Online Persuasion in Facebook and Mixi: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

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Abstract. Social networking sites persuade millions of users each day to adopt specific behaviors. To understand this phenomenon in the context of persuasive technology, we analyzed how persuasion takes place in leading social networking sites from two different countries: Facebook in the U.S. and Mixi in Japan. We compared the two services on four persuasion goals: creating profile pages, inviting friends, responding to content by friends, and returning to the site often. Our analysis reveals the differences and similarities in how Facebook and Mixi are designed to influence users toward the achievement of these four goals. In general, Facebook’s persuasive design is more assertive and mechanistic, while Mixi’s approach, by comparison, is subtle and indirect. These persuasion styles seem to map generally to cultural differences between the U.S. and Japan.

Keywords: persuasion, captology, social networking, persuasive technology, behavior chain, persuasive design, cultural comparison, Mixi, Facebook.

1 Introduction

Social networking services are among the most popular sites on today’s Internet. They are also among the most persuasive. For a social networking service (SNS) to succeed, the service must motivate users to adopt specific target behaviors: register, upload a photo, connect to friends, share content with friends, and so on. The study of social networking sites can provide insight into how persuasion occurs online, an increasingly important topic in captology, the study of persuasive technology [1].

Facebook is the fastest growing SNS in the U.S., ranking #5 in traffic1 for all U.S. websites. However, in Japan Facebook is not popular, failing to rank in the top 100 sites. Instead, Mixi is the leading SNS, ranked as the #5 website overall in Japan2.

Despite the profound cultural differences between the U.S. and Japan, people in both countries are being motivated and persuaded on a daily basis by these social networking services. As a research team from the U.S. and Japan, we set out to compare how persuasion occurs in Facebook and Mixi by analyzing the user

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1 Data from Alexa.com on January 1, 2008.
2 Data from Alexa.com on January 1, 2008.

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experiences from the perspective of persuasive technology. To our knowledge, our research is the first collaborative effort between countries to compare the persuasive design of social networking services that appeal to two different cultures.

Our comparison is a case study. As such, we do not attempt to test hypotheses. Instead, our goal is to illuminate which issues deserve deeper investigation and which could later become independent variables in a controlled experiment.

Our work makes an original contribution by specifying persuasive goals in SNSs and describing how two services achieve these goals; comparing influence strategies used in online settings from two different cultures; and analyzing the success of SNSs in terms of persuasive technology principles.

1.1 Background

Fogg & Eckles [2] investigated over 50 successful “Web 2.0” services and identified a pattern that all leading services followed, which they called the “Behavior Chain for Online Participation.” This framework, illustrated in Fig. 1, was a useful lens through which to compare persuasion on Facebook and Mixi. The Behavior Chain outlines three Phases: Discovery, Superficial Involvement, and True Commitment. Our comparison of Facebook and Mixi focuses on Phase 3: True Commitment.

Our analysis revealed that both Facebook and Mixi are designed to persuade users toward the behaviors listed in Phase 3: creating value and content, involving others, and staying active and loyal. To focus our research, we extracted four SNS persuasion

Fig. 1. Our cross-cultural analysis focuses on Phase 3 of the Behavior Chain [2]