

Social Norms of Students: Online Activities Surrounding a "First Date" Scenario

Evan Golub
Department of Computer Science
Human-Computer Interaction Lab
University of Maryland
egolub@cs.umd.edu

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a student activity which gives some insight into the social norms of university students regarding online activities. The students were presented with a "first date" scenario and asked what online activities they would and would not do in relation to that scenario. A single-reviewer form of emergent coding was used to identify trends in the student responses and then iterative coding was used on the open-ended responses. The results are presented by gender and example anecdotal quotes are given for context. Some potential implications indicated by the responses are given.

1. Background

Social norms change over both time and location (Axelrod 1986). There are currently vast amounts and types of information available online. Much of this is provided voluntarily, such as via social networking sites. Other information is aggregated and ferreted out by search engines. Still other information can be purchased from agencies that pre-date the modern Internet but which are easier to find now. The ease with which information can be accessed does not automatically mean that it would be seen as socially acceptable to access this information. However, it is possible that what might have been considered by most to be "cyber-stalking" a decade ago could be considered common behaviors today or even expected. The perception of normal versus abnormal behavior of others in this regard is important to consider due to the impact can have on the people involved (Hensler-McGinnis 2008). The way college-aged students perceive online behavior has been looked at before in the context of a scenario which was legally classified as cyberstalking (Alexy 2005). This paper seeks to empirically look at behavioral norms as expressed through a class activity where students were asked to consider what online actions they would or would not take in a certain situation. The result of this activity was a window into some of the current social norms in terms of online behavior surrounding a "first date" scenario. The role of online profiles brings issues typically discussed in the context of online dating⁴ into "traditional" dating as well. A certain amount of reciprocity might be the reality in terms of expected norms, but this will be explored in follow-up work.

2. Class Activity and Emergent Categories

As part of a class activity, students in a university general education course on the topic of information technology were asked to fill out a worksheet looking at what they would or would not do between an initial meeting with someone and what might be seen as a "first date" with them (Table 1). They were asked open-ended questions regarding what online activities they would perform and what they would not perform relative to this scenario. While reading through the student responses it appeared that they might contain some interesting trends.

To give the scenario a full context, the students attend the University of Maryland in College Park which is near a Metro station and roughly 10 miles from the heart of Washington DC.

<p>You meet a person at a gathering on Friday. You talk for 10-20 minutes and decide to meet at the Washington Monument in DC the next day at 11am and spend the afternoon there. You exchange names and telephone numbers just in case one of you is running late.</p>
<p>What online activities would you perform in relation to this scenario between getting home on Friday and leaving for DC on Saturday?</p>
<p>What online activities would you NOT perform in relation to this scenario between getting home on Friday and leaving for DC on Saturday?</p>

Table 1: Information on the worksheet; the scenario presented to students, the first open-ended question, and the second open-ended question.

The students were provided large boxes on the sheet of paper with the scenario and questions into which they were asked to write their answers. The specific words that were used by the students differed, but based on a reading of the answers to the open-ended questions, the following categories were generated via a single-reviewer form of emergent coding (Stemler 2001) for the "would perform" question.

<p>Social Network Lookup: Mentioned (or implied) going onto Facebook or MySpace or Twitter to look up the person.</p>
<p>Social Network Friend Them: Mentioned actually "friend"ing or following them on the social network.</p>
<p>Web Search Them: Mentioned performing a general web search on the person's name.</p>
<p>Criminal/Background Check: Specifically mentioned performing a criminal background search.</p>
<p>Contact Them: Mentioned contacting the other person directly using some online tool such as IM or e-mail.</p>
<p>Get Directions/Traffic/Metro Info: Mentioned anything about going online to find directions to the place, traffic reports, parking information, Metro schedules, etc.</p>
<p>Check Weather: Mentioned going online to check what the weather forecast was for Saturday.</p>
<p>Tweet/Blog/Update Status About Them: Mentioned that they were going to post some sort of information about the upcoming outing to a place such as their Twitter feed or blog or Facebook wall.</p>
<p>Attractions/Activities/Events/Places To Eat: Mentioned going online to search for things to do, places to eat, places to go, other events that might be going on.</p>

Table 2: Categories generated for the things that students reported they would perform.

The responses from all students were then coded based on these categories (Table 2). The coding was "binary" in that a "maybe" was counted the same as a "would" and multiple comments by a single student that fit into one category was only counted once for that student. For example, a student who said "*Facebook the person if applicable*" counted as a "yes" under **Social Network Lookup** and a

student who mentioned getting Metro directions and also parking information would get counted as a single "yes" under the **Get Directions/Traffic/Metro Info** category.

For the "would not" perform question, there are a few issues to consider. First, asking this type of question is restricted by what the students would think of and then think they wouldn't do. Related to this is that if there's something a student thinks "*nobody would do that*" they might not think to list it. Second, there were a wide variety of responses that were seen as off-topic. Coding categories were not created for responses such as "*Google how to sneak illegal objects into the Washington Monument*" or "*stay online all night talking to other friends because I would need my sleep*" or "*look up cab information*" for example. Responses such as "anything not related to getting there and back" and "inquire further about the actual person" were challenging to decide on, but in the end we did not "check off" any of the categories if they were not specifically mentioned by the student. Another example of a challenging response was "*I would not use Myspace to find the person because I don't have an account*" since it implies that maybe they would if they did. Also, in this case the student had already said that they would "*try to find them and friend them on Facebook*" so it was decided that this should not be coded as "would not" for looking them up on a social network.

In the end, the categories in Table 3 were generated for the "would not perform" question.

Social Network Lookup: Mentioned they would not go onto Facebook or MySpace or Twitter to look up the person.
Social Network Friend Them: Mentioned (or implied) they would not "friend" or "follow" the person.
Criminal/Background Check: Specifically mentioned not performing a criminal background search.
Otherwise Research Them: Generally mentioned not broadly searching for other information on the person or the people the person knows.
Contact Them: Mentioned they would not contact the other person directly.
Tweet/Blog/Update Status About Them: Mentioned that they would not post some sort of information about the upcoming outing.
Stalk: Used the word "stalk" in describing what they would not do.

Table 3: Categories generated for online activities they reported they would not perform.

Some anecdotal examples of "otherwise researching" the person specifically mentioned looking up their address, so this could be an interesting category to add to the follow-up study. Using these categories, there were some students (17% of the males, 25% of the females) who indicated nothing that would code as "on-topic" for the question.

3. Results and Commentary

There were 106 students enrolled; 70 male (66%) and 36 female (34%). The vast majority of the students were between 18 and 23 years of age (96 out of the 106). Of the students enrolled, only 81 students participated in this activity; 53 male (65%) and 28 female (35%).

The results shown (separated by gender) in Table 4 (as well as using a bar graph in Figure 1) were generated using iterative coding on the "would perform" responses. The results (also separated by gender) shown in Table 5 and Figure 2 were generated from the "would not perform" responses. Table 6 specifically reports on how many students used a form of the word "stalk" when describing what they would not do in relation to the scenario.

		Males	Females
W1	Social Network Lookup	68%	75%
W2	Social Network Friend Them	19%	32%
W3	Web Search Them	17%	25%
W4	Criminal/Background Check	4%	11%
W5	Contact Them	9%	14%
W6	Get Directions/Traffic/Metro Info	70%	54%
W7	Check Weather	21%	18%
W8	Tweet/Blog/Update Status About Them	4%	7%
W9	Attractions/Activities/Events/Places To Eat	58%	57%

Table 4: Online activities students reported they would perform, by gender. See also Figure 1.

While only being a preliminary exploration of these ideas, there are still certain points that do stand out here. Both genders were roughly the same in terms of indicating that they would look them up on a social network and in terms of looking for other things to do or taking place in the vicinity of the destination. With more than two-thirds of students saying that in this real-world meeting scenario they would go online to learn more about the other person, there is an implication that the entire domain of research on online dating and profile creation becomes relevant to "traditional" dating as well. However, though both were small in number, female students were almost three times as likely to say that they would do some type of criminal and/or background check on the other person. They were also roughly 50% more likely to "friend" the other person, perform a general web search on them, contact them online. Across genders it appears to be normal to check the other person out on social networks like Facebook, but not typical to perform a general web search using a resource such as the main Google search engine.

		Males	Females
N1	Social Network Lookup	17%	11%
N2	Social Network Friend Them	32%	21%
N3	Criminal/Background Check	11%	11%
N4	Otherwise Research Them	43%	43%
N5	Contact Them	26%	29%
N6	Tweet/Blog/Update Status About Them	13%	14%

Table 5: Online activities students reported they would not perform, by gender. See also Figure 2.

Again, performing a general web search using a resource like Google is not something which appears to be seen as normal or expected behavior. One thing to note is that the sum of "would" and "would not" for mentioning certain types of activity does not add up to 100%. Since this was open-ended, this is not unexpected. The sum for looking the person up on a social network accounts for around 85% of the students while the sum for "friend"ing only accounts for around 50% of them.

	Males	Females
Used a form of the word "Stalk" in what they said they would not do.	8%	7%

Table 6: How many students used a form of the word "stalk" when describing what activities they would not perform, by gender.

Looking at what the students who said they would not "stalk" the person said that they would do can also help us in identifying what the social norms might currently be. Of the five students who said they *would not* "stalk" the other person, four of them indicated that they *would* look the person up on a social networking site such as Facebook. When taken with the fact that so many students (43% of the males, 43% of the females) explicitly indicated that they would not otherwise search for information about the person implies that there might be a line drawn between information that people are specifically going out and sharing with the world (such as information available to 'anybody' on Facebook) and information that is out there which the person did not specifically place online to be found and seen. One student even wrote "*These seem to maybe break the borderline of acceptable and non-acceptable 'creeping'*" when writing how they would not "Google them" or look for their blog.

4. Future Directions

With the presented set of categories (Table 2) derived from the open-ended questions, the next step will be to create a more traditional survey based on these categories and have students in a wide variety of courses and possibly wide variety of academic institutions answer the survey.

Several students indicated that they would "friend" the other person to gain full access to their Facebook profile. Gaining a deeper understanding of the choice to "friend" the other person will be sought by having the survey ask the closed-ended yes/no question on whether they would "friend" the other person, but then have an open-ended follow-up of "why" for that item.

A challenging decision to make is whether to allow all of the closed questions to have an open-ended follow-up. If a student says that they would not do a background check, is it of interest or importance that their stated reason is "*I am not that paranoid*" (as one of the students wrote on their sheet).

In addition to asking questions to explore behavioral norms (what the student would do) this new survey will also ask questions about expected norms (what the student expects that the other person in the scenario would do). It is possible that students might generally expect others to do the same things they themselves would, but it is also possible that they will have either higher or lower expectations about the online exploration their counterpart would undertake.

A story published in the Washington Post Magazine (Grossman 2008) talks about how the notion of a 'blind date' might be gone in today's age. In it Grossman writes, "*Now, if a friend sets you up with someone, and you don't automatically Google that person, check his or her 'relationship' status on Facebook and do a quick vetting via Cheaternews.com (the modern answer to stocks and pillories), one might question if you are really fit to date at all.*" This scenario is slightly different than the one discussed here in that in our scenario the two people have already met and spent some time together, but it might be worthwhile having two similar scenarios where one of them is a 'blind date' variation.

5. References

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A. Appendix

Figure A1: Activities students reported they would perform, by gender.

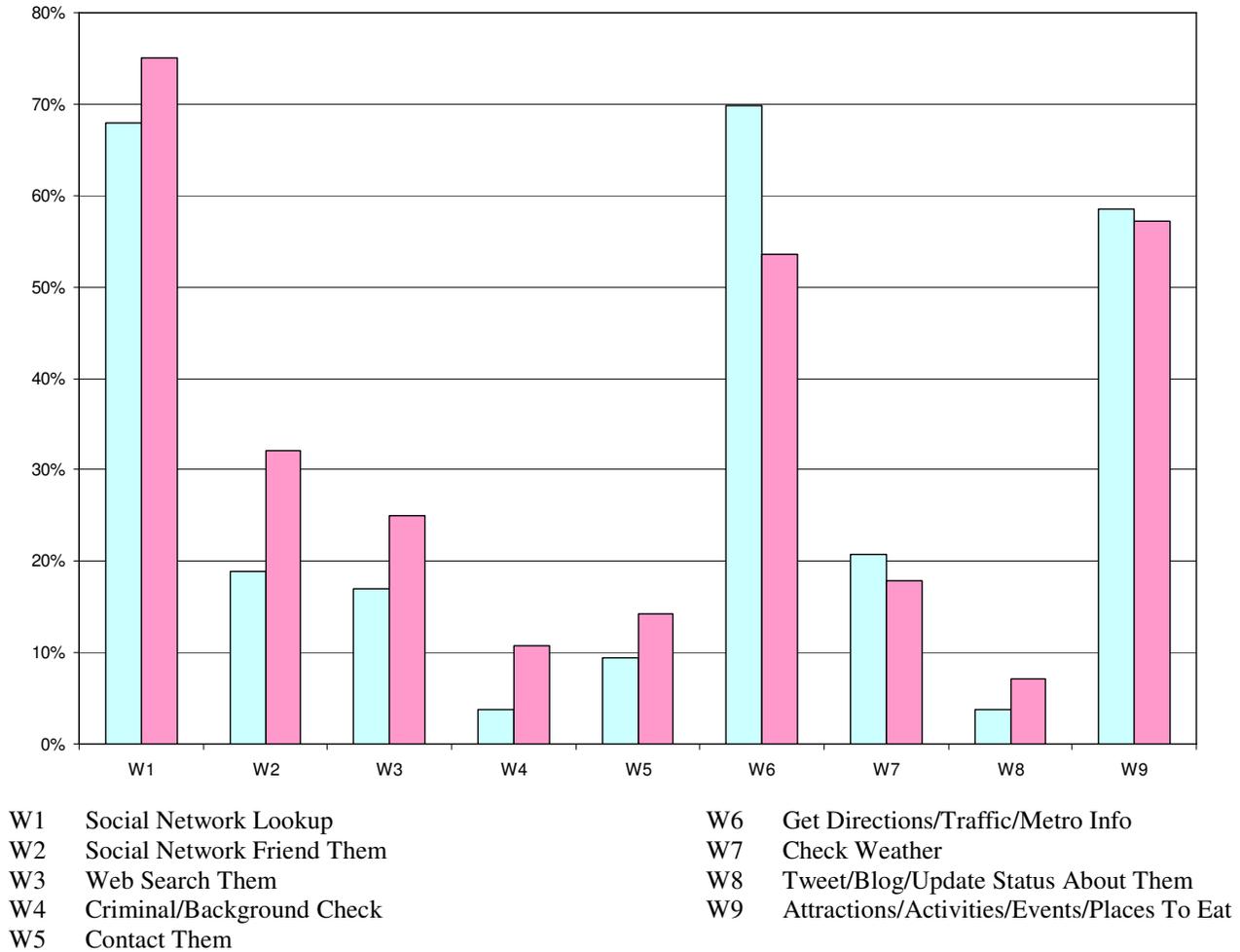


Figure A2: Activities students reported they would not perform, by gender.

