company behind *Friendster* because of their autocratic decisions. I have spoken with teachers who fear the presence of their students, drug dealers who find the site invaluable to their trade, and communities who have erected memorials to deceased friends through the site. I have consulted with or advised many of the companies competing in the domain and i have spoken frequently to the press so that they may understand the phenomena better. It is important to note that while reports indicate that 1/2 of the site's users are from abroad, predominantly Asia, the vast majority of my interviewees have been located in the United States and Canada. Furthermore, the majority of my interviews took place before October 2003, although the site continues to grow and attract new relevant social groups.

Theoretical Validity

The premise of *Friendster* is based on the adage that friends of friends make better dates. This foundational philosophy is based on the creator's observation of dating in Silicon Valley and his irritation that online dating sites did not meet the needs of people like him, people who were "not 'keen on messaging random weirdos'" (Hua, 2003). To address this, *Friendster* requires people to publicly articulate their social network. Yet, this design decision places a heavy burden on users who must determine what defines a "Friend." As Friend is the only label one can attach to any other users on the system, the magnitude and context of the relations are lost. Thus, users must determine their own cut-off limit for inclusion, often defaulting to a relatively low tie weight so as to not publicly offend someone by not including that person in their network. The result is that one's *Friendster* network might include everyone from close friends to relatives to acquaintances to familiar strangers.

The loose structure of one's social network complicates the adage on which the site is founded. As one of my subjects reported, "Why would I want to date my cousin's hairdresser's drug dealer's best friend?" His question spoke straight to the primary issue generated by these networks: without context, what's the relevance, trust or value?

In unpacking the initial adage, what *Friendster* is assuming is threefold:

- 1) People share things in common with their friends and through transitivity, their friend's friends.
- 2) Networked connections provide trust, reliability and reputation.
- 3) Increased commonality and confirmed reputation are valuable metrics for dating potential.

While each of these statements may be relatively accurate, there is an embedded assumption in them: context. People do not share all things in common with their friends, but there is usually a set of overlapping interests, tastes and personality qualities. What complicates this is that people may only share a facet of their identity in common with each friend and the facets shared between two distinct friends might be non-overlapping. Thus, just because two people share a friend in common does not mean that they themselves share anything in common, although the probability is higher than in the general population. Furthermore, trust and reputation depend on the context in which the relationship evolves. While people may be able to recommend their colleagues for a job based on observed talents, they may not have the necessary interaction level to recommend them as dates because that is not the context of their friendship.

Finally, *Friendster* is not the only online dating site to assume that commonality matters. Many dating sites allow users to search for potential lovers based on things like religion, height and body type. While *Friendster* does not offer these traditional mechanisms for determining commonality, media consumption tastes can be compared, particularly movies, TV, books and music. This design decision was chosen because it did not scare off users looking for Friends or Activity Partners, yet provided an axis for comparison and search. While some version of the commonality approach is taken by most dating sites, I am not convinced that this is theoretically valid. Certainly, people with similar tastes are often drawn towards one another, but quite frequently a perfect match is made that surprises both partners, as neither would have chosen the classifications they labeled

the other one. In other words, while a woman may envision her ideal partner to be between 5'4" and 5'10" and Jewish, she may fall madly in love with a 5'2" Buddhist and find more attraction and common ground than she ever would have imagined possible given simply those coarse descriptors.

While *Friendster* has been exceptionally popular, its theoretical validity must be challenged. In doing so, one must also consider the assumptions made by other dating sites and consider how the structural differences fundamentally alter the social mores and behavior that we take for granted in dating offline end up shifting as well.

Purported Successes

While *Friendster* purports to be a dating site, the predominant usage suggests otherwise. By mid-July, many users who joined *Friendster* were unaware that it is a dating site. They believed that it was a place to connect to friends. Most users initially surfed the site to find other friends, particularly those with whom they were out of touch. In doing so, they found many forms of entertainment, such as fake characters and truly creative Profiles. This encouraged users to pursue a Treasure Hunt approach to surfing the network while simultaneously making their Profiles more creative for others. Thus, *Friendster* became a game.

Yet, amidst this gaming, one could find both intentional and unintentional dating behaviors forming. Often those who were looking for dates found the interface aggravating because the traditional search qualifiers were not available. Conversely, those who had gone to the site to explore and play with friends suddenly found themselves talking to people who caught their eye and dating via *Friendster*.

Although a wide variety of dating patterns can be found on *Friendster*, three types of behavior dominate the intentional uses: hookups, direct pestering, and familiar strangers.

Hookups

As with any online dating site, people surf the site for hookups as well as potential partners. While the suggested theory is that friends-of-friends are the most compatible partners, hookups often occur regardless of the network. Or rather, many looking for hookups prefer to be 3 or 4 degrees apart so as to not complicate personal matters. In addition to in-town hookups, *Friendster* users tell me that they also use the site to find hookups in cities to which they are traveling. This behavior is undoubtedly what instigated the mock site *STD-ster*.

Direct Pestering

Sometimes, people unintentionally fail to introduce their single friends to one another. By having a public articulation of one's network, it is really easy to look at Friends' Friends and pester the intermediary about potential compatibility. While 3 and 4 degrees are often meaningless to people, there is a decent amount of trust in second-degree connections, simply because they can be easily confirmed via a shared connection.

Familiar Strangers

When Stanley Milgram coined the term “Familiar Strangers,” he was referring to the strangers that one sees regularly, but never connects with [5]. Given additional contexts, an individual is quite likely to approach a familiar stranger. For many, Friendster provides that additional context. In browsing the site, users find people that they often see out. From the Profile, one can guess another’s dating status and sexuality as well as interests and connections. Often, this is enough additional information to prompt a user into messaging someone on *Friendster* or approaching them offline.

Another form of dating that is quite fascinating emerges between Fakesters. In my interviews, i met one inspiring couple that met while performing as fake personas. While their initial interaction was in character, they quickly discovered that both were single gay men and their courting shifted from character performance to real life.

Although *Friendster* imagined that users would court in a fashion similar to Match.com, this has not panned out. *Friendster* users are certainly dating, but it is not their predominant use. When they do date, the mechanism is not simplified to boy sees cute girl and contacts her. *Friendster* users are bridging the physical and digital connections, engaging through the game play and using the social network to diminish offline social recourse.

Hua, Vanessa. 2003, June 27. “Bound Together: Popular startup dot-com connects users to thousands of friends of friends of friends” *San Francisco Chronicle*.
<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2003/06/27/BU181364.DTL>

Milgram, S. The Familiar Stranger: An Aspect of Urban Anonymity. *The Individual in a Social World*. Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1977.