

Going Offline: An Exploratory Cultural Artifact Analysis of An Internet Dating Site's Development Trajectories

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Abstract

In this study we develop a theorization of an Internet dating site as a cultural artifact. The site, Gaydar, is targeted at gay men. We argue that contemporary received representations of their sexuality figure heavily in the site's focus by providing a cultural logic for the apparent ad hoc development trajectories of its varied commercial and non-commercial services. More specifically, we suggest that the growing sets of services related to the website are heavily enmeshed within current social practices and meanings. These practices and meanings are, in turn, shaped by the interactions and preferences of a variety of diverse groups involved in what is routinely seen within the mainstream literature as a singularly specific sexuality and cultural project. Thus, we attend to two areas – the influence of the various social engagements associated with Gaydar together with the further extension of its trajectory 'beyond the web'. Through the case of Gaydar, we contribute a study that recognizes the need for attention to sexuality in information systems research and one which illustrates sexuality as a pivotal aspect of culture. We also draw from anthropology to theorize ICTs as cultural artifacts and provide insights into the contemporary phenomena of ICT enabled social networking.

1 Introduction

The popular press reports that Internet dating has rapidly become one of the most profitable Web Services, outstripping the former front runner – pornography (Sunday Times, 2006). In this paper we explore this phenomenon emphasizing the links between sexualities, technologies and cultures in order to demonstrate the value of, and the need for greater attention to sexuality within information systems research. It is claimed that the assumptions and norms associated with sexualities intimately contribute to the definition of contemporary culture and society (Person, 1980) However, given that sexuality is viewed as such an important part of behaviour in the social sciences and that Information Systems research is viewed as sociotechnical, with 'the social' as much a part of the intellectual

genealogy of the area as 'the technical', then it is surprising that this aspect of 'the social' has been neglected – or maybe not? A first barrier to an articulation of nuanced information systems research that incorporates sexuality is that it has taken some time for the social sciences in general to move from a sociology of male society towards a sociology of a gendered society (Wharton, 2005), let alone one that is sexualized. Within information systems this shift in terms of the importance of gender has been witnessed although research in the area is still in rather short supply (Trauth, 2002; Adam et al., 2004; Kvansey et al., 2005). Within Sociology a further view has emerged relatively recently, one that considers sexuality, in addition to gender, as a central contingent aspect to definitions of identity and social relations. We believe it would be fruitful to follow Sociology's lead and extend attention to sexuality in information systems research. To neglect this area, we believe, means missing an important aspect of the social nature of information systems, particularly given the increased intertwining of sexuality and ICTs in many societies.

With our attention focused on Gaydar as a cultural artefact it is worth considering the anthropological position regarding sexuality-nuanced studies. As a broad observation, Anthropology, including the sub-discipline that examines cultural artefacts – Material Culture Studies – has traditionally shared the prevailing view in the social sciences that sexuality is not an entirely legitimate area of study (Robertson, 2005). In early studies where sexuality was a central focus of study the work was either critically rejected or seen as a means to open Anthropology up to a popular audience. Examples of such works are found in Mead's (1928) *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Malinowski and Ellis's (1929) *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-West Melanesia* and Levi-Strauss's (1955) *Triste Tropiques*. The criticisms levelled at these authors may in themselves offer partial explanation for the reluctance that Anthropology has previously had with seriously addressing concepts of sexuality. The reflective turn in Anthropology (and other social sciences) has, however, seen a significant increase in research that once again discusses sexuality as a central cultural phenomenon.

As with gender there are a variety of debates concerning the basis of sexuality (variously biological, social or cultural), which sexualities are legitimate ones (usually those defined as heterosexual) and the extent to which gender influences sexuality; and vice versa (Weeks, 1985; Hearn and Parkin, 1995; Dowsett, 2003; Beasley, 2005; Bruce and Yearley, 2006). For the purposes of this paper, sexuality and gender can be seen as separate parts of a set of things that interweave aspects of identity at many points (Rubin, 1984). Gender and sexuality can thus be seen as parts of a system of cultural logic that is woven together with many other components to form a fully articulated social identity (Jameson, 1984). It is important to emphasise here the idea of 'many other components', since we have been to careful not to see gender and sexuality as the only definitional strands within contemporary gay cultures. Clearly, there are multiple strands of identity that define the gendered and sexualised 'I' but our focus here is on directing attention to sexuality of and in Information Systems research and thus greater attention is given to this aspect. Sexuality itself we see as concerned with sexual object choice and desire (Richardson, 2001; Cranny-Francis et al., 2003). Everyone therefore has a stake in the meanings and identities defined through sexualities and their relationship to other aspects of individual meaning and identity. It would be all too easy to think that sexuality matters in the case of Gaydar because we are dealing with a group of people often marginalized on the basis of their sexual choices and desires. However, clearly sexuality matters to everyone irrespective of how marginal or mainstream their choices and desires are. One could, we would argue, perform a similar study to the one we report here in which the individuals engaged with specific cultural artifacts are heterosexual and where it would be possible to observe a development trajectory commensurate with the meanings attached to such sexualities.

In terms of the focus of our study, research into on-line communities that are domestic social spaces has become important as these are increasingly intertwined with everyday lives. You can be intimate

with people who are not there anymore and people who have yet to arrive because of the internet's asynchronous nature (Hine, 2000). Indeed, people often invest as much effort in the relationships developed online, as offline (Carter, 2005). Thus as Winner (2004) suggests, as technologies are introduced into society, it is important to ask what kinds of bonds, attachments and obligations are in the making. However, minimal attention has been paid by the information systems community to the role of sexuality in shaping such spaces as internet dating sites. In this paper we pick up these intersecting threads of concern to argue that sexuality is an important consideration within the studies that bring together technology and cultural phenomena. The argument enables us to make the claim that cultural artifacts possess meaning in the context of sexuality and that understanding these cultural meanings enables an examination of the cultural logic of apparently random and disparate social activities – in this case Gaydar. By doing this we contribute a study that puts sexuality centre stage, draw from Anthropology in order to theorize ICTs as cultural artifacts and provide insights into the contemporary phenomena of social networking – in this case for the purposes of internet dating.

In the next section we introduce the lens of the cultural artifact. Following this we outline our research approach. We then introduce Gaydar and deconstruct it as a cultural artifact. After this, the conclusions and implications for research and practice are presented.

2 Theorising ICTs as Cultural Artifacts

Culture regularly presents itself as a 'difficult' concept for all of the social sciences (Williams 1983, 87). The work of Malinowski (Voget 1979, 513) saw culture as the encompassing body of concepts, ideas and institutions that enabled human survival. A functionalist epistemology is clear in this observation but an understanding of culture as a totality of experience is reflected in our own work. Another view of culture that bears relevance upon our own work is that of Harris (1979, 51) who claimed culture as "the socially acquired life-style of a group of people including patterned repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting." The cultural artifact is, in this context, most simply put as a meaning-laden 'thing'. The cultural artifact is one aspect of the totality of cultural experience and meaning and is also one aspect of Harris's patterned ways of thinking and Malinowski's 'body of concepts.' However, discussions which isolate the artifact as being meaningful in itself often conflate being a 'thing' with having physical qualities as a necessary relationship (Miller 1991, 31) yet clearly any physical 'thing' that is 'meaningful' is always an artifact (cf. Shanks & Hodder 1997, 17). However, discussions that commence with an interpretation of an artifact's meanings are not bound to those 'things' with specifically material forms. Making reference to a digital object through a physical analogy is unnecessary when the Internet has become such a dominant and mainstream site of cultural activity in post-industrial societies (Touraine 1974, 116). Gadamer (1989, 242-54) argues that without a fusion of cultural horizons there can be no communication between parties. Thus, in this case artifacts found in digital environments have meaning because of the relationship(s) they have with the material environment. Gaydar as a site of social networking together with the theorized consideration of sexuality as a constituent of sociality recognizes the need for this fusion of horizons. Simultaneously, it also allows us to see Gaydar as a 'thing' in its own right defined by its relationships with a range of contemporary cultural practices and, concurrently, remaining distinct from these practices. Distinguishing cultural phenomena solely between material and digital provenances echoes the political conflicts and tensions (including those that are based around sexuality) that exist between individuals, spaces and things that are continuously interrelating and intersecting. It is in this sense that we discuss Gaydar as a cultural artifact, capable of being examined and interpreted without reference to specific individuals or their activities. In this way we claim Gaydar to be a cultural artifact because of the meanings that it provides and its ability to persist beyond the presence of any specific individual or activity.

The meaning of 'things' is generally perceived to shift around the anchorage of a cultural artifact's physical qualities which provides different forms of meaning-stabilising anchorages (Miller 1991, 116; Miller and Slater 2000). However, none of these anchorage points are individually stable entities; they are all, along with the artifact itself, the product of shifting social and cultural forces (Miller 1991, 126-7). For example, the anchorage of style, in all its indefiniteness, is an important quality for many forms of artifacts including furniture and clothing (Lemmonier 1993, 11). As a cultural artifact we argue that Gaydar is similarly continuously shaped and reshaped by shifting meanings and its relationship to contemporary events and activities. Moreover, such associations will also influence the development trajectory of Gaydar as an artifact. The increased fluidity of cultural meanings that craft an artifact's qualities is a hallmark of post-industrial consumption-oriented cultures (Smart, 1992, 52 & 143; Touraine, 1974). Digital artifacts bring this fluidity of meaning to a hypothetical post-production zenith. Within the context of its digital environment the cultural artifact is not bound by any specific material imposition and has the fluidity not only to shift in terms of its cultural relationship with other 'things' and people but to also rapidly change its actual form in response to these relationships.

Artifacts evoke particular understandings of the culture(s) that they exist within. An artifact can only be understood meaningfully *in situ* and in relation to the other artifacts – this is one of the reasons why archaeologists despair of treasure hunters (Miller 1991, 109-11; Shanks & Hodder 1997, 11). And even when 'things' are considered in context Aunger (2003) observes that "not all social messages are equally attended to or adopted by their receivers." The contextual environment constructs an expectation for the artifact and, in turn, the artifact crafts an expectation for the space and the people who interact with it. This reciprocation connects artifacts and meanings with people. The expectation developed within the context of a specific space provides a key anchorage around the meaning of an artifact in this association with a particular meaning or set of meanings.

3 Research Approach

This study has been constructed by theorizing Gaydar as a cultural artifact. One of the authors (Light) has been an ethnographer, a member and active participant in the community for over 7 years. As Halberstam (2003) notes, researchers may coexist in the same friendship networks and may function as co-conspirators. Data collection involved participant observation of the software in use (in terms of profile configuration, not chat room usage), analysis of the functionality and content of the site, and the site of the Gaydar developers, Qsoft. We have also drawn on documentary and visual evidences, such as the media packs provided by Qsoft and magazine advertisements. Indeed, the use of advertising imagery is one of the most popular forms of photographic evidence used in social research (Ali, 2004). Mindful of the ethical considerations for online community based research, we did not study individuals (Brownlow and O'Dell, 2002; Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002; Carter, 2005). This concern also lead to our articulation and advocacy of a cultural artifact approach. We approached Gaydar as primarily a cultural artefact that is informed by and influences contemporary cultural and social attitudes and beliefs. We made a conscious decision not to reproduce quotes from private member profiles, or members themselves, to ensure that no 'private' data was made unwittingly or unnecessarily 'public' for arguably marginal benefit. Indeed, we did not interview on-line community members and we had no online contact with Gaydar members for the purpose of this study. It could be argued that we have revealed a hidden social space by placing Gaydar in the spotlight; however anyone who wanted to find such a site could do so very easily using a conventional search engine. We believe that we have not violated anyone's privacy directly.

Gaydar is one of several gay online communities that could have been studied; other insights of course might have been obtained had we studied another site. However, as Dyer and Wilkins (1991)

argue, single cases have frequently led scholars to see new theoretical relationships and question old ones in part because focussed research permits a deep understanding of an entity. Of course this work will not provide complete answers. As Knights (1997) observes, the demand for exhaustive and complete explanations is a deeply masculine construction, and is a demand that should be resisted especially in the context of discussions concerning sexuality, technology and social experience. Thus, the data from this study contributes rich insight (Walsham, 1995). We also recognise that theories are ways of seeing and not seeing, thus a different theoretical lens might provide a different view of Gaydar (as might the same lens applied to a different online community), but we feel the cultural artifact approach is adequate for our purpose here and, indeed, affords interestingly useful insights. It is useful because it allows insights into how digital artifacts develop in seemingly *ad hoc* ways. Examining Gaydar as an artifact – and as a proxy to direct human experience – also reveals the interactions and interplay that exists between people, spaces and things to shape, define and alter contemporary cultural meanings and understandings.

4 Gaydar as a Cultural Artifact

The term Gaydar is premised on having the capability to locate and work out if a person is gay – a gay radar. This is because the default model of relationships in most societies is hetero-normative (Beasley, 2005) which means that heterosexuality is taken as a given and consequently assumptions are automatically made about people's public and private lives. Gaydar as an idea is arguably necessary because gay people, despite popular misconceptions, do not necessarily have any phenotypical characteristics. Outside of those spaces where you might expect to find gay people, such as gay bars, Gaydar is used to enquire about and possibly confirm the sexuality of an individual. It is perhaps best described as recognition of one gay person by another based on verbal and non-verbal behaviour, a key feature being various forms of eye contact, or 'Gaydar Gaze' (Nicholas, 2004). Therefore, the use of the term for the Gaydar group of websites, which have as one of the inscribed aims assisting people to locate each other through a technologically mediated 'gaze', seems appropriate. Gaydar operates in around 159 countries but, for brevity, in this paper we focus mostly on the United Kingdom operations of the group. This is the oldest part of the Gaydar group of websites and it incorporates the largest percentage of members by country (a third reside in the UK). Extending the study globally would have introduced even greater cultural complexity which would have been difficult to convey here. Issues such as regional and national identities in terms of sexuality and more generally, while an interesting aspect of individual meaning construction, would inevitably add layers of complexity to the analysis. Introduction of these additional aspects of identity would also reveal further aspects of identity tension and meaning creation.

The company that developed and operates Gaydar is called QSoft. It was started in November 1999 by a gay male couple and QSoft now provides IT Development and consulting services specifically targeted at accessing the 'gay market'. The pages of QSoft's website make the commercial interpretation of Gaydar clear. Statistics are used extensively alongside the rhetoric about why organisations should market their products and services through banner advertising and sponsorship. Advertisers working with QSoft include Dell, Vodafone, Oxfam, Kelloggs, The National Lottery, British Telecom and Twentieth Century Fox. Whether there is any substance in the matter, the gay market is also positioned as an entry point into the 'mainstream' (straight) market as gay men are seen as opinion leaders who have straight friends who will imitate their purchasing decisions. Although Gaydar is largely unknown outside the gay community, it has over 3 million members worldwide (nearly a million of those are based in the UK) and according to Hitwise, in October 2005, gaydar.co.uk was the UK's largest gay and lesbian dating website by share of visits. In that month gaydar.co.uk received 13.95 per cent of all visits made to dating websites, ahead of heterosexual

focused websites such as datingdirect.com (7.99 per cent), udate.com (4.89 per cent) and match.com (3.47 per cent). Indeed it is claimed that the Gaydar radio station and associated websites now reach more than 85 per cent of the UK gay and lesbian marketplace. Thus this “media” group is embedded within society on a commercial basis in much the same way as Halberstam (2003) argues, that gay men and women are used in the media in an instrumental fashion. The majority of members are gay and bisexual men. There are some gay women, bisexual women, transsexual, transgender and transvestite members but these are in the minority (the sister site www.gaydarGirls.com has over 115,000 registered members). Access to the site is via registration and whilst this is free to guest members extra services can be obtained by upgrading to full member status for around £60 GBP, or the equivalent, per year.

1.1 Shaping the Trajectory of Gaydar: the Influence of Social Engagement

As a cultural artifact, Gaydar has become a hub for a variety of social engagements. The three most readily evident roles are the Website members, the male escorts who advertise their services through the communication channels that Gaydar enables and the developers of Gaydar who benefit directly from the commercial success of the Website. Each group has a close interrelationship with gay male sexuality as a facet of contemporary gay culture and with the artifact of Gaydar in the ways it defines them and the ways it is defined by their presence and influence.

The members of the Website are one group who utilise the artifact as a social facilitator. It is also this group who most directly reveal the diversity and range of identities that are all too readily collectively classified under a single overall label of gay male sexuality. As a consequence of the social pressures that this undifferentiated identity imparts some members do not post a picture of themselves on their profile. There are many reasons why individual members may choose to obscure at least some of their overall identity. In response, members often post messages on their profiles saying that they refuse to respond to messages from people who do not have a picture of their face. This form of resistance is further evident in the site's chat rooms, many people refuse to interact with others who do not have 'face pics'. Generally members who do not readily offer these aspects of their identity are often not openly gay (or out) and do not post a picture for fear of being identified. They remain marginalised as a consequence of the expectations, form and facilitation of sociality (and gay male sexuality) that Gaydar facilitates. This is irrespective of what might be seen as a safe and inclusive Web-based environment and, indeed, one that other studies have indicated such groups favour over traditional meeting places such as bars (Bolding et al., 2004). In many respects Bolding et al's conclusion is founded upon assumptions regarding the anonymity of Website interactions – or at least the ability to remain anonymous. We argue that the cultural artifact of Gaydar demands specific types of interaction and engagement that conforms to the series of sexualised meanings that have developed around its creation and development. What this means is that Gaydar with respect to its current trajectory at least, is dominated by the need to have some identifiable and visible person and identifiable sexuality to interact with, as is often the case offline, people want to see – and know - who they are dealing with. Those who do not wish to post 'face pics' thus develop other strategies to involve themselves in the network. Some advertise on their profiles that they have 'pics to share' upon request. Thus, private photographs are offered to individual members when it is considered personally safe to do so.

The relationship of male escorts to Gaydar is somewhat more problematic beyond any particular moral position someone might take regarding the motivations to profit from the sale of sex (or at least the suggestion of this possibility). Gaydar – as an artifact – condones an albeit veiled form of prostitution and thus implicitly comments about prostitution in general and about the perception that differences exist between male and female, as well as opposite-sex and same-sex, forms of

prostitution. The implication being that same-sex male prostitution is a 'milder' or perhaps even less morally concerning activity. This imprecision of relationships and meaning surrounding Gaydar is not entirely unexpected. Tilley (1989, 191) observes that, "an object, any object, has no ultimate or unitary meaning that can be held to exhaust it." The influence of this prostitution activity around the artifact of Gaydar draws the site into a debate about the political meanings of prostitution. It also creates a tension of sex-for-sale being located amongst the broader range of social engagement activities that Gaydar facilitates. Ultimately, the interaction of the artifact with sexual activity highlights the sexualised nature of the artifact itself – although not so crudely as to be reduced to being a sex 'thing'. Gaydar simultaneously echoes a series of attitudes relating to sexual activity that those who interact with it understand and at least to some degree tolerate or accept. However, the subtlety of a cultural artifact's meanings must recognise that the artifact itself represents an amalgam of responses, understandings and attitudes that may, or may not, comfortably rest with any single developer, male escort or Website member. Thus, although such social engagements are performed at a particular level now, it is difficult to determine how this trajectory may evolve in the future in the light of wider cultural activities, its prevailing cultural logic and changing attitudes to sexuality, in particular, those associated with gay men.

In a solely material environment the Gaydar system developers would often be constituted as the manufacturers and creators of the artifact with little ongoing input or influence (except as day to day users of the artifact and members of the Website/product itself if they so chose). The digital environment permits a more intimate and longer relationship that enables a continuous level of craft and extension to be conducted. This results in an extension of the influence that the developers maintain over the artifact they have constructed in the context of its environment. It is significant to recognise that the artifact itself influences this continued development and that the changes the developers bring cannot 'simply' be reduced to commercial motivations or organisational policy. The developers also engage with the artefact in the most traditional sense as a tool for their personal benefit. The employment advertisements for system developers to work on Gaydar also reflect that the developers are not solely defined by their relationship to gay male sexuality or even its artifacts. The advertisements stress qualities of 'geekiness' and the need for an obsession with technology. Such qualities are similar to those of unashamedly technology thirsty organisations such as Wired, Google, Apple and Slashdot. Thus, although Gaydar is gay owned and managed, ironically, the developer cultures shape, and are shaped by stereotypical notions of associations with heterosexual men, masculinity and technology as evidenced more generally within the IT industry (Adam, 2005).

Gaydar's meshing with wider prevailing social meanings, through mainstream understandings and alternative resistance, is equally important. Like Napster (Spitz and Hunter, 2005), Gaydar is shaped by cultural practices that are already integrally meshed with specific meanings and values. As Gaydar becomes more widely known within the context of mainstream contemporary cultures it will increasingly affect more direct influence upon popular and personal perceptions of gay male sexualities. Clearly, it will be flexibly interpreted as a cultural artifact, and possibly imbued with immoral and pornographic meanings. A gay personals section of the French Minitel system for example, was labeled an 'electronic brothel' and condemned by several public figures as a venue for the seduction of boys (Livia, 2002). This extreme response is an accusation that, as yet, has not generally been applied to heterosexual personals such as those printed in *Loot* or found at Match.com. A direct comparison of these forms of social engagements that assumes a commonality of meaning and purpose is not realistic or viable however as this would ignore the sexualized and political meaning that is imbued with the differing artifacts that, in fact, represent a form of alterity rather than mimesis (Taussig, 1993). Gaydar is undoubtedly charged with sexual meaning and we indeed argue that it is a sexualized artifact. However this role itself should not be reduced to becoming a mechanism for facilitating sex, several studies have shown that is used within the UK and

in other countries by a significant proportion of men use it for making friends, usually around 50 to 60% (Bolding et al., 2004; Murphy et al., 2004).

1.2 Extensions of Gaydar: Trajectories Beyond the Web

As an artifact it is significant to recognise that Gaydar is not solely conceived of as a Website (or even a suite of Websites) but rather as a coherent and meaningful thing that exists beyond immediate access or presence. This is analogous with the capability to speak meaningfully about an artifact without it being present in the immediate proximity of the discussion. In the UK it is possible to talk about a 'semi' and generally have an understanding that the reference is to a semi-detached house, mutual understanding might be indicated by questions about the 'semi's' number of bedrooms, the location and its council tax banding. Gaydar has a similar meaningful reach beyond a specific Web address. As it has become increasingly commodified Gaydar and its meanings have become embedded within other environments.

Artifacts are positioned within existing social structures of power by both contributing to their definition and by being defined by them. Gaydar reveals a particular relationship to prevailing social structures through its contribution to a certain sexuality project which itself has a wider relationship to the hetero-normative attitudes that are an integral part of the social spaces including the Internet but extending more broadly to other spaces including entertainment venues and 'abroad'. It is however, inappropriate to assume that the relationship of cultural artifact to any site of social engagement is solely a form of resistance to hetero-normative understandings. The commercial expansion of Gaydar as an online travel agency, for example, suggests that the relationship may also take the form of being a mainstream specialism or 'niche market'. Linked to this, Gaydar facilitates forms of global social engagement by enabling members to access the profile of other members from around the world by modifying a search criteria or entering an appropriate chat room. More significantly, if a member is travelling in a particular area, then Gaydar enables fully subscribed members to configure their profile to show this information. Members are consequently able to find other like minded people to meet up with, find out about gay friendly places to go to and potential problem areas that should be best avoided. These complex layers of tension and resistance are embedded within the meanings of the artifact itself and ultimately serve to define it.

Emphasis on travel as a key leisure activity of contemporary gay culture is also reflected in the sponsorship of the Sydney Mardi Gras by one of the Gaydar websites. This further reflects the role of Gaydar in relation to niche marketing and as a harbinger to mainstream marketing practice. A thoroughly mainstream aspect of capitalism endeavours to respond to the recognition and political articulation of both the multiple identities that individuals maintain and the assumed affluence of some marginalised communities – and reveals the series of negotiations that artifacts must span when they exist and address politicised areas of contemporary culture. The sponsorship of the Sydney Mardi Gras must also be recognised as support for a specific range of sexualities that cannot be solely regarded as some type of national form or based around romantic notions for the meaning of Australianness (even gay Australianness).

The development of the Gaydar Radio Station similarly reveals the meaningful extension of the Gaydar artifact's influence into areas where the influence of the mainstream has been widely recognised and critiqued. Digital technologies have circumvented the national political policing of broadcast activities and enabled a range of forms of resistance to flourish – some of these are anti-copyright (including the peer to peer file sharing networks) while others are designed to avoid record company hegemony. Arguably this resistance to corporate hegemony is similarly tied to the anti-copyright sentiment. The uber-myth of *myspace* as a space for introducing new musical talent is

indicative of these beliefs. The politics are reinforced by the purchase of the *myspace* brand by Rupert Murdoch which has since been met with resistance as former users transfer their loyalties to what we would call alternative 'Web2.0 socialities'. Gaydar Radio again develops a specific rationale for why a distinct form of media is required in this context. The implication – which is again based around specific notions of sexuality – is that gay men will prefer to listen to specific genres of music in preference to those presented on national or commercial broadcasters. Indeed, Gaydar Radio sponsored the London [gay] Pride event in 2006. Irrespective of the political messages presented here, tying media content to sexuality is perhaps an oversimplification of the individual relationship that exists between musical taste, sexuality and the vast range of other factors that constitute individual identity – and ultimately culture. This is another example of the tensions and negotiations that exist in the definition of Gaydar Radio as a distinctive form of radio broadcasting. Making this tension and relationship even more complex, Gaydar Radio has recently begun pod casting extending its media penetration still further.

Internet-enabled computers have also been placed in gay night clubs effectively extending the places that Gaydar is visible and present. The location of Gaydar terminals presents a specific negotiation of the artifact's meanings. The artifact is presented within the context of a specific aspect and activity of gay male sexuality – the nightclub – which itself is representative of specific forms of sexuality and a specific form of commercialism. The nightclub environment is influenced by the Gaydar presence through an extension of possibilities for social engagement that an individual can achieve in any single night. The Gaydar presence also reshapes the nightclub environment by encouraging individuals to remain longer in a single venue consequently supporting the opportunities for commercial profit while simultaneously throwing up the potential tension that club-goers utilizing the terminals may be individually less engaged with the physical nightclub.

The presence of Gaydar in other environments also extend into/onto other Websites through the creative use of the iconic symbol associated with Gaydar. Gaydar members link to and identify with the community by downloading banners and buttons that they paste onto their web pages. This button creates a network of association built through the meanings ascribed to the Gaydar artifact as well as a more mundane referral network. Interestingly and an indication that the button network is not 'simply' the product of commercial motivations is the absence of any words on the buttons themselves. The meaning is conveyed entirely through the symbolic value of the button which requires pre-existing knowledge of Gaydar and its network of Websites – in effect an individual must already 'be part of the club' to understand the value and associated meanings of a Gaydar button on another Website. The use of symbolism will also generally preclude 'random' clicks by the uninformed Web user suggesting that gaining knowledge of Gaydar itself requires something more than a single click of a mouse.

5 Conclusion

We draw from Anthropology in order to theorize ICTs as cultural artifacts and this offers an alternate perspective of culture to the Hofstede (1991) approach that is so often enmeshed in information systems research. By theorizing Gaydar as a cultural artifact we construct it as a meaning laden thing which persists beyond the physical and into the digital environment. Further, using this lens we can see how the meanings attached to gay male sexuality, by various interested parties fuel specific development trajectories of the artifact. Moreover, we also attend to the shaping effects that Gaydar has as it evolves over time. Through this analysis we can raise the social and organisational (in this case predominantly commercial) interests in the site. Thus, we pay attention to the tensions amongst commercial interests and identity formation, particularly as they are related to sexualities.

Moreover, because of the nature of Gaydar we are easily able to position sexuality centre stage as a pivotal aspect of sociality and examine its relationship to ICTs. Also, we provide insights into the contemporary phenomena of social networking, in this case the purpose being, primarily, internet dating. In combination we use the theorization of the artifact to help us bring to the surface a cultural logic that is not obvious at first glance why seemingly *ad hoc* areas of social and cultural activity are tied to a sexually (and sexuality) charged social networking website. In sum that is we can link the engagement of members, developers, male escorts and the blurring of online/offline activities such as sponsorship, travel agency and radio broadcasting, at least in part, to the meanings attached to gay male sexuality at a given point in time.

The role of ICTs within everyday life continues to increase in relevance. We believe that information systems researchers therefore need to give this area much more attention than it is granted at present. Although, it is important that we understand the functioning of technology and work organisations we believe that Information Systems research is missing a host of interesting and challenging research opportunities by restricting its foci to such areas. The focus of the cultural artifact with its multiplicity of shifting and fluid meanings that do not respect organizational or spatial boundaries is one means by which the significance of considering wider social and cultural contexts can be revealed. Identity and the meaning of artifacts are not developed solely within the confines of the organization. As illustrated by our study, there is much to be gained through the exploration of the various intersections of ICTs, work organisations and society. Not only is internet dating a rapidly increasing societal phenomena, it is also one of the most profitable commercial operations on the web. The commercial success and the continuation of websites such as these that affect core aspects of human experience will in turn come to increasingly influence social practice by shaping and reshaping the 'expected' venues for conducting our individual social lives. Successfully influencing social practice is an appealing commercial prospect for Gaydar as well as other popular (and mainstream) social networking sites. The industry is comprised of commercial organisations utilizing ICTs in an exceptionally profitable fashion. Given the continued skepticism leveled at IT investment in some work organizations, the case of Gaydar offers interesting food for thought.

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