Strategies for Gaining Visibility on Flickr

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Abstract
Social network sites (SNSs) have become an important part of daily communication practices and media use for millions of people. SNSs enable people to interact with content such as photographs or videos in a new way, to create user profiles and communicate with others through these online presentations of self. This study examines social practices among the group of active users of the popular online photo-sharing service Flickr. The results of nine qualitative user interviews show that there is ambivalence in people’s relation to the community of Flickr; the users distribute their photographs with expectations of getting attention and feedback from others, but they have to be socially active and network with others in order to become noticed at all. This study aims to provide insight into the strategies for gaining visibility for one’s personal content on Flickr, and to contribute to the theory of computer-mediated communication.

1. Introduction

In recent years, social network sites and web services that lean on user-generated content, often referred to as social media or Web 2.0, have attracted users of the internet. Social media has changed the role of media users from being merely passive viewers to being active co-producers. As the user-generated content adds value to social media services, the active contributors play an important role in the success of many internet sites.

Development of the communication technology has affected people’s social interaction and communication practices in many ways. Contrary to some prior predictions about technology-mediated communication having an impoverishing effect on social interaction [22], it seems that the internet has rather provided users with higher social connectivity and group participation through online social network sites and communities [20]. Previous research about using SNSs indicates that people are using them rather for connecting with people they already know than for meeting new people; especially Facebook is most often used for maintaining existing relationships and seeing how friends are doing [14].

This study focuses on social behavior on the online photo-sharing service Flickr [9], and aims to clarify the role of social interaction in a service that was originally intended for the distribution of photographs. Furthermore, this study describes the social interaction practices enabled by the structure of Flickr, and how the content, the photographs and users’ comments on them, can facilitate social interaction between users. The findings can be utilized in the design of social internet sites.

Since social activity is an essential part of SNSs, this study aims to shed light on the questions concerning motivation for participating actively and sharing content in online communities. Understanding the factors behind user motivation and active contribution is important, particularly for designers and administrators of social internet services, as committed and active users are the key to an attractive and socially active website [4,12].

This qualitative study with nine interviews of active users presents user motivations for participating in and contributing to Flickr, and sheds light on social interaction and networking practices on Flickr by describing a subgroup of active users.

2. Related work

Flickr was launched in 2004, and it has become a popular digital photo-sharing website with millions of users worldwide. Boyd and Ellison [6] define social network sites as web-based services that allow users to construct a profile, articulate friend lists, and view and traverse friend lists made by them and others within the system. According to this definition, Flickr presents a typical SNS as it allows the users to create their personal profiles and add others to their contact lists. In addition, they can share their own content, their photographs, comment on them, and communicate with each other through private messages or in the groups created around different topics or shared interests.
Nov et al. [21] distinguish artifact-based online communities from content-based online communities claiming that the major difference between these two types of communities is in the act of contribution: contributing online is the “second act” and a fairly easy step that requires little additional mental effort in addition to the “first act”, that is creation of the artifact. Flickr represents the artifact-based community as it enables users to share their photographs, but the sharing is somewhat ‘detached’ from the process of content creation.

2.1. Photo-sharing in two photographic cultures

Previous research about photo-sharing has investigated the behavior of photographers, and particularly how new technology, such as digital cameras, camera phones, and online photo-sharing services, has influenced it.

During the past years, personal photography has undergone many technological changes. The emergence of new technology has shaped people’s photographing practices in many ways. For example, the change from paper photographs to digital images has increased the size of people’s personal collections, as photographing has become cheaper and more instantaneous [3,11]. Digital images also allow people to process their photographs in a new way. Kirk et al. [11] introduce the notion of photowork for describing the activities that people perform with their digital photos after capture but prior to end-uses such as sharing.

Miller and Edwards [17] introduce the term “Snapr culture” to describe a photographic style enabled and encouraged by new technology and online galleries such as Flickr. In contrast to “Snaprs”, the term “Kodak culture” defined by anthropologist Richard Chalfen [8], refers to a photographic style, in which people take pictures of traditional subjects such as birthdays or holidays and share them with people close to them.

The behavior of Snaprs differs from the Kodak culture type in their relation to photo-sharing, as the representatives of the Snapr culture take photographs for sharing them online, and their interaction takes place through websites rather than face-to-face; they use tagging, commenting and online messaging for maintenance of social bonds [17].

Because the community of Snaprs seems to be tied into the affordances of Flickr, Miller and Edwards [17] suggest that these practices would not even exist without it. Thus, the previous work of photo-sharing indicates that using Flickr or other online photo-sharing services has affected users’ photographic practices and changed the ways in which they share and interact through the photographs.

According to Miller and Edwards [17], there are major differences between the two above-mentioned groups of photographers, especially in their relationship to privacy. The Snaprs are not concerned about their privacy or the fact that the photos are viewed by strangers. On the contrary, the Snaprs are motivated by publicity and expect their photos to be viewed, whereas Kodak culture representatives are willing to share their pictures only with the existing contacts.

There are also differences in the forms of social interaction between the representatives of the two cultures since the Snaprs’ interaction occurs through a website rather than face-to-face, and with online contacts rather than traditional contacts, such as friends or relatives from real-life. The Snaprs are happy to utilize interaction tools provided by Flickr, and their interaction style is more about tagging and commenting, and photo-sharing is more like blogging as photos are used for presenting one’s life and photographic skills. In addition, Snaprs share their photographs mainly with interest groups formed on the website, whereas Kodak culture representatives share pictures with their traditional social connections.

2.2 Role of social interaction on Flickr

Social media sites such as Flickr enable users to network and interact with each other by commenting on the content and rating it. Since Flickr is mostly known as a place for photo-distribution, it is interesting to investigate the role of social interaction on it and to find out whether it is a photo album or an online community for the users.

In a psychological sense, the term ‘group’ refers to a collection of people who possess a common social identification and are more or less meaningful to each other [7]. On Flickr, the groups are formed by users around common interests, photographs that relate to a certain topic, and users freely join these groups according to their personal interests. As the main form of group participation seems to be posting pictures to groups dedicated to certain topics, it can be concluded that social interaction occurs through the content, the artifacts themselves, rather than through the discussions in the groups of Flickr.

Previous research indicates that Flickr users post their pictures actively to at least one group [19], the main reason being to increase the visibility of their pictures [26]. Although the users participate in groups actively and share their pictures as much as possible,
group loyalty in posting photographs seems to remain quite low since they are posted in many groups at the same time [19]. Thus group participation seems to be motivated by photo exhibition rather than social interaction.

In Flickr, information is gained through social networks, mostly by following the newsfeed of contacts and finding new pictures through photo streams [19]. Van Zwol [26] has analyzed the browsing behavior of Flickr users and found that the number of contacts and pools where the image belongs to, can predict the popularity of a photo. In other words, those who have large networks and post photos to many groups are more likely to have their photos viewed many times. Similarly, the study of Nov et al. [21] indicates that users with a greater structural embeddedness, that is the number of ties in networks, tend to share more photographs.

It seems that some features of Flickr which were not originally designed for social interaction, such as tagging, are used for social purposes as well. Tags are used for example, to make photos easy to find, to communicate contextual information about them, or to gain a reputation as a photographer in the community [2]. Thus, online photo-sharing in Flickr seems to be highly motivated by personal benefits, such as the pleasure of knowing that the pictures are getting attention and the person who takes them is gaining a good reputation as a photographer.

However, in the light of previous research, it appears that the attraction of Flickr is the content, the photographs, as the community aspects do not play such an important role. Even though some social interaction occurs, Flickr seems to be more about photo-blogging and presenting one’s own photographs than communicating and creating reciprocal and meaningful social relationships with others.

3. Method

3.1. Data Collection

In order to study the social interaction practices and the role of sociability in Flickr, we chose to conduct a qualitative interview study. Our objective was to gain a deeper understanding of the usage of Flickr and the role that it plays in the photographing practices of the interviewees. The research approach is ethnographic since the informants are given the role of experts and particular care was given to their descriptions and interpretations of their actions. An ethnographic research approach was chosen since it provides an insider’s view to the phenomenon studied by describing activities that the researcher might never experience [5].

The participants of the study were recruited from eleven user-groups of Flickr that were located in the Helsinki city area in Finland. An invitation letter was posted to a discussion forum of the eleven Flickr groups, and interviewees were selected with an electronic screening questionnaire from the basis on their activity on Flickr.

The participants were nine advanced photographers and active users of Flickr who had been members of Flickr for at least one year, and some of them even from the beginning 2004. Two of them were females and seven males, with the age group varying from the early twenties to the early sixties, most of them were 25-35 years old. They were from variety of different, both technical and non-technical backgrounds. However, none of them was a professional photographer.

Rather than to provide a statistically representative sample, our purpose was to focus on the experiences of the Snapr type of photographers, the advanced users who are familiar with sharing pictures with others and interacting through the pictures online. However, we claim that the division into two categories does not cover all the aspects of photo-sharing behavior, since the participants belonged to various kinds of social networks, in some of which the online and real-world contacts were connected. For example, some of the Flickr groups were formed online but they gathered in offline meetings as well.

The participants were studied during eight weeks in January and February 2009. Before the interview, they filled in a questionnaire in which they were asked about background information, such as how frequently they take pictures and visit online galleries, as well as their current photo-sharing practices and most common topics of their photographs.

In the nine semi-structured user interviews, the aim was to find out what motivates the users to share photos, their actual usage of Flickr, and particularly, social interaction and networking practices on Flickr (see Table 1). The interviews were recorded and the interviewees were able to use a computer for presenting their pictures and Flickr pages in the interview.

In order to thoroughly understand the context of the online communication studied, the interviews were complemented with online observations in the social networks on Flickr during the research period. The research group created a user account on Flickr for research purposes and most of the participants added the research group to their contact list.

In online observation, particular attention was paid to public social interactions such as discussions and
comments on photos. In addition, the content and themes of photographs were observed. Altogether, online observation offered understanding of the actual communication by bringing out small details that might have otherwise been forgotten from the interviews. Since ethnographic research is descriptive, research questions are refined throughout the study as all the details become known [5, 23]. Thus observation served as a foundation for interview questions and provided information for refining them.

### Table 1. The interview guidelines

- With your own words, tell about your use of Flickr.
- Why do you use Flickr?
- What attracts you in Flickr?
- What kind of content are you interested in? (produced by others)
- What kind of content you have added on Flickr?
- Which groups do you belong to in Flickr? Why?
- What is the purpose of groups?
- With whom do you interact on Flickr?
  - How do you interact with others?
  - Have you met them in real life?
  - Are you interested in meeting them in real life?
  - Why/why not?
- Is there enough social interaction currently in the service? If not, what kind of social activity you would wish for?
- What would you like to tell about yourself to other users?
- What would you like to know about other users?

3.2. Analysis

All the interviews were transcribed and content analysis was carried out. The data analysis started with reading all data repeatedly in order to achieve immersion, which allows researchers the new insights to emerge [13]. In the process of reviewing the transcriptions, special attention was paid to recurring patterns, themes and explanations, and thereafter, occasional items and differences between the users were observed in order to form an overall comprehension of the data.

As Hsieh and Shannon [10] describe, content analysis is not a single method but rather a set of different approaches to textual data. The content analysis strategy applied in this study is conventional, as we used many open-ended questions, and the codes are derived directly from the informants rather than from a pre-existing theory or framework [10].

The qualitative research strategy is about making sense of the data by interpreting and finding meanings from it. Thus, for the validity of the research, it is critical that the interpretations from the data are repeatable, confirmed and correct [16]. However, the analysis of interaction practices, meanings and social uses also revealed some differences and contrasts in the data, which indicate that Flickr is experienced and used differently even within the rather small and homogenous user-group of this study. The findings of the user interviewees were coded and categorized under main themes; these are presented in the following section.

4. Findings

4.1. Documenting everyday life

In the questionnaire, the informants were asked about their current photographing and photo-sharing practices. All the participants reported taking pictures with their digital camera daily or weekly, and visiting Flickr daily. They were all familiar with tagging their pictures since everyone mentioned having tagged and geotagged their photographs. Only one respondent mentioned not having edited his photographs at all, and the rest used regularly Photoshop, Picasa or some other professional software for processing their photographs.

The informants were asked about the most common topics of their photographs. Most often they mentioned photographing subjects of everyday life, such as buildings, views, and people. We also wanted to find out what triggers them to take pictures if they have camera at hand, and the majority reported taking pictures for aesthetic pleasure; in order to show others the beauty of everyday life. They also mentioned being inspired by extraordinary things and occasions of life.

“My mission as a photographer is to show others a different perspective to life than what people usually see.” (User 1)

As for their motivations to take photographs, we asked about the meaning of photography for them, and the most often mentioned meanings were aesthetics and artistic self-expression, socializing through them, and joy and fun (these three options were mentioned by all nine participants).

They were also asked how they currently share their photographs. In addition to sharing pictures on Flickr, all except one reported sharing them by
showing them from a computer screen and half of them by sending pictures on e-mail. All nine participants mentioned sharing their pictures with their friends, family members, as well as with unknown people online.

As their background information reveals, the informants were familiar with new photographing technologies and engaged in photowork practices, such as editing. From the basis of their photo-sharing practices, they possessed characteristics of both Snapr and Kodak cultures, as they all shared their pictures online and offline, and with both friends and unknown people.

4.2. Motivations for sharing photos

Our aim was to determine the users’ motivation for sharing photographs online. Sharing is known to be one of the major drivers for photography [3]. Sharing photographs is the primary way to get connected with others on Flickr, and the interviewees reported as the most important reason for having joined Flickr to be able to share their pictures online.

For the participants, photography played an important role in their lives, and they reported self-development and becoming a better photographer as the main reasons for sharing pictures. Flickr enables this learning process by offering new ideas, important connections with other advanced and skillful photographers, an opportunity to follow what other photographers have been doing, and above all, a place where one can become noticed as a photographer.

Feedback and peer support were expected and highly valued, most valuable was the kind of feedback that helps to improve the quality of photographs and to learn new things, such as comments about composition or lightning.

“I believe that everyone [in Flickr] wants to become a better photographer.” (User 1)

“You can learn a lot from others by following the discussions and participating in them, for example the discussions about a certain camera model or lenses.” (User 2)

Many interviewees explained that joining Flickr had affected their photography style and they started to take pictures with the audience in mind. Thus it appears that pictures are taken with the idea of sharing them online, and the sharing seems not to be entirely separated from the process of content-creation. The interviewees emphasized that awareness of the loyal audience that follows them, and regular comments on their pictures, encourages them to take more pictures and share them online.

“I have uploaded thousands of pictures on Flickr. I didn’t take pictures for my own pleasure, but just the opposite, I want others to see and comment on them.” (User 8)

It seems that the most important perceived value of Flickr is the community of photographers. Photo-sharing is socially motivated and the pictures are shared with expectations of getting recognition and receiving important feedback from others. Social rewards such as encouraging comments were considered as a major reward in using Flickr. One interviewee puts it like this:

“It is thrilling me when someone who’s a total stranger to me has been commenting on my photo. I am amazed by the fact, that someone finds it worth commenting.” (User 7)

Similarly to the previous study on blogging as social activity [18], the relationship between audience and a photographer on Flickr is a form of social communication in which both parties are influenced and shaped by each other. The audience is creating the content by commenting and interacting.

4.3. Seeking visibility

The observation of the public content in groups revealed that many groups seemed rather passive at first glance, especially with regard to discussions. It seems that group participation is not so much about having general discussions with others as distributing photos. The results of observation and user interviews seem to support previous studies [19,26], as they indicate that the most important reason for creating groups and posting content to them is to draw attention to one’s pictures.

“Thousands of pictures are uploaded to Flickr every minute. Your pictures will get lost pretty soon unless you send them to different groups. Then they are on the top of a pile for a while and get comments.” (User 3)

The majority of the interviewees reported, that they did not participate in groups or create them in order to socialize with others. The importance of groups seems to be that they enable the promotion of oneself in the service as active group participation makes the pictures and the photographer more visible in a photo pool that is overflowing with content.
In Flickr, there is a feature called “Explore”, which is a collection of the top pictures picked up by a computer algorithm based on their “interestingness”, i.e., how interesting and popular they are. Hence, the web service is suggesting and offering users interesting content by presenting a collection of the most interesting pictures on the login page. Those participants who had already had their pictures ranked on the Explore page explained that visibility in it brought more publicity to them as photographers and also to their other pictures.

The Explore page seemed to be highly motivating for users, and the admittance into it was experienced very rewarding, like being in a hall of fame. This “struggle for getting to Explore” may sometimes lead to rational calculations in picture-taking and also to well-planned photographs. Since getting to Explore has become so important, there are even groups established for solving the secret, and finding out how the computer algorithm selects the pictures.

“This [Explore] is the place where everyone wants to. The best pictures of the day are shown here for everyone around the world. People are spending ages on pondering how to get here.” (User 3)

“They have made a game out of it. They try to solve the secret algorithm and find a way to get their pictures into the Explore list of the day. It’s a sort of conspiracy theory thing.” (User 2)

In addition to aiming for Explore, there are some other strategies for getting visibility and recognition for one’s pictures on Flickr. Making contacts and socializing actively with others, as well as participating in groups, were also seen as useful ways of getting attention. The results show, that people find new pictures mostly by following newsfeed, through their contact lists, groups, or by searching with tags especially if they are looking for pictures about more specific topics.

The interviewees claimed that being socially active on Flickr is a way to arouse interest in other users, and commenting actively on others’ photos usually helped to get visibility for one’s own photos too. As one interviewee who had received lots of comments on his pictures stated, pictures are commented on with the idea of social exchange in mind:

“People comment on pictures in Flickr because they want their own pictures commented on. That escalates the interaction.” (User 8)

Similarly to previous research [2] tagging seems to be used not only for personal, but social purposes as well. According to the interviews, tagging pictures seems to be an important way to organize them according the topic or date and thus construct a narrative photo-blog or a personal memory. But above all, tagging can be also a social tool and as an important way to inform other users about new photographs and their topics; in this way, they can find viewers. The participants tended to tag their every photo, and the tags they used were carefully considered, so that the pictures would find as suitable an audience as possible.

“There won’t be much of audience unless you tag your photos. But if you add good and suitable tags, lots of people will come and see them.” (User 5)

In addition to the social activity, such as group participation and commenting on others’ pictures, tagging and taking of well-planned photographs were considered as the best ways to become noticed on Flickr. Even though taking and distributing pictures with good quality and an interesting viewpoint are essential for gaining recognition from others, these strategies were needed for becoming visible in the large and rather fragmented networks of Flickr.

As the social rewards were expected, not getting any feedback was experienced as frustrating, since that
was taken as a sign of being not such skilled photographer.

“If you aren’t getting any feedback from others, your pictures probably aren’t very good or interesting.” (User 1)

4.4. Self-presentation through photographs

SNSs, including Flickr, offer the users many opportunities for self-presentation, e.g. they can tell about themselves with their own words, create personal profiles and communicate through the content. In Flickr the self-presentation most often occurs through photographs. Photos can be used for example, for storytelling purposes and documentation of one’s everyday life, and especially the highlights of it.

According Van House et al. [24,25] self-presentation through pictures is about influencing others’ view of oneself, for example, through self-portraits or pictures of friends, whereas self-expression occurs through aesthetic and artistic pictures. As distinct from other SNSs, in Flickr the users wanted to be recognized as good photographers, and thus they were concerned about the quality of the pictures. They usually edited their photographs carefully in order to make them aesthetically better and more pleasing and strongly argued against sharing snapshots without any artistic value. For them, Flickr was about artistic photography and they wanted to present themselves as serious photographers. Most interviewees were concerned about the opinions of other community members and wanted to make an impression on them:

“I’ll take hundreds of pictures every day, but only one or two of them ends up to Flickr, after I’ve been polishing it up with Photoshop.” (User 3)

Therefore, the active Flickr users interviewed in this study expressed a norm for good quality and a professional attitude as opposed to taking just “tourist snapshots” or to the traditional “Kodak culture” style of photography. Similarly to previous research [17] Flickr users mostly shared ‘artsy’ photos and avoided putting snapshots online, which is one important difference between the Snaprs and the Kodak style photographers. The interviewees undervalued posting pictures with non-artistic value just for fun, as one serious photographer says:

“There are also users who take snapshots without any serious thinking. Like ‘look, it’s me on the beach’. That makes me laugh.” (User 5)

As previously described, privacy aspects are a major issue that distinguishes Snapr users from Kodak culture photographers [17]. Participants of this study clearly represented the Snapr culture since above all they wanted publicity for their photographs and did not object to sharing them with strangers. However, all of them were suspicious about their privacy to some extent, and for this reason they had all made some adjustments to privacy levels, so that some of the most personal pictures were visible only to friends or family members.

Similarly to previous research [1] people were especially sensitive about pictures of other persons and locations that were considered private. They did not want outsiders to recognize pictures of personally meaningful places, or add geotags to them. The exact location information of e.g. summer cottage was considered as confidential, since there might be a risk of unexpected quests or burglars in revealing too detailed information.

To summarize, in Flickr, the content, the photographs, play an important role and social interaction evolves around them. Sharing is an important part of photography since pictures are uploaded to Flickr in order to create and maintain social connections. However, rather than just documenting and describing their personal lives or daily activities, they expressed themselves with artistic photos and thus wanted to communicate the identity of a professional photographer.

As Van House et al. [24] are stating sharing photos can be seen as gift-giving and nurturing of social relationships. In the community of Flickr, photo-sharing is more about taking the initiative for interaction and the photographs serve as a common interest or social objects to share and talk about. As one interviewee puts it, content facilitates discussion and communication with others:

“The situation is like a room full of people who are strangers to each other. At first there is silence, but if some music is introduced, this activates people and they start to socialize. The discussion needs a topic, like movie or music, for example, and in one way or another, the pictures will bring out the whole spectrum of life.” (User 8)

5. Discussion and conclusions

The focus of this study was on users who are active contributors and participants in Flickr groups, and therefore social motivation was perceived as an essential reason for photo-sharing. For the participants, Flickr is not just a place for photo-storing; it is as
important to become seen and to receive recognition from others for their pictures.

Because masses of new pictures are uploaded to the service every day, differentiation from others has become a challenge for the users who are motivated by publicity and comments from others. They have to seek visibility for their pictures in many ways in order to get the audience and comments they desire.

From the basis of the user interviews, several strategies for getting visibility on Flickr can be identified. Being active in posting to groups, making contacts and socializing with others were the most common strategies for drawing attention to one’s photos. Thus, structural embeddedness, in terms of social networking and reciprocity, seems to be important in getting visibility. Participating actively by posting pictures or commenting on pictures taken by others and establishing new connections in networks were motivated by the desire to gain a wider audience. Other often used ways for promoting one’s photographs were aiming to have pictures post on the Explore page and using tags for social purposes, such as informing others about the pictures.

As a conclusion, it can be stated that social interaction plays a crucial role in Flickr. However, sociability has an instrumental meaning for the users, as it is first and foremost serving the needs for getting visibility and attention. The results show that social connection and reciprocity were highly valued among users, even though they are motivated by their ambitions for self-development and the search for a good reputation.

The networks and practices of Flickr seem to have affected the photographic behavior of Flickr users, since pictures are taken and edited with the Flickr audience in mind. Therefore, the sharing of pictures online is an important part of photography and cannot be seen as decoupled from the creation. This qualitative study presents a small sample of Flickr users and thus describes only a small group of Finnish advanced photographers and the meaning of the Flickr community for them. The results cannot be generalized for all the user groups of Flickr, but rather shed light on questions concerning user motivation and social practices connected to online photographs among the active users of Flickr.

There are various uses of Flickr and in this study people not using it for social purposes or participating in groups at all were intentionally excluded. Accordingly, the results emphasize social motivations and the meaning of groups. As this study introduces motivations and practices of those heavy-users who are visible for others for their public activities, it cannot grasp the more invisible ones, who do not participate and contribute actively. In future studies, it might be useful to study various user groups in order to identify the complexity of Flickr and find more generalizable data describing the various uses of Flickr.

6. Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the informants for sharing their thoughts and photographs, and research assistant Jarno Ojala for helping in the data collection and analysis. Special thanks to Nokia Research Center and Marion Boberg, Andrés Lucero and Severi Uusitalo for making this study possible.

7. References


