

Effects of Social Networking Sites on User Experience

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Abstract

Social Networking Sites (SNS) introduced a new medium of communication among users. Facebook, Google+, and LinkedIn share several notable features between sites, while maintaining distinct user experiences. This study investigated users' experience and ownership of accounts on multiple SNS. 40 undergraduate students, 18-24 years old, were surveyed and all 40 had Facebook accounts. Only 24 students had accounts with Google+ and 15 owned a LinkedIn account. Results showed the most significant factor affecting satisfactory user experience was the popularity of the site among users' social circles, with the features of the site being less valued by users. The perception of a site's purpose and how to use its features to network effectively also greatly impacted user experience. Facebook was a gold standard in that its features were present in other SNS. Further results found that although users expressed a desire for customizability, they rarely took advantage of such opportunities.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites; Facebook; Google+; LinkedIn; User Experience

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1 Introduction

Social Networking Sites (SNS) are web applications that allow users to create personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and send e-mails and instant messages between each other (Boyd & Ellison 2008). Social media has become a critical component in the appeal of the internet and provides a new medium for social connectivity. SNS give users the chance to connect, express their opinions (e.g. Facebook's "comment" and "like" features), follow influencers, and share information.

Analyzing user experience has been approached from many angles. Burke (2009) found that users may be drawn back to a social media site if their friends regularly engage with the site's uses. This allows the initial users to experience what their friends have engaged with and motivates them to engage as well. Therefore, it is vital for the developers of these sites to encourage users to contribute content, as user experience depends on the contributions of those within their social circle. A primary characteristic of social networking sites is their reliance upon users to generate most, if not all, of their content. The SNS must create tools, settings, features, and an interface that enables users to add and create items with ease. How these functions influence the behavior and experience of the user must be understood in order to be designed effectively.

Another angle to approach analyzing user experience is by studying the difference between having a single site and having multiple sites. Dijck (2013) looked at the implications of users' needs to create "multiple" stories about themselves to different audiences. Conscious and subconscious decisions are made by users when interacting with SNS interfaces. These studies involving how a social media site, and its interface, influence a user from various aspects, provided a substantial framework for our survey study of undergraduate students on their experiences with social networking sites.

2 Methods

This study investigated the question, how do the interfaces of Social Networking Sites influence a user's experience? The three SNS selected for comparison were, Facebook, Google+, and LinkedIn. A major commonality between all three selected sites was the ability to choose between sharing information with everyone or to limit sharing to select user friend groups. To gain insight into user experience on SNS, we deployed an open-ended survey consisting of 54 questions, covering multiple variables such as motivations for use, an interface's design and aesthetics, as well as preferences for a social networking site. Deploying a survey allowed us to reach a greater number of participants than interviews, yet still allowed for open-ended responses. Our survey was completed by 40 undergraduate students, ranging in age from 18-24 years old, from three U.S. universities in the South and Midwest. Given the university enrollment of the researchers, undergraduates were the largest population accessible. Data was collected and analyzed after two months.

3 Findings

It was found that features are not the main appeal of social networking sites; popularity is the central factor affecting user experience and satisfaction. "Popularity" is seen as the number of social connections to an individual user and their frequent use of the site. Many Facebook users had created an account due to either word of mouth from friends or siblings. Users continue to frequent the site due to familiarity and following other's content. The perception of a site's usefulness also affects user-site interaction, meaning that respondents did not interact with Google+ or LinkedIn due to confusion of perceived purpose and how to utilize its features. Facebook retained all of its users from the survey pool because of its aforementioned popularity, familiarity, and build off of other sites. Many users felt that Facebook's layout, however, should be more customizable based on user's needs and frequency of used features. While Google+ offers many of the customizable capabilities users were looking for, survey participants stated that Google+ was not a site commonly used, for reasons that ultimately indicated a lack of popularity within a user's friend group. The organization of a layout was also desired to be more structured like Facebook's due to confusion created by Google+'s 'free-form' style.

Expectations for other sites developed based on what the user had grown accustomed to through years of Facebook usage. The friendship aspect of Facebook that drew users to the site and helped spread the word is lacking for both Google+ and LinkedIn. The importance of a site's popularity within a user's friend group takes precedent over their desire for customizability.

4 Conclusion

In order for a new SNS to be created, it must take into consideration imitating features and layouts of previously established sites due to the probability that its user-base will already have pre-existing expectations. In future SNS development, it is likely that there will need to be a shift from a less free-form style of organization to a more structured homepage or newsfeed. It is important for future SNS to achieve the difficult balance between organization, popularity, and customizability. Having a previous SNS, however, will influence the perception and desire for features on alternate networking sites. Advertisement is needed for both previously established SNS in order to increase the number of active users, and emerging SNS in order to raise awareness. A cycle is formed when old SNS evolve to compete with the features their users want as emerging SNS build off the features of these existing sites. Our results have only scratched the surface of what a portion of undergraduate users are wanting to see. The development of SNS will continually evolve and users' expectations will gradually change, leading to a constant need for research on Social Networking Sites.

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