

Analysis of Instagram Users engaged in Experience

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Introduction

During the last four weeks of the second module of I542: Foundation of HCI, we discussed different traits of the user in terms of processors, consumer, producer, participants of information and technology. This paper tries to relate some of these traits by considering users engagement in the social media platform. I discuss how a platform that was initially developed as a mobile application for sharing pictures of everyday activities to the world transformed as a marketplace for huge advertisement companies that leverages user-generated content to create engaging content. I first relate with the class reading of (McCarthy Wright, 2004, p. 62) Dewey's User in engaged experience theory and then introduce a new metaphor of User as a Product at the later stage. Though there are tons of applications out there, for the focus of this paper I will analyze only one social media platform – Instagram.

What is Instagram?

Founded in 2010, Instagram started as a mobile-based photo-sharing application that gave people the to capture moments of their life and show artistic skills by using an enhancement filter. It has become one of the fastest-growing platforms of its kind with the majority of the young population. In 2021 there are 1.074 billion Instagram users and 71% of the active users are below the age of 35 years (Maryam Mohsin, 2021). Soon after Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012, many new features rushed into the platform which increased the engagement of the people furthermore. With features such as Stories, Reels, IGTV, brand tagging- redirecting users to an e-commerce website and recently in 2021 the shop feature, the photo-sharing app has become more of a community that engages with more and more people every year.

Why do people use it?

While being a social media application similar to Facebook, Instagram provided special filters that people can use to beautify their photos. Facebook lets people connect you digitally through text, photos, games with people you know and are friends or family, but Instagram though just a photo and video sharing platform, gives people a means to express themselves to the world and meet people with common interests through hashtags (#). According to research by Pavica Sheldon & Katherine Bryant (Pavica Sheldon, Katherine Bryant, 2013, p.89) on motives to use Instagram, they conclude that there are 4 major factors or motives to use Instagram. The four factors were defined as: Surveillance/Knowledge about others, Documentation, Coolness, and Creativity, out of which Surveillance/Knowledge about others was the most influential factor of Instagram use. This includes simple actions such as liking a photo, following someone or even researching on other people's profiles to get inspiration for art. the second factor is Documentation which consists of uploading photos as a memory, sharing stories of your environment with your followers or even remembering or sharing an event. Then the next factor is more popular in narcissist people, young user group mainly Gen Z people. Coolness is basically to post images/videos to seem cooler, get popular, promote yourself or your product and Finally Creativity is the action to find people that matches your interest, find art inspiration or create your art in terms of videos, reels, show off your photography skills. Through this research, we got to know what kind of general activities people do while using Instagram though I think there is one more factor that is now a part of Instagram use i.e., Entertainment - People use Instagram as a source of entertainment or to pass time through IGTV, live feed and Reels, but how does Instagram make people continue using it? How do they keep the user wanting more? is it the User Interface that keeps the user engaged?

What makes Instagram so engaging?

User as engaged in Experience:

To answer this, I try to relate the users in engaged experience class where we came across an interesting piece of literature – The Rhythmic Dance of Aesthetic Experience (McCarthy Wright,

2004, p. 62) where John Dewey considers aesthetic experience in terms of felt and lived but ‘*a rhythmic dance of resistance and release that “both self and world become imbued with felt, emotionalized, or expressive significance”*’ (McCarthy Wright, 2004, p. 62). Dewey identifies this rhythm as a closely related activity such as cumulation, conservation, tension, and anticipation. Let’s analyze how Instagram follow these activities that makes people engaged towards the fulfilment of experience. All these activities are interconnected and run continuously hence the name rhythmic dance.

Anticipation in Instagram can be a release of a new feature on the app that is communicated beforehand in terms of ads or it can be an expectation of several likes or comments on the picture that you post. When the expectation is met, experience is saved in terms of memory and it is conserved, if not met conservation is breached, people reflect on what they did and where they can improvise or change to get better results. Conservation here can either be the value that is generated when your task is fulfilled or the memories that are saved in terms of a photo gallery. As Dewey (John McCarthy and Peter Wright, 2004, p. 62). explained aesthetic experience is achieved when a task or activity is fulfilled. Fulfilment is a combination of build-up and release of experience. This build-up is defined as cumulation and through this build-up, tension is created. When people want to post an image or a video on Instagram, accumulation occurs during each step users perform during the activity such as capturing photos, choosing the filter, writing the correct hashtags and description, posting it, getting notification of the likes and comments on the post. The tension here is the resistance that users might feel during the task or activity such as choosing the picture between similar pictures or selecting a piece of music for the video or a filter for the picture, or it can also occur during writing the description and hashtags. Tension is released when these micro-tasks are completed. Once the Instagram post is uploaded again the anticipation kicks in on how people react to the post. This is a continuous process and does not stop at a particular point, which keeps the user engaged with the application.

I think though Dewey’s theory helps the designer understand different phases involved in the collective aesthetic experience, developing an engaging experience requires a lot of effort to analyze everyday use cases through each phase and will require a lot of imagination and assumption during this process. designers cannot measure the resistance users face during each interaction, also the tension and release during one interaction is subjective and can vary from user to user.

User as Product:

Now I put forward user as a product to understand how users are studied by social media and marketing companies to create engaging/addictive experiences. Social media has become an essential tool not just for users but also for companies. As the active users increased, more and more content is being generated every second. The main source of income for these social media companies is ad revenue. As Prof Ekbia said during the lecture "*Capitalism can dynamically reinvent itself*" (Hamid R. Ekbia, Bonnie A. Nardi, 2019). when Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012, Instagram was generating zero revenue as people were using the platform just to share photos and connect to people with similar interests, but Facebook saw the opportunity and the potential of the massive amount of data that users generate by uploading content, sharing, tagging photos and videos. Later after the Facebook acquisition, the monthly active user kept growing at an exponential rate. With new features (similar features from Facebook) like stories, IGTV, Live broadcasting the monthly active user group kept growing at an exponential rate. "*Because social media provides an inexpensive way to interact and engage with these large numbers of potential customers, social media marketing has become a valuable channel for marketers*" (Roope Jaakkimäki. Et. al, 2017,) Marketing companies saw an opportunity to use the platform to generate ad revenue. These marketing companies are using user data from everyday interactions such as users likes and dislikes, personal data, user interest in different products etc. and studying this data can help marketing companies to create ads that are more engaging that can increase the time spent by users on the platform, in turn, the user unknowingly generate more data with the continuous engagement. This is the vicious cycle that helps tech companies to create business models that make sure that advertisers are as successful as possible by monetizing user-generated free labour. During this Pandemic through social marketing has helped many local vendors and influencers by providing them with an online platform to sell their product, promote their craft and run their livelihood, they are not the major benefactors. The Social marketing companies have become the prime customers(users) of Instagram and we users are now the product, our engagement, our choices, our time, everything that we perform is a data set of interest for tech companies to keep the user engaged. What does the user gain in this! Besides emotional satisfaction or discontent, an

addictive application that uses user-generated data to make it more addictive and makes tech giants profit.

Conclusion

We analyzed different factors that come into the picture while the user is engaged in an aesthetic experience. first, we discussed four major motive that keeps user using Instagram. Then I applied my understanding of engaged experience from Dewey's The Rhythmic dance of Aesthetic Experience to understand how users are engaged and how the resistance and release of tension results in users engaged in the experience. But understanding user in engaging experience by Dewey's model consists of imagination and subjective elements that might be arduous and ineffective. And finally, I introduced User are a product that designers and social marketing companies can analyses to keep the user engaged in the aesthetic experience.

References

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