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Reactive interaction and subjectivity in social network sites

Hamilton Garcia Nogueira [1], Berenice Santos Gonçalves [2], Alice T. Cybis Pereira [3]

Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Campus Universitário Reitor João David Ferreira Lima, Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brasil, 88040-970.

[1] hamiltongn@gmail.com 1, [2]berenice@cce.ufsc.br, [3] acybis@gmail.com

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1 Context

Performing an action such as "liking" a picture is so simple it has become a habit. Automatic, even, repeating itself several times throughout different contexts on social network sites (SNS). In order to understand this kind of interaction, one has to reflect upon its context. Made popular in the Web 2.0 era, the SNSs have changed the use of internet to an extent that makes it almost impossible to differentiate both universes. Making use of attractive and user-friendly interfaces full of functionalities regarding communication and social interaction, the SNS are amongst the most accessed sites in Brazil and worldwide. When it comes to the term "social network", it is important to highlight that it consists of being a metaphor to observe the connection patterns of a social group, from the established connections between the several actors (RECUERO, 2009, p. 24), in other words, its existence does not depend on any kind of website or media, given its application in the offline world, dealing with the relation between humans. Facebook[1], Twitter[2] and Instagram[3] are some examples of SNSs.

Interactivity is one of the strong points of these kind of websites, since it is through the interaction of its graphic interfaces that the communication between its users occurs. On the categorization proposed by Primo (2001), the interaction with an interface can be reactive, when the system offers previously defined choices, or mutual, when a user has more part and communicative freedom – with the system and with other users.

If on one hand the first type seems limiting, it is recognizable that in SNSs, especially on Facebook, an interaction as simple as a click possesses expressive potential: the act

[1] http://facebook.com/
[2] http://twitter.com/
[3] http://instagram.com/

of "liking" a link, a page, a picture, reveals personality traces of the interactor as well as its relationship with its network acquaintances. Considering the studies about computer-mediated interaction and communication, the role of reactive interaction on the social media's dynamic is yet to be defined, especially in SNSs. In order to reach this goal, the process of the "like" button is going to be analyzed under the perspective of its practical and subjective functions.

2 Method

Every Facebook user has a profile that keeps and displays its personal information, posts, pictures, contacts, etc. Every text, picture, video, link or event created by one user generates a publication, denominated as "stories" by Facebook. Contact's stories and user pages nourish the newsfeed. Stories related to applications and publicity also are shown there. There are three options in order for the users and the pages to interact with the stories they come across: like, comment and share. This analysis focuses on the first one that presents at least three immediate consequences. Via Facebook's exploration and observation, this study is about the site's interface reactions to the "like" interaction, on histories on the newsfeed.

3 Results

The first aspect to be observed is the number of times that a certain post has been "liked", in other words, how many people "liked" that publication, as seen in figure 1. The number is shown below the publication along with the name of some interactors, in case there is a connection with who is viewing the post.

Figure 1 – Count shown below the publications on the news feed.

Source: Authors.

The text "X others like this" (figure 1) contains a hyperlink to reveal the list of people who "liked" the publication, with their names, pictures and links to their profiles. The privacy of these interactions depends on the post's author. If the post is set to be public, so will be the users list. Following this logic, the same happens if the author's posts are set to be seen only by his contacts.

The second aspect related to the "like" button is the notification (figure 2). Every time a publication is "liked", its author is notified that a certain person, using its own profile, performed the interaction. Should more than one interaction of the same kind and in the same post happen, the notice is gathered in one sole notification.

Figure 2 – Notification count located on the superior part of Facebook's interface.

Source: Authors.

These notifications are private information. Only the author of the post (or comment) receives and it. The icon that represents the earth globe also shows other kinds of notifications. The red highlighted number above the icon appears whenever there is a new notification, showing the number of times this event occurred as well.

The third and last aspect is the creation of a temporary story as a result of the interaction (figure 3). The appearance can happen in an arbitrary way by Facebook itself. The website's algorithm calculates when and who to show this story in the news feed, based on the relationships present in social network.

This situation can be better understood in the following hypothetical situation. The user named Alina "liked" her friend's picture, who does not belong to the friends list of Carla's other friend, Arthur. Even though he is not connected to Alina's friend, there is a possibility that the interaction might appear in Arthur's newsfeed in a temporary story, allowing him to see the picture that Alina "liked"

Figure 3 – Temporary exhibition liked by a contact in the news feed.

Source: Authors.

The privacy settings of every user and its publications are taken into account by Facebook's algorithm, which alters this last process. In any case, the invisibility of these stories created by Facebook, the ones that show friends' interactions, can be seen as problematic. There is no way to know how many people have seen that story that is shown for a limited period of time.

The three aspects analyzed also apply to other interactions, such as: comments, shares and making new friends (the connection between profiles), a "liked" page, etc. In the same way, the same processes also take place in different social media websites. An interaction such as the "like" button has set a pattern for SNSs interfaces and extrapolated this context reaching out to other types of websites, like news websites, that integrate the SNSs buttons along with its publications. Google makes use of the +1 button in its system (works in a similar way as the "like" button, in Google Plus) to enhance the research results while evaluating social connections. These examples, and the "like" itself, are but the surface of the web of possibilities that the interface integration along with SNSs has to offer.

4 Conclusions

This study sought to identify the immediate impact of the "like" as means of nonverbal communication between people on Facebook. While being far from coming to any absolute conclusion on the matter, the study objectified to analyze the current context of the reactive interaction on social network websites. Based on theoretical review, the "like" button has proven to be more than a simple condition of reactive interaction, but it expanded to a culture that carries a new form of communication and content consumption. "Liking" is approving without saying a word and, even so, causing registers that impact systems and people.

A deeper study involving tests with users would contribute to widen the comprehension of the users' perceptions and motivations regarding the tool. Other reactive interactions on SNSs are open to discussion, such as the retweet button on Twitter, a peculiar website in so many ways. Tumblr, Pinterest and Instagram are also relevant for the SNSs scene and also make use of reactive interactions. Another possibility is the exploration of the mobile apps of SNSs, which has shown gestural reactive interactions, through interfaces sensible to the touch.

Lastly, it is important to highlight that the integration of the SNSs with other kinds of websites is also a possibility for future studies. The relevance of the "like" button seems to be in its superficial simplicity and in its complexity of identity, networks and social capital involved around this sum of clicks. These characteristics have the potential for the development of more meaningful interfaces, which are able to contribute to a better users' experience. Therefore, it seems pertinent that the design field further invest itself on projects and researches that dedicate themselves to comprehend and dialog with social media.

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