Cultural differences, experience with social networks and the nature of "true commitment" in Facebook

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Abstract

Formed on an analysis of design practices, the behaviour chain model stipulates that social network designer's ultimate aim is to encourage users to adopt the social network site by entering a phase of true commitment. During this phase, social network users are driven to connect to known or unknown others by engaging in instrumental uses that create value and content and involve others, while staying active and loyal by investing time in the site. This paper investigates how designer's intentions, as captured by the behaviour chain model, materialise through users' reported practices in the social network site Facebook. A total of 423 Facebook users from 5 countries answered a questionnaire that allowed us to examine how 2 user characteristics, *experience with the site*, and *culture*, shape the nature of true commitment. Our findings show that experience with the site and even more so, culture, have an effect on users' motivations for using Facebook, as well as their instrumental uses and the time they invest on the site. This analysis reifies the behaviour chain model by allowing designers to understand how the features they design are embodied in users' practices.
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1. Introduction

The growth and usage level of social network sites have become a global phenomenon. Cyworld is estimated to host profiles of 50% of the South Korean population (Kim and Yun, 2007). Mixi, Japan's most popular social networking site, has 14 million active accounts and is rated as the eighth most visited site in Japan[1]. Orkut is the fifth most popular site in India[2]; within Orkut, 8.3 million profiles (20% of all users) are Indian[3].

Social network sites typically share three common elements. They allow individuals to "construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Despite their similarities, it has been argued that the design of social network sites varies in nuanced ways (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Subtle design distinctions from site to site, further compounded by the culturally homogeneous groups congregating certain social network sites (Hargittai, 2007), can influence users' motivations and uses, fostering different community cultures (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Hargittai, 2007).

This paper narrows its scope on the social network site Facebook. Initially targeted at US University users, Facebook opened its doors to high school students, followed by corporations. Since September 2006, the site has been open to everyone. Facebook[4] statistics show that 400 million active visitors have joined the site on a global scale, 70% of which are located outside the US.

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  [1]Retrieved on 22/01/10 from http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/mixi.jp
  [2]Retrieved on 22/01/10 from http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/orkut.co.in
  [3]Retrieved on 12/02/10 from http://www.orkut.com/MembersAll.aspx

  [4]Retrieved on 01/03/10 from http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics

By February 2010, Facebook had localised the site making it available in more than 70 languages, a move that reflects its growing international uptake.

A number of studies have demonstrated that the large-scale mobilisation in Facebook is sparked by the opportunity to connect and to communicate with people one has met or befriended offline (Joinson, 2008; Ellison et al., 2007; Golder et al., 2007; Lampe et al., 2006) and to a lesser degree by the ability to investigate new others (Joinson, 2008; Lampe et al., 2006; Ellison et al., 2007). Given the social character of Facebook users' motivations, it is not surprising that Facebook users, compared to non-users, place more value on social grooming i.e., a dispositional curiosity about others and a desire for social connection (Tufekci, 2008). At a collective level, the intensity of using Facebook to maintain offline ties leads to an increase of social capital within the offline community, a process that particularly benefits users with low self-esteem (Steinfield et al., 2008; Ellison et al., 2007). A range of instrumental uses has been found to sustain users' motivation to keep coming back, such as posting photographs, using applications and changing the status update (Joinson, 2008).

The present research extends previous research on Facebook by using a novel, but not-yet empirically tested, framework, the "behaviour chain model" (Fogg and Eckles, 2007). The model was originally built to capture the range of behaviours, Web 2.0, and more specifically social network, designers strive to elicit in their users through their designs (Fogg and Iizawa, 2008). In brief, according to the behaviour chain model, users are initially guided to enter a phase of *discovery*, for instance, during which they learn about the site. Next, users are led into a phase of *superficial involvement* during which they may decide to try the service. Finally, users become situated in the *true commitment* phase, for example, expressed by involving others in their activities.

The authors of the behaviour chain model (Fogg and Eckles, 2007) do not present their work as an analytical model, but rather as a best-practices framework for designers. Nonetheless, we believe the behaviour chain model provides a useful framework for evaluating how designers' intentions materialise through users' actual practices; though designers' choices can successfully shape users' motivations and uses, it is also well known that users can interpret and appropriate the technology in unexpected ways (e.g. boyd and Heer, 2006). Using the behaviour chain model as a theoretical lens, this work examines whether the nature of the third phase, true commitment, is stable or rather shaped by users' *experience* and *culture*. In the next Section we review the behaviour chain model, present recent experimental findings in support of the model and position it within other related research on Facebook.

2. Relevant work

Aiming to capture the process designers undertake to motivate user participation, Fogg and Eckles (2007)

observed the design practices of 50 Web 2.0 applications (including several social network sites). This analysis led to the construction of a model, the behaviour chain, in which they argue that sites eliciting user-generated content are built around three phases. Each phase is characterised by several target behaviours that materialise through a number of instrumental uses. The first phase, discovery, aims to market the service provided by enticing users to learn about the site and to visit it. Once users sign up for the service they enter the second phase, superficial involvement. During this phase, the site highlights the possibilities for content creation and information exchange with others motivating users to try the service. The third phase, true commitment, is our present focus, as it signals users' full adoption of the service, in our case the social network site. It is characterised by three key target behaviours that follow a repetitive and cyclical pattern. These are: (1) creating value and content e.g. posting a photograph (2) staying active and loyal e.g. visiting the site frequently and (3) involving others e.g. sending a friend request. Fig. 1 presents the model as visualised by Fogg and Eckles (2007). To reify the behaviour chain model in the domain of social networks, Fogg and Iizawa (2008) illustrated how two diverse social network sites, Mixi and Facebook, facilitate the three target behaviours of true commitment by
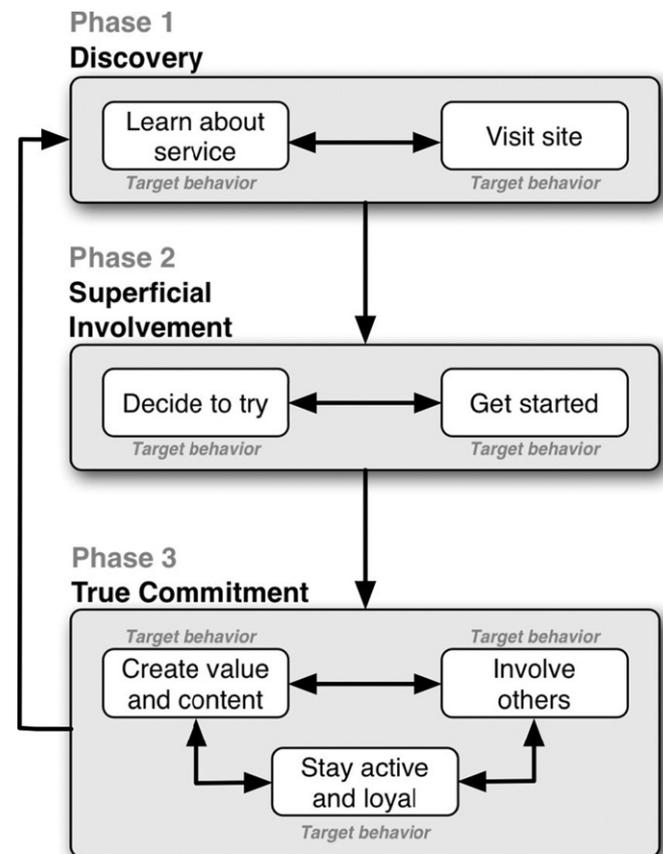

Fig. 1. Behaviour chain model (reprinted with permission from Fogg and Eckles, 2007).