Abandonment of Social Networks: Shift from Use to Non-Use and Experiences of Technology Non-Use

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ABSTRACT
In this paper we describe a qualitative research on abandonment of a social network, i.e. Facebook, and why some people opt to terminate their use. Interviews were conducted with subjects who previously had daily use experience, and now opted for non-use. Four major themes were found as contributing to this technology abandonment. The insider story shared by the interviewees, of their technology non-use sheds light on the contributing factors leading to a shift from a user to a non-user.

Author Keywords
Social Networks; Technology Non-Use; Abandonment; Facebook; Non-Use.

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m. Information Interfaces and Presentation (e.g. HCI): Miscellaneous

INTRODUCTION
Social media is a growing phenomena in the nowadays fast-paced Internet-using society. In 2009, social networking and blogging sites accounted for 17% (about one in every six minutes) of all time spent on the Internet. [7]

Many people use online social media to keep in touch and/or interact with other people. The number of people who use Facebook actively has reached 500,000,000, half of which, log on every given day, and 40% of them accessing Facebook through their mobile devices, and people that use Facebook on their mobile devices are twice as active on Facebook than non-mobile users. [2]

Since the social networking culture has taken the world by storm, this pervasive presence on cyber-space has brought up interest in psychologists, sociologists, and IT experts, to understand it better. This motivates a number of studies to be done.

Pros and cons of social media, are subjects of such studies; e.g. the opponents of the social media culture may mention the risks of cyber-bullying [3], or security risks of disclosing personal information, usable by cyber-criminals for identity theft. Proponents, on the other hand, embrace the new possibilities facilitated by the social media, e.g. finding old classmates and acquaintances; convenient easy communication channel to keep contact with friends; reaching a wide range of audience, which was not as easy, before; to name a few. And the list goes on.

This paper explains a study of the Facebook experience of people who had been using it, and stopped using it. The aim of this study was to try to understand why people leave Facebook, by probing into the lives of people who have left it. The research hopes to bring an understanding of why some people leave an online social network, i.e. Facebook.

METHODOLOGY
The method for conducting this research was face-to-face semi-structured interviews. It involved the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and/or special topics. These questions were asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewers were allowed freedom to digress; that is, the interviewers were permitted (in fact rather expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared and standardized questions. [1:107]

The target group were students, under 25 years old age-wise, who had recently stopped using Facebook: To study the comparative contrast of their life and Facebook usage experience before and after having discontinued using Facebook.

One to three in-depth interviews was aimed to be carried out. The interviewees were sought for by asking as many acquaintances, friends and friends of friends of the researcher in Sweden, their extended social circle and two people were found that had terminated their use of Facebook in this outreach.

The interviewees had the same cultural background – both of Swedish nationality: One male and one female. Although English was not their first language, both interviewees were highly fluent in it and had excellent command of English and comfortable expressing themselves in English, and the interview was conducted in English.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face; One over Skype, with video on, and the other in-person.
The whole length of the interview was recorded on two devices; a digital MP4 player/recorder, and a laptop, with explicit verbal consent of the participants.

The interviewer had prepared a set of about 10 questions a priori, and started with open and easy questions, to make the interviewees feel comfortable, and get going. Questions were designed and categorized into five sub-themes, more or less semi-structured, but open to minor changes, e.g. in wording, and re-ordering during the interview, as the flow of the conversation was intended to be kept as natural as possible, and uninterrupted. [1: 107]

Based on preparatory talks with colleagues and friends about this research, to find out some research areas for this research question, five sub-themes were used, for the interview questions, which included loneliness and friend-making; attention span and instant gratification; social cue reading; cyber-friendships and real-life friendships; and the Facebook life and real life.

RESULTS

The first interviewee was a 23 years old male living in Gothenburg, Sweden, studying industrial economics, at Chalmers University of Technology. His usual use of computers was to watch football games and play music, writing essays, were the tasks that he described as fun, and not on a computer, and trying to live his life “in life”, and not on a computer, and trying to use the computer as little as possible. He said “I don’t want to become addicted of it, I want to be able to live my life without a computer, [...] I would like to be outdoors and meet people, I love talking to people.”

“to be out and meet people” was a high priority for him. “I’m getting a bit scared when everybody is just using their phones all the time, not trying to be with human-beings like before.”

He mentioned some people’s shyness, and the aspect of Facebook facilitating easy contact for shy people. “The good feeling of being close to people. For a lot of people, they are getting shy to meet other people in real-life; internet and social media are really good for use for them. That is not what I want it for. So I think that’s a good thing for a lot of people, it’s good that you get to choose, [...] it’s just another alternative.”

He did have a smart-phone, and used Internet on it merely for Spotify (an online music streaming service offering unlimited streaming of selected music from a wide range of labels). “since I am trying to get rid off/use as few technical things as possible, I’m having my smart-phone for music, so I can get rid of my iPod.”

In response to the question ‘Do you think by not following the general trend in using technological services i.e. Facebook, Mobile Apps, etc., you will miss on some opportunities that are available or advertised on the Cyberspace?’ he said “definitely, I think I will miss opportunities, but I think people who use computers will miss the opportunities that I get outdoors. In this information-society it is very hard to have everything, [...] you have to prioritize. [although] if we’re talking about Spotify or Skype, I’ll hear about them even when I don’t have computer. I hear about the games on Facebook even that I don’t have Facebook.” He had quitted Facebook half a year before the interview, having had used it for two years. Back then, he had around 300 people added on his friends list. His frequency of use was “many”, 10-20, times a day, 3-5 minutes each. He described his Facebook experience as exciting in the beginning, didn’t like it after a year any more, and stressful in the end, and then he quitted it.

“I got a bit stressed about it, to know what everybody is doing, when you seen all the people saying ‘today I’m doing this, today I’m doing that’. Then I take all these people’s updates like ONE person, think Oh, they’re doing so much, I’m doing nothing, but it was just a lot of people I compared, and put in a box, and I thought I should do all these things.” He described the stressful feelings were significantly experienced toward the end of his Facebook experience. “Now I get stressed when I hear about Facebook. I don’t wanna hear what everybody is doing, and see all the pictures, it’s just wasting my time. There’s no depth in Facebook.” To the question whether he had made friends on Facebook that met in real-life, he said “no, I didn’t want to.” Although he said it was possible to do so; with spending time and sending message and being active on Facebook.

The second interviewee was a 17 years old female living in Gothenburg, Sweden, studying an International Baccalaureate, with focus on social sciences. Her usual use of computers was mainly to search, read, chat on MSN, and suchlike. She had quitted Facebook two and half a years ago, having used it for four months. She had around 200 added on her friends list. Her accumulated use was 3-5 hours a day, everyday, “as soon as I opened the Internet.” She did have a smart-phone, and did not use Internet on it, mainly due to its high cost per minute of usage.

She described her Facebook experience as time-consuming and useless. “It became a huge part of my life that I didn’t like. It was such a huge part of life for everyone else, that if I had Facebook, it all became a competition of who had the more friends, who had the more pictures on Facebook.”

She mentioned the number of friends and pictures, and comments one gets is regarded as one’s status, and prestige, in that circle, and you are viewed as such. “people who are on Facebook, they almost define themselves by how many friends they have, how many pictures they have, how many comments on the pictures, and so on, and so forth [...] I realised that wasn’t me, [...] I just felt like it’s not worth it.”

In response to the question if she feels she is missing something by not using Facebook as a means of staying in touch with friends, she replied “the friends that are worth keeping, are the ones that bother to stay in touch with me out of Facebook [...] it’s not like I’m isolated, I have phone, they can text me [...]”

To the question whether she had made friends on Facebook that met in real-life, she said yes, she had found a couple of
old childhood friends, that she met and they see and meet each other since then.

She mentioned the lack of some communication factors, such as facial expressions, body gestures, and so on, in Facebook interactions, and also, since she did not know many of her Facebook friends, and who they were, and how they were, she said "everything you say and see on Facebook is subject to misinterpretation."

"You have to weigh the benefits, and see if it's worth it." she added.

DISCUSSION

Findings show that Facebook provides new opportunities for connecting with friends and family, mainly as another channel of communication, in addition to other channels, namely physically-present conversations, telephone, SMS texting, email, and so on. But, when the disadvantages of the Facebook outweigh the benefits, some people opt out and abandon it. Four themes contributing to this abandonment were identified in this research study, which follows:

TIME-CONSUMPTION

A common point of view that both interviewees shared, was that their Facebook experience ended after having become a waste of time. The usage became daily easily, and it took a big chunk of the person’s daily available time. Having abandoned Facebook, the interviewees reported an increased amount of available time at their disposal, and less stress.

STRESS

Also stress was a reason for the subjects to leave Facebook. First, the stress suffered from the manufacturing of an identity on Facebook which is regarded as the person’s status among its Facebook friends, is an incentive for the user to want to become more and more engaged in the competition for status and prestige, if he/she is investing in its Facebook presence. A related research in the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self [10] also suggests among young people, the self is increasingly becoming externally manufactured rather than internally developed. The second kind of stress found, is the stress caused by regarding a population – of one’s social circle – as a single person, and experiencing a feeling of lagging behind their combined activities, altogether.

LACK OF PHYSICALITY

The research subjects were very interested in meeting and talking to people, in person. The social interactions on Facebook did not satisfy their expectation from a “real” conversation or interaction. They mentioned the lack of non-verbal cues, and that we pick up on body language [5][6] when we are communicating in-person and Facebook – like many other artificial communication channels – does not require the full in-person subtleties of social skills we need in physically-present interactions.

OVER-CONVENIENCE

The convenience of Facebook contact keeping, was found to be both an advantage, and a disadvantage. It can facilitates easy and convenient interactions. On the other hand, the research shows the convenience of sending messages publicly on Facebook, also had resulted in the users being less appreciative of those correspondences, since they do not require as much time, effort, and exclusivity, as compared to private messaging/emails/SMS one receives from friends.

FUTURE WORK

Further studies needs to be done, on this matter, to get a better understanding of this growing phenomena, and to get a better picture of the overall impact of the use and non-use of on-screen social interactivity. The research described in this paper, can be a used as relevant literature, for such future studies.

REFERENCES