Targeting Different Demographics - Students and Facebook

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ABSTRACT

These days' students are consistently connected to Facebook through devices both mobile and immobile such as computer, laptop, mobile, iPad, MP3 players, messenger services etc. There has been a definite perception shift both in students and the general public from thinking that Facebook is a service that you merely use to a more dramatic thinking that Facebook is something that you have and own more like a possession [1, 2]. It has also become a medium of self-expression, a topic that is so close to heart especially with students and teenagers as that is the age where they are overwhelmed with societal stereotypes and social norms where they are either trying to fit in or rebel against. Facebook provides this portal without many boundaries imposed on its users. It is this type of thinking that has encouraged and has enabled the growth of some of Facebook's most popular features and can attribute towards the success of Facebook and what it is today. From a Human Computer Interface (HCI) point of view, it is interesting to note the vast amount of changes that have been made over the years that have enabled Facebook to grow with its demographic and evolve concurrently along with their needs. It is also curious to investigate the enormous success of this social network giant despite not obeying most of the normal HCI usability heuristics, which is cause to question the way we measure success from a HCI point of view.

INTRODUCTION

It is within human nature to form bonds to certain things, whether it is a photo, a book, furniture, jewelry or any materialistic object [1, 2]. With the recent outbursts of technology of recent years and the leaps and bounds of the capability of what that technology is able to do these days, we have started to also notice a bond being formed with virtual objects that consumers have. Virtual possessions have been described as objects that are losing material e.g. books, photos, music and others.[1]. [1] also identified an ever increasing need to record and keep track of history among students, and has become of very high value to teenagers, these things include activities such as geo tagging to trace where you posted or updated something from, services that keep track of your jogging routes such as MapMyRun.com[1]. There is further emphasis of the fact that seamless integration between that of social aspects such as simple things like going for a run can cross over to the virtual world and be tracked, traced and recorded for recollection in the future. Students like the fact that they have a record of what they have done and have a momento like trace of their life.

In combination with the increasing amount of mobile technologies being produced, be it your mobile phone, iPad, laptop or music player, teenagers nowadays can easily carry and access the mass amount of data that they have stored, which they are now starting to perceive more of as a "possession".

FACEBOOK AND STUDENTS

There is general consensus that students consider Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook to be a virtual possession as defined above [3]. Facebook is a perfect example of how student's lives cross that boundary of reality and virtuality so seamlessly and how they can take advantage of the features offered by Facebook. By using features available, students enhance their lives by making things easier, productive, more social and be more aware by overcoming some social barriers which may have been seen as an obstacle to some students.

In [3], by simply studying the daily activities of students and their interaction with Facebook, they were clearly able to identify how Facebook can simulate an online social environment similar to that of the real world with added benefits. For example communication is a key pillar of strength for Facebook as it allows various forms such as private messaging, public messaging in the form of posts, "poking" to get someone's attention among others. If you were a student in the real world and wanted to ask a co-student who you don't really know a question, it is more passive to use Facebook as a medium to communicate if you were too shy to approach them.

By realizing that students lead a really hectic and scheduled based lifestyle whether it is for classes, work or extra-curricular activities, there is a general agreement that Facebook supplements this lifestyle and allows students to easily manage various aspects of their day to day activities [3]. This could be through the use of the groups, fan pages as well events.

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Through data gathered in [3], they were able to identify 4 key social gatherings where Facebook was able to help facilitate which would be beneficial to a student's life:

- Scheduled Social Gathering
- Semi-Scheduled Social Gathering
- Ad-Hoc Social Gathering
- Special Events

In addition to events, Facebook's notion of the friendship system is well received so that students don't lose touch with their peers be it really close friends or the "Hi-Bye" type relationship [3]. We are now in an environment where we can bypass the exchange of details to keep in touch, as you can simply find people using the search and send a "request" [3].

Appeal of Facebook
We have established that there is a need for students to self-express themselves, and we have found that Facebook seems to be a popular medium for this. But among the several social networking sites that are available, what is Facebook's Secret to attract the attention of billions of students and teenagers on a daily basis.

As mentioned, students love to create dynamic representation of one's self [2], normally this is expressed through decoration of posters and items within their bedrooms. Students expressed they feel their creativity is limited somewhat within the confines of the home as they have to follow certain ground rules set in place by their parents or guardians [1, 2, 3].

For example, one individual felt that she couldn't put up a picture of her boyfriend because her parents didn't know however her friends were aware [3]. She said it was annoying that she couldn't express their relationship. However with Facebook, she is able to openly express her feelings but at the same time limit visibility of her posts/pictures/information to certain groups on her Friends lists therefore still being able to hide it from her parents. It is this sort of environment, a type of rebellious feel that Facebook still manages to carry across virtually similar to that of the real world that encourages students to keep using it. The Flexibility of Facebook is really charming to the student population [2].

There is also this notion of social capital that has come about from Social Network Sites. Social Capital is defined as the "benefit derived from ones position in a social network" [4]. This could be anything to do with advantages that students may receive from being involved with the groups they belong to e.g. homework study groups being created or interpersonal relationships. For example if you were connected to experts in industry, you would be able to gain top of the line advice instantaneously [4]. It is suggested that social capital arises from a mixture of bonding and bridging [2, 4].

Students emotionally also associate some value to each profile on Facebook [7]. Physiologically, they believe that your social status on Facebook increases depending on the number of posts that you make, number of likes that you get, number of photos that you are tagged in etc. Students are essentially heading towards the initiation of creating a virtual social hub, where you are "popular" not by your looks etc. as in real world environment but by the amount of interactions that you are involved with [3, 4, 5]. There is a value and judgment passed with every action one makes [7].

Again, by enabling access to Facebook through mobile devices, the accessibility of students to its services has also increased. Students are able to upload photos, post, comment, view messages, share things when they want and wherever they want. This just encourages the student demographic to use Facebook more.

There is also explorative research has been carried out to identify key areas in which opportunities exist such as "Accrual of Metadata, placelessness and presence, curation and presentation of self to multiple audiences and probing paradoxes and consequences" [1]. These are several key concerns for which raises areas which more work needs to be put into to investigate further.

EVOLUTION OF FACEBOOK
In [5], they describe the 3 main characteristics of SNS such as Facebook:

1. Create public or semipublic profiles for your connections [5]
2. Obtain list of other users for which they are connected to [5]
3. View and search their own connections [5]

Although these initial ground rules remained to have stayed the same, the features that are offered on the system seem to undergo rapid change [5]. Facebook is becoming an area that demographics like students and teenagers seem to be spending a lot of time on which has created the cause for change and to keep up with demand that has been generated and thereby continuing to give individuals features that Facebook believes will be useful to them so they continue using the system.

As time goes on, we cannot expect the student population to be simply satisfied with the same services, they expect change as their perception, views and uses change. Below we can see quotes from participants in the study undergone in [5], for each individual, the change in their needs is obvious:

"I would say when I first got [Facebook], it was such a novelty that I was on a lot just searching kind of in awe,

looking at everyone's profile to see what they're really about. And now after being on it a couple of years, all my close friends, I've looked at their profiles before."[5]

"[Over time my use of Facebook has] probably increased.

The features were -- when I first started, it was all about, you know, friending people, finding out who was on Facebook because it was kind of a big deal, you know? But now, I kind of use it to see what's going on with my friends rather than just friending people. I don't look to expand my friend base. I know I'm not going out there searching people I'm not friends with. I use it now for photos a lot and that wasn't a part of Facebook when I first joined." [5]

As we can see, there is a shift in perception and use as a user starts utilizing Facebook. It was vital part of Facebook's strategy to need evolving with the needs of its users especially that of students. This resulted in the addition of many new features that we see today.

During 2006, we saw the networks were expanded to include workplaces as well as schools [5]. As Facebook went global – it was important that student's world-wide felt that they were involved and not just have this view of Facebook being a USA only oriented service. During this year we also saw the introduction of the News Feed which included any profile changes made by friends as well as privacy settings being added [5].

In 2007, Facebook launched applications [5], which was a huge bonus for business and game ventures, as it opened up a world of opportunity for them to be creative to market and create applications of users to either play or add on to their page. This invoked further personalisation and allowed some business that chance to increase their visibility.

Since then, there have been numerous additions and changes such as chat being introduced, Cover photos, layout changes to profile pages, Fan pages being created, Groups being created, being able to modify lists easily, incorporated mini-feed on the side, etc.

In addition there have been significant resources put into the development for the range of mobile apps available, whether it's for slate devices or different mobile operating systems. Each change and decision in the design has been taken in consideration with the demographic students e.g. allowing documents to be added and send as attachments has made it easier for students to do group assignments and collaborate better through group chat. We can definitely say that evolving with students and their changes has allowed Facebook to remain at the top of its game.

FUTURE OF HCI

It is a known fact that there is an increase in social media sites similar to that of Facebook, such as LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter which are just a few to name. With the addition of mobile devices, accessibility has been the top of mind for any social entrepreneur developing these sites. Design and interaction of these interfaces referred to as Human Computer Interaction (HCI) has been a pressing issue for the number of people behind the scene working on such applications. Trying to captivate their demographic in innovative ways has led to a creation of new paradigms and beliefs being formed in HCI [6].

In [8], it is mentioned that we were to carry out a usability test using original guidelines, Facebook would not rank that well and predicts that it will not be the success that it is today. [8] mentions only 2 out of the 10 heuristics were adhered to which any analyst would be appalled at, then why has Facebook done so well with 400 million active users daily [www.facebook.com]. This statement has caused several heads to turn and question our standards of assessing systems in terms of usability.

It was found that we should be also measuring the user's experience [8]. Since then, there has been a slow adoption of this "user experience" paradigm within the HCI community [8, 9]. An obstacle was raised in terms of how we measure this said "experience". The study in [8] divided it into 5 sections measured through mainly observatory techniques: Pleasure, Curiosity and Fun, Identification and Self Expression, Surprise and Serendipity and Privacy [8].

Facebook seemed to score pretty high in each of these sections for the majority of the functions that students are able to perform which in turn confirms the huge success behind Facebook. Because Facebook is an amazing case study of how successful an application can be despite failing the heuristic analysis, it has initiated research into various techniques on better we can measure the usability of systems which will channel successful adoption into different demographics.

Further to this, there have been some studies carried out in [9], where they are allowing students to create and design their own social networks using the "Ning.com" tool [9]. They have identified that it is quite interesting that the creators of the most successful Social networking sites to date such as MySpace, Facebook and LiveJournal are all young people catering to young people like students. They aim is try understands pattern as to why the trend is like that and what is attributing them to successful creation of SNS sites.

SUMMARY

Facebook definitely has a powerful connection with the youth of today. They go as far as calling it a possession and it not difficult to see the vast amount of evidence pointing towards at how attached they are to it. Students are expressing an enormous amount of trust and eagerness to post private and personal data to their connections and the outer world.

The outreach that Facebook has had just in terms of students and teenagers is quite groundbreaking despite the fact that it has failed heuristics testing, it's definitely considered a winner and provoked the Human Computer Interface community to question some of the strong paradigms that have been adhered to for a while.

We can see from the report that Facebook is definitely beneficial to students both socially and slowly starting to help academically as well by encouraging like-minded individuals to form groups for information transferal. It has been identified that, it's vital that Facebook to consistently be on top of the student demographic and cater to their constantly changing needs and perspectives so that it stays at the top of its game.

As Facebook Continues to grow and adding features, it will be interesting to notice how the "adverse" amount of features will affect the student population. It will be quite fascinating to observe the student trend and see what fate they decide for this growing Social Media Network.

FURTURE WORK

Facebook is a territory where there aren't too many players, and the fact that it is a leader in its industry allows it to be versatile and explore many avenues, avenues that are considered to be uncharted areas both in terms of the student population and HCI paradigms that it challenges to question.

Key opportunities exist in the management of this virtual possession, as the tools can be more greatly developed to enhance privacy and to create that perfect crossover for students to easily set their privacy controls without going through too much hassle.

To add on to this, there is also opportunity for investigation to see how well immersed Facebook is on the various platforms that it presents itself on whether it is on the laptop, slate device or mobile. On each version, are all the features present and available for the user to use? How would this effect usability and consistency for students?

There is also the side of how attached a student is to Facebook, we have seen all the advantages the Facebook can provide but what about the disadvantages that it can provoke. There is consensus from most parents of students that it is distracting and addictive. How far do students take Facebook or any other Social Network Site in terms being addicted or causing harm to themselves because they have misrepresented themselves inappropriately.

The questions being raised are merely the tip of the iceberg, the participation of students in Facebook is huge and admiring the HCI that has gone into to creating that, and the effects that come about as a result of the student and Facebook relationship can be a mixture of positive and negative and definitely do require further work.

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