TRAVELLING THROUGH FACEBOOK; EXPLORING AFFORDANCES THROUGH THE LENS OF AGE

Niki Panteli
University of Bath, Bath, UK, N.Panteli@bath.ac.uk

Ben Marder
Edinburgh University, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, ben.marder@ed.ac.uk

James Davenport
University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom, j.h.davenport@bath.ac.uk

Fabio Nemetz
University of Bath, Bath, Bath, United Kingdom, f.nemetz@bath.ac.uk

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Research in Progress

Panteli, Niki, University of Bath, UK, N.Panteli@bath.ac.uk
Marder, Ben, Edinburgh University, UK, Ben.Marder@ed.ac.uk
Davenport, James H., University of Bath, UK, J.H.Davenport@bath.ac.uk
Nemetz, Fabio, University of Bath, UK, F.Nemetz@bath.ac.uk

Abstract

This developmental paper uses the travel writing genre to study the affordances of social networking sites (SNS) from an age perspective. It provides a travel journey through the city of Facebook and in doing so identifies that affordances are found at two intertwined layers, the global and the local. Further, it shows that Facebook affords the creation of multiple new locales of this nature, which are age-specific. Our travel story leads us to three such locales: playground, social club and night club. The paper reflects on the use of travel writing as an alternative genre in information systems (IS) research.

Keywords: travel writing, genre, affordances, Facebook

1 Introduction

In this paper, we use the travel writing genre as a way of exploring scholarly IS work and in particular the affordances of SNSs. A genre is a particular form of communication addressed to a specific community which fits into the lives of its members (Agre, 1998). Yates and Orlikowski (1992) defined genres as a ‘typified rhetorical action in the context of socially defined recurrent situations’ (p. 301). In what follows, we explain the relevance of travel writing as an alternative genre in the study of technology affordances. Following a brief explanation of the methods adopted, we then present a practical application of the travel writing genre with the aim being to explore the affordances of SNS, in this case Facebook, among different age groups.

2 Travel writing in a study on SNS affordances

In recent years, SNS have received a surge of attention from academics, addressing them as commercial, technical, and social phenomena. With regards to the lattermost, research has unveiled a number of benefits, drawbacks, uses, and gratifications (Turel and Serenko, 2012), but in most cases attention has been given to the actual and observable features, thus neglecting the subjective perceptions of the users themselves. Furthermore, the majority of studies have used undergraduate subjects, which is justifiable on the basis that this age range has the highest adoption of SNS. However, as usage spreads throughout generations, a broader sampling approach is needed. Our study aims to contribute to these research gaps by providing an examination into the affordances of SNS for users of different ages. This will
deliver the first application and extension of affordance theory (Gibson, 1986) into the increasingly important context of SNS and how they apply to different generations, thus answering a plea by Wilson et al. (2012) for deeper insight into how behaviour on Facebook differs across different age groups. Affordances represent the perceptions created and not the actual qualities of an object or an environment. The theory of affordances has recently been used to understand the possibilities provided by photocopiers and watercoolers for informal interactions (Fayard & Weeks, 2007) and by Barley, Meyerson & Grodal (2011) in their study of email as a source and symbol of stress. No study so far has examined the affordances of online spaces and SNS in particular nor have affordances been studied through the lens of age. The study opens up new avenues for research on technology affordances as it will encourage researchers to consider demographical differences in the examination of existing and new technologies. To enable the travel genre as a vehicle for achieving these research aims data was collected focus groups that captured users’ metaphoric representations of Facebook.

3 Methods
Focus groups have been used as the main method for this examination. Research has shown that these are particularly useful when generating metaphors, as, during the discussion, one person builds on and adds to another’s metaphor (Kendall and Kendall, 1993). Thus within a focus group discussion, the verbalised experiences of others may provide opportunities to crystallise one’s views on the subject as well as to stimulate memory. In sum, focus groups are advantageous here as they allow for metaphoric ideas to be subjected to criticism, negotiation and in some cases consensus within the group (Yuen, 2004).

The focus groups took place between March 2012 and May 2013 and involved three age groups: 15-17 (adolescents), 22-26 (university students/young adults) and 50-60 (mature users); 6, 6 and 5 focus groups from each age category, respectively, took place. In total 78 people across the different age groups took part in the study. Each focus group was facilitated by a moderator and guided by a list of questions which led to uniformity in data collection. The moderators began by asking the participants to describe Facebook in relation to a metaphor; a suitable way for encouraging creativity and new ways of thinking and seeing (Morgan, 1986). A list of suggested metaphors was presented to them at this point: marketplace, club, zoo, jungle, playground, festival, home and family. This list was compiled by the research team with the purpose to stimulate discussion on how participants perceived Facebook.

Following discussion regarding the appropriateness of different metaphors, the groups would sketch out on paper that which they collectively felt was most suitable, illustrating different affordances of the site in the context of that metaphor. The moderator at this point prompted further discussion by asking the groups how they situated themselves and their usage within the chosen metaphor. Drawings were found to be appropriate for the study as they can unmask attitudes, feelings, motivations and beliefs, which are often difficult to articulate (Webb, 2002). The drawings presented metaphorical representations of the users’ stories within the physical spaces they were inhabiting in the chosen metaphor.

We used the metaphoric images to help us develop a map of the site in both spatial and temporal terms. As such, we located areas that were visited after school (the playground) and
during the day (the social club) as well as places that were visited at night time (the night club). In all cases, we were guided by the metaphorical language used by the participants of the study. It was through these images, roles and encounters that we attempted to explore the affordances of Facebook. In what follows we present the findings of the study in a travel writing genre.

4 Travelling through the City of Facebook

“At 4:15 pm my flight bumps down onto the grand city of Facebook. I was very excited as I had heard so much from friends and in the media of this place and its huge population, so much so that I had even thought of emigrating but first I wanted to check it out for myself. Happy to be free of the shackles of an itinerary, my plan was just to casually walk around to absorb the city, take in the culture and get to know the people. I jumped in a taxi and headed straight to the centre of the city. The driver was very pleasant and excited to tell me all about the city. He said that the city was massive with over one billion people currently living here but it was not overcrowded, expressing that although many people think that this may sound unbearably huge it is really more like a collection of many small towns with their own unique community cultures. Although it was just after 5:00pm the roads were busy but there were surprisingly no jams, my enthusiasm was rising in line with every skyscraper, green area, shopping district that flew through my peripheral vision. My first step out of the taxi found myself in a square where different activities were taking place; around me there were big buildings covered in huge, flashing advertising screens constantly changing as different people walked past. Smartly dressed individuals in suits were dashing between buildings, groups of teenagers skateboarding on the sidewalk, and round the outskirts people sitting outside restaurants and bars, dining and drinking al fresco. This square was truly alive with both business and social pursuits. Albeit the city was no doubt agog with activity, it had the air of an organised chaos.

The taxi driver had recommended I ride the free “incredibly efficient” public sky rail around the city as it provided a great view of the city. Never turning down a recommendation by a local person, I walked over to one of the four stations located in the square. It was very busy but it worked perfectly like a human river flowing up the elevator onto the train. It was full of all different ages and cultures, with a constant noise of chatter and music blearing out of people headphones. The skyrail moved quickly away from the stations stopping regularly with a heavy changeover of travellers at each stop. The taxi driver wasn’t wrong, on both counts, yes it provided a perfect view and second, although at first glance the different parts of the city were similar with the same types of buildings and parks, looking closer there was obvious evidence of lots of smaller communities with their own cultures. It can be said from the names on the shops, the marketing on the billboards and people’s appearances that certain districts laid home to residence from different cultural backgrounds. Although these cultures seemed somewhat geographically separated, socially there was no such separation on the train; instead, there were people from all cultures chatting about current affairs and others shaking hands while passing business cards. My legs were tired of sitting so I got off at the next stop. The sky was grey, the air crisp, and my surrounding quickly alerted me that the district I had stopped at was populated by native English speakers.

4.1 The Playground
I could hear a dull murmuring of voices with occasional shrieks of excitement in the distance; inquisitively I headed towards the source. It was a playground that appeared to be a hive of activity and with every step I took closer, the noise increased twofold.

The railings and the playground equipment appeared relatively new but the teenage inhabitants were no strangers to their environment. Any creak of the gate as it opened was drowned out by the overwhelming buzz of the surroundings. Sweeping my eyes left and right it became instantly apparent that what was once a blur of homogenous activity better resembled heterogeneous set of microsystems, there were many tight groups of teenagers socializing and entertaining themselves in many different ways. Albeit there were visible clusters of people having fun, groups were interacting with others and some sociable individuals butterfly between. Right in front of me there were many teenagers playing on a slide, swings, roundabout and climbing frame. Something that did strike me was how well presented all the teenagers were; nearly everyone I could see had obviously spent time on their appearance. From first sight it seemed like a happy place, lots of people enjoying themselves, many standing in groups with their friends chatting, laughing, listening to music and couples lovingly holding hands. I thought to myself, here you can be what you want and life is to be enjoyed.

However, as I started to walk around snaking in and out of the crowds there seemed to be less jovially events occurring. There were two youngsters fighting with a group of others standing watching, and a teenager being picked on in the corner by another. There were also loners on the outskirts glaring in, I initially felt sorry for them being all alone but as I looked more closely at their faces they actually seemed quietly content just sitting taking in everything around them.

There was a teacher dressed smartly in a suit, I wondered whether if they knew of the possible bullying occurring under their watch, nonetheless they seemed either unaware or worryingly apathetic to the situations. This all seemed rather strange to me as surely they should be intervening. Shrugging this off, as maybe this is the culture here I continued to stroll over to a bike shed located at the side of the playground, peaking behind I saw teenagers hiding away from the crowds talking privately. There was also a one boy loitering suspiciously; intrigued to what he was up to I watched him for a minute as he approached a group chatting and covertly put his hand into one of their bags they had left on the floor behind them. My head turned quickly as there was shouting coming from the gate, a man in his mid-40s had entered. The teenagers had pointed him out to the teacher who walked over there and started to question him. The teenagers who had alerted the teacher then went back to playing as normal, and after a brief discussion between the teacher and the stranger he was quickly led out. The teenagers to me seemed pretty aware but not too bothered by the threats that surrounded them.

It was time for me to leave so I began to walk towards the gate, it was at this point I noticed a number of older individuals behind the fence. Some resembled parents, many of which were smiling looking in, some were even waving at their children, there were others who stood there with crossed arms looking displeased. Looking along their line of site to see what had annoyed them I saw a teenager in just his boxer shorts joking, showing off to his friends. At this moment he turned around and caught a glimpse of who I believed to be his mother, he swiftly pulled up his trousers and looked sheepish. There seemed to be another adult stood outside the fence away from the parents wearing an overcoat; he looked rather sinister.
As I strolled out of the gate I began to reflect on my time in the playground. My first thoughts were that this was a fun, harmless place where teenagers could come and enjoy themselves and it seemed for the most this was the case but there was a number of worrying incidents that made me realize that this was not a safe haven for entertainment as I had once thought.

4.2 Social club
Meandering the streets of Facebook once more, I really started to fancy a cold beer so I looked around for the nearest drinking establishment; also these are always great places to meet the locals. Soon I came across this subtle sign above this old fashioned wooden door that read ‘social club’. I opened the door and walked in. A casually dressed older lady holding what appeared to be a guest list approached me to ask who I was, I smiled and told her I was a travel journalist here to experience her city, she smiled back and invited me in. Inside was subdued, the seats were wooden, few windows and the upholstery dated, there were a few old but sturdy tables with people sat around them some in pairs some with more. There were also old style pub games such as darts, a long wooden bar with glasses hanging from it and what appeared to be a private or VIP area of some sort. In addition, there was a small old fashioned dance floor but nobody on it. The clientele were mature ladies and gentlemen in their 50s, the atmosphere was quiet but friendly, it seemed a world apart from the bustle of the playground I was recently in.

I walked up to the bar, to my delight they only sold local beers. To my right there was a couple of older gentlemen sat quietly at the bar one reading the newspaper and the other just sitting, just like myself. Quenching my thirst I looked around, on the walls there were notice boards covered in holiday photos, and flyers for up and coming events. A woman wearing a sash holding a bucket was walking around to the patrons collecting money for a charity. From my seat I could see into the private room; there was a big round table which seemed to play host to a family, over different generations, the older people seemed happy chatting but the younger members appeared a bit bored with the whole situation. There was also a person sat alone in this room looking caringly over the others. These people seemed to be relations of the lady I had encountered on my entrance as she seemed to move between that room and the tables outside to chat with her friends, however, leaving her glass of wine at the private table. The bartender put on some music on jukebox and one well dressed lady leapt up from the table she was sat and started jiving by herself on the wooden dance floor. There was a cringe worthy feeling in the air as we gazed upon her, it seemed this was not the done thing in this social club but she continued to dance till the song had finished. By this time it was getting quite late, my drink was finished and I wanted to go somewhere more lively.

As I strolled out and round the corner I noticed there was a large crack in the external wall of the social club which when looked through revealed what was going on inside; this seemed a bit of a security risk to me.

4.3 Night club
The streets were dark but there seemed to be music and crowds in the distance, looking for a bit of excitement I headed straight over. This was the night club district; this was certainly buzzing and vibrant much like the playground but with slightly older people, they were beautiful and appeared that most were in their early 20s. I decided to go into the first night club I came across, it had a brightly coloured neon blue and purple sign outside and modern music playing inside. Two bouncers dressed in black were stood either side of the door, anticipating there may be some issue with smartness of my clothes I quickly tucked my shirt
in and swept my hair. To my surprise the bouncers were pleasant and let me straight through. The place I had walked into can only be described as effervescent. There was a long chrome bar filled with all kinds of drinks, round the corners there were tables with chairs and in the middle a busy dance floor filled with gorgeous people. One girl was particularly striking; she had long blonde hair and a short but classy sparkly dress, what was funny to see were the guys sat at a nearby stable had no problem overtly staring, as if they didn't think she could see, but I sensed that she knew. People seemed to be dancing a bit, then sitting down with their friends, then dancing some more. I recognised one of the dancers as I had met him in the social club earlier though this time he was more smartly dressed. Before reaching the bar I was approached by a girl selling shots of some strange brightly coloured liqueur, although I politely refused she was very persistent and I would even say at some points annoying.

Finally I reached the bar, in contrast to the bar in the social club along with the local wines and beers were a whole range of international exports that I was familiar with. But I thought ‘when in Rome’ and ordered again a local brew. There were single people sat alone either side of me watching the dance floor, there were also a few pool tables located in the corner. Huge flat screens hung from the ceiling of the bar providing news updates and the ability for revelers to text in statements that could be read from these screens such as birthday wishes. Although the club was mainly populated by young adults there were a few older members wandering around, some talking at tables, others were by themselves. The impression I got was that the younger crowd were not particularly comfortable with the older generations being there observing their behaviour. Some of the older people were sat with the youngsters it seemed many of which were colleagues, where the younger most probably less senior people were trying hard to impress. I witness something quite funny, there was a younger lady sat with someone who seemed to be her mother at a table near the bar and after some resistance from the daughter the mother got up ready to dance, the look on her daughters face was sheer embarrassment as her mother started to tap her toes and move her hips in time with the music. The youngster had enough and proceeded to drag her mother out of the club, before coming back in and venting loudly to others about it. This was not the only person I saw to be evicted from the premises, there was a sleazy looking drunk older man and one that resembled a drug dealer who were thrown out by the bouncers after they were reported by those they were harassing. The club seemed to be quite up on security as there were CCTV surveillance cameras up by the doors of the club. This was a fun environment but it seemed that people knew there were dangers.

It was 11:30pm, after a tiring day’s travel and few beers I was ready for some quiet time to reflect on my first day in Facebook back in the hotel. Today I had a real glimpse into the lives of the residents from all different ages, of what it seemed like a lovely place to live or visit, so many things for you to do, plenty of places to socialize but like most places around the world there are downfalls too that one needs to be aware about and take into account when visiting”.

5 Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The city of Facebook is indeed very grand; it is inhabited by people across different ages though clearly our visit has revealed that different age groups develop different affordances of this space. Our travels have showed that affordances can be explored at two levels: global and local. We refer to them as the two layers of Facebook within which affordances develop. The
first layer, the global, is open, fluid and boundaryless. Its effects include more reach, mobility and flexibility in everything individual inhabitants do (Panteli, 2009); this affords numerous different activities of both business and social nature as well as diversity in culture and language. The result is considered not only to be an expansion in the way people communicate and interact with others, but also a complete breaking of ties with local settings, and the construction of new identities and opportunities that enhance freedom and creativity.

The global layer of Facebook affords a near limitless set of possibilities for unrestricted communication with others regardless of time and space. In contrast, the second layer, the local, focuses on re-establishing the inherent characteristics of local interaction, albeit within the online space. The local layer suggests that social interactions are still realized in particularly formed settings which shape and perhaps dictate how they will manage and use Facebook. Individuals live, think and breathe in their proximal and physical, psychological and sociological circumstances and these in turn influence their online interactions and interpretations.

The two layers are intertwined; they cannot exist without each other. The strength of the local is the ability to sustain age-specific needs, interactions and relations; the strength of the global is the ability to connect individuals allowing the exchange of information and knowledge regardless of time and space. Our visit to the city of Facebook shows that this metropolis affords the emergence of a new locality, both global and local, a locality that is both Facebook-enabled and mediated but also age-specific. Facebook affords the creation of multiple new locales of this nature. Our travel story has introduced us to three such locales: playground, social club and night club. They represent activities, actors and interactions that are particularly linked to the age they represent (e.g. bullying in the playground; networking in the night club; catching up with friends and family in the social club). The new locales co-exist. That is, the creation of one space does not exclude the others. The temporal dimension of Facebook has also been captured in the journey; within and after school playgrounds, coffee time with friends and time for the night club are all indicators of activities and interactions taking place at different times of the day and night. Life on Facebook is ongoing.

Though these locales appear different, they do share similarities. All locales visited as part of our journey indicate that none of them are completely exclusive or private; the cracks on the wall, the bystander in the corner and the strangers at the gate indicate that these spaces afford unwelcomed visitors. Inhabitants show awareness of the lack of privacy and possible invasion into their space but this does not seem to deter them from being there. Mature users are found to be actively involved in safeguarding their locale (they are the bouncers at the door), whilst the younger groups are seen to be more relaxed about the lack of sufficient security attributing their protection less to themselves and more to the Facebook administration team. It is these new locales, which carry both global and local characteristics, that become the source and symbols, through metaphoric representations, of online interactions across the ages.

In summary, this study contributes to the study of affordances, first, by providing the first examination of the affordances of SNSs and second by distinguishing affordances across different ages.

6 Reflections on the Travel Writing Genre
No previous research has examined the affordances of social networking sites and no other study exists to-date that explores generational differences in SNS. The study points to different layers of SNS within which affordances can be developed; no other study has presented affordances as existing at different layers. It is difficult to say that without the travel writing we wouldn’t have been in a position to identify the different layers. What is sure though is that we as the researchers have been analysing the data from different perspectives for more than a five month period and it was only when the study was presented from a travel writing genre that we were able to ‘see’ the two layers in our analysis as well as the new locales of affordances in SNS. Needless to say that this new genre has made the writing more enjoyable than having to keep within the conventional academic writing boundaries. Presenting studies using alternative genres is inspiring and insightful too. This is not only worth the attention of researchers in the field of IS, but strategists, developers, managers and policy makers. It is common practice that as people get tired of the monotony of normal life to travel in order to gain a new perspective both of new places and the one they already live; thus when researchers are fatigued by the “tyranny” of prevailing genres (Rowe, 2012) they too should pack new clothes into their methodological suitcase and embark on a journey.

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