

Exploring Facebook's Success through Presence

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Abstract

Facebook is widely known as the currently most successful social medium. Scholars have explored why people sign up for Facebook and how they use the site. However, there is not much research exploring why Facebook is so successful. This paper argues that Facebook finds success in the sense of presence that it evokes in its users. The four themes of I am immersed, I am social, I am there, and I am an owner are employed to thoroughly explore Facebook's presence. Future innovations for Facebook and future research suggestions are also discussed.

Facebook, along with other social media sites, such as Twitter and MySpace, has provided users with a host of new ways to interact with online content and other users. Applications for these websites can be downloaded to smart phones and mobile devices giving users the ability to connect when they are not sitting at a computer. Constant email and text updates remind users to log in and check up on the online world that never sleeps.

Many scholars have explored why users sign up for Facebook and how they use the site (e.g., Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011; Cirucci, 2012a; Cirucci 2012b; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). However, *why* Facebook is so successful is an under-studied topic. As of April 2012, Facebook has 901 million users worldwide. An average of 526 million users sign in daily (Wasserman, 2012). While other social media, such as Twitter and Tumblr, also have a large number of users, no site can compare to Facebook's mass appeal. Facebook employs a host of features that encourage users to return, thereby maintaining its success. Success here is defined as obtaining and maintaining a large group of active users, i.e., users who regularly sign in and engage with the site, while also encouraging their friends and family to join.

This paper argues that one reason Facebook is successful is that it evokes a feeling of presence in its users. Presence has been defined by scholars in different ways, but for this paper's purposes presence is "the perceptual illusion of non-mediation" (Lombard & Ditton,

1997, *Presence explicated*). This paper examines Facebook's presence-evoking features. The four themes of *I am Immersed*, *I am Social*, *I am There*, and *I am an Owner* are employed to understand why Facebook evokes a sense of presence. Recommendations for Facebook and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

1. Evoking Presence

This paper argues that Facebook is successful because of the sense of presence that the site evokes in its users. Presence through Facebook is broken down into four themes to more thoroughly describe Facebook's successful design.

1.1. I am Immersed

1.1.1. Defining immersion. Immersion may be understood most literally as placing an object fully into another substance, such as dunking a cookie into milk. In abstract terms, immersion is used in psychology as a healing technique – people who are afraid of flying are told to get over their fears by flying in a plane – and as an educational tool – students immerse themselves in language by visiting the country to which the language is native. These are just a few examples; for a more complete history and explication see Jennett, Cox, Cairns, Dhopharee, Epps, Tijs, and Walton (2008).

Immersive presence describes when a user is mentally captivated with a medium. Self-reports of users include that they are "addicted" or "excited" (Lombard & Ditton, 1997, *Presence as immersion*). A user becomes "engaged" with the medium, investing time and attention. He then becomes "engrossed," feeling an emotional attachment to the medium and its relevant parts. The user must "suspend [his] disbelief of the . . . world" (Brown & Cairns, 2004, p. 1299). For the purposes of this paper, becoming immersed is defined as a user suspending disbelief and allowing himself to become engrossed in the narratives and strategies of Facebook.

Suspension of disbelief is when a user must somewhat forget about the technology that exists between

him and the message and believe that what he is experiencing is “real” (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). For example, in the online role-playing game World of Warcraft (WOW) gamers play as avatars that are often fantastic creatures such as Orcs and Nightelves. If the gamer continually thinks that the characters are unrealistic, he is thinking too much about the technology between he and the game, and he will not be able to become immersed. Instead gamers must suspend disbelief; they buy into the game world and become immersed by accepting what is presented to them as true.

In his book, *Fundamentals of Game Design*, Adams (2010) breaks down immersion into categories. Adams explained that a narratively immersive medium will have “interesting characters, exciting plots, [and] dramatic situations” (p. 26). This type of immersion is similar to becoming wrapped up in a good book or movie (Adams, 2010). The characters have been thoroughly explained and the viewer becomes engaged in their lives and what is happening to them. Readers invest time and attention into the book, get to know the characters, and soon begin to feel emotionally attached.

Adams (2010) described strategic immersion as “observing, calculating, and planning,” as when a gamer is trying hard to win a game (p. 26). Rules of the game must be thoroughly understood and unpredictability cannot be too high. In WOW, as in most game, a gamer can have more fun and become more immersed in the game if he knows the rules and knows how to win. Once the gamer thinks he understands the game, and is immersed, if the game suddenly presents something to him that is completely unexpected, his immersion will break down because he no longer feels as though he is an expert-gamer.

1.1.2. Immersive Facebook. A Facebook user must suspend disbelief in that he must forget that a computer and website are between him and those with whom he is interacting. If less technology gets in the way, then Facebook can do a “better” job immersing its users (Jennett et al., 2008). Facebook’s design aids in this process. The site’s design is minimal, without a great deal of movement or too many activities happening at the same time. Users enjoy this simplicity. Some users have contrasted this to MySpace in order to express their distaste for the now-dated site; MySpace incorporated profile colors, backgrounds, music, and even html code while Facebook does not require its users to create such intricate designs (Cirucci, 2012a). Facebook’s basic design allows its users to forget about the technology and

become immersed in the social relationships and interactions.

Although his definitions of immersion are geared toward video games, Adams’ (2010) analyses can be applied to Facebook to further understand why it is an immersive medium. Narrative immersion occurs when users become engrossed in the story elements. On Facebook narrative immersion is powerful. Although a reader can become narratively immersed in a book, he can only become immersed insofar as he can relate to the main character and others. However on Facebook the user *is* the protagonist. Therefore he can become more deeply immersed in this personal narrative.

Facebook users also surround themselves with relevant narratives by adding new people to their networks. From there, a user can follow what his friends are doing through wall postings, photo albums, and news feeds (updates of what users’ friends are doing on the site). Not only do these features strengthen presence by “surrounding” the users with friends (Cheung et al., 2011), they also create novel-like circumstances in which users can immerse themselves. Users have reported enjoying lurking through others’ profiles to entertain themselves by readings status updates and viewing photo albums (Cirucci, 2012a; Tufekci, 2008). This kind of immersion maintains Facebook’s success because it keeps users coming back to catch up on friends’ narratives and to encourage other people to join so that they can extend their network, thus extending their entertainment possibilities.

While Facebook users are not often considered gamers, a recent systematic analysis (Cirucci, in press) argues that social media provide a video-game-like experience, allowing Facebook to incorporate strategic immersion as Adams (2010) defined it. The systematic analysis (Cirucci, in press) argued that much the same way that video gamers fight to be heroes, Facebook users fight to be contemporary heroes – celebrities. Recent studies have shown that Facebook users are strategically immersed by working hard to build their friend counts, to build their “like” counts, to build their comment counts, and to present identity images that help them to appear “popular” (Cirucci, 2012a; Zhao et al., 2008). Users of Facebook are so engrossed with negotiating their identities that they have remained active users of the site, leading Facebook to remain successful.

1.2. I am Social

1.2.1. Defining social presence. A 2011 study (Cheung et al.) reported that social presence is the primary

reason that people use Facebook. Social presence is when the user feels a warm and personal connection while using a medium for social interaction reasons (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). For the purposes of this paper, social presence is evoked when personal interactions take place that include empathy in users and that provide experiences that mirror offline, face-to-face interaction.

Lombard and Ditton (1997) noted that social presence is strong when it incorporates interactions that are intimate and immediate. Intimacy is how close a person is to another: how much he is smiling, is there eye contact, and what has the user chosen for topics of conversation. Experiences high in social presence usually provide a means for adjusting these variables so that the user can personalize his experience accordingly (Argyle & Dean, 1965 as cited in Lombard & Ditton, 1997, *Presence as social richness*). Intimate interactions become more immersive when users feel empathy for others involved. Vorderer et al. (2004) described this phenomenon as having “hope and fear” for the players (p. 396). A social situation may incorporate intimacy, but if the user has no emotional attachment to those involved, he will experience low social presence.

Immediacy can be measured through language choices. For example, choosing to say “you and I” instead of “we” communicates different closeness between the two subjects involved. When a message uses “you” instead of “we” the message is more immediately directed at the consumer. The choice of medium is also integral to immediacy (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). Using a more direct medium such as a text sends a different message than a medium that takes longer for the recipient to receive, such as a mailed letter. Today, a message through a social medium is common, while a phone call sends the message that the issue at hand is more immediate.

Finally, the evoking of social presence is increased when the experiences are “true to life” (Lombard & Ditton, 1997, *Presence as realism*). That is, the user can relate what he is experiencing to offline interactions. While watching a television show, the consumer may feel more social presence if the main character is similar to himself and goes through similar life events that the consumer has experienced. Here also, it is clear that personalizability of the selected medium can increase social presence because a user can create a world that is similar to his own.

1.2.2. Social presence through Facebook.

Facebook evokes social presence because it allows users to personalize their online space so that it is as intimate as

the user desires. A user can make his profile public so that anyone can view it, or private, so that only his selected friends can view his profile. Also, a user can place their friends into groups so that his updates are only visible to selected groups making the experience even more intimate. Users also have the option to chat one-on-one with other users or send private, email-like messages.

Pictures provide a strong sense of social presence on Facebook. Pictures are widely used on Facebook and users have reported that they enjoy lurking through others’ profiles to view pictures and learn about others’ lives (Cirucci, 2012a, Tufekci, 2008). Subjects in photographs are often captured smiling and looking into the camera, as if directly addressing the viewer, thus evoking social presence. Also, Mendelson and Papacharissi (2011) reported that college students used Facebook pictures to display emotional closeness through physical closeness. Intimate friendships were shown by friends standing close to one another in pictures. Once users became involved in intimate romantic relationships, their amount of pictures as couples increased, and their closeness with their significant other relayed emotional closeness (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011).

Language use on Facebook is integral to social presence and immediacy felt. Users can “tag” friends in posts and pictures; this means that users can make a friend’s name a hyperlink that connects to that friend’s profile page. Therefore, tagging creates a more direct link to the people involved in the online interactions and conversations. For example, instead of a status update reading “We went to the game” or “My friend and I went to the game” a user can post “John Doe and I went to the game.” Because “John Doe” becomes a hyperlink to John Doe’s Facebook profile, the connection becomes more immediate. Similarly, in pictures, users can tag who is visible in the picture which also creates hyperlinks to those people’s profile pages.

Clearly, social presence is stronger on Facebook when the user can feel empathy for those involved. Social presence is also stronger the more that users feel their encounters resemble offline encounters; users are free to include those people that they care about and interact with offline. They can also start conversations and create photo albums that reflect offline experiences. Facebook recreates face-to-face-like encounters, online. A user can update friends and family members when something important has happened in his life. College students, for example, noted that they mostly use their Facebook walls to update their networks about school accomplishments or job interviews (Cirucci, 2012a).

Facebook has seemingly excelled in the creation of experiences that model face-to-face interactions; instead of Facebook users employing the site to create new, online connections, people use Facebook to support connections that they have already established offline (boyd & Ellison, 2007). While other social media sites support users creating large networks, mostly of people that they have never met (i.e., celebrities on Twitter), Facebook arguably creates more face-to-face-like interactions and thus more presence-evoking experiences because its users already know most of their connections in an offline context.

1.3. I am There

1.3.1. Defining “being there.” As Lombard and Ditton (1997) described, and how many scholars define presence, one way to experience presence is to have the feeling of “being there” (*Presence as transportation*). Media have the ability to transport their users (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). For the purposes of this paper, media as transportation is defined as a user either feeling as though he is somewhere else, or making his presence felt for others when he cannot travel to their location.

Consumers feel a sense of presence when they are transported to another time or place. A viewer of a television special about ancient Rome may begin to feel as though he is in that time period. The telephone was first introduced as being second only to actually being able to be with the person; using the telephone allows a caller to feel a sense of presence with the person on the other end of the conversation (Lombard & Ditton, 1997).

Instead of a media experience transporting the user, the user can also feel as though the experience has been brought to him. This is usually measured by asking consumers how much they felt like the media content they were consuming was actually happening to them (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). For example, a scary movie on television may evoke presence as transportation in a viewer by having a doorbell ring and causing the viewer to quickly look over at his own door. Because that viewer felt as though the movie was happening to him, it caused him to reference something that exists in his world.

1.3.2. “Being there” through Facebook. A blogging site such as Tumblr may create a similar feeling of being there much like a book or movie. However, Facebook is successful because the site provides a more intense feeling of presence in another place or time. A user can upload pictures into photo albums that tell a story. Take for example a user who cannot attend her

cousin’s wedding. She can instead flip through the photo album that her cousin has created on Facebook and imagine herself as a part of the festivities. Additionally she can use others’ posts and comments about the wedding to feel even more transported to the special event.

Because Facebook keeps events in chronological order as they happen, guests can update the woman on the events of the wedding day. Twitter also makes this kind of updating possible, but it is less rich because separate applications must be downloaded to include aspects such as pictures and videos. Facebook however allows users to easily attach pictures and videos to posts through its mobile applications. The woman can even feel as though she is at the wedding in real-time by checking her Facebook notifications that others are posting during the wedding. Furthermore, the bride can also feel as though the presence of her cousin has been transported to her wedding; her cousin can send her private messages, pictures, and videos before, during, and after the celebration.

Users have noted that they join many groups and charities through Facebook, even if they do not attend the offline meetings (Cirucci, 2012a; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). This allows their presence to be transported to the efforts. If a “real” event has 100 attendees, but there were 1,000 supporters online, those 900 have transported their presence to the event in the form of support and arguably have helped the event to be more successful.

1.4. I am an Owner

1.4.1. Ownership defined. The last way to understand Facebook as evoking a sense of presence is user as a “simulated stakeholder.” This is an indirect type of presence that mimics how owners feel about their possessions. For the purposes of this paper, feeling present as an owner entails a user taking care of a product as if it were an “investment” and creating a space that can support this investment and other, related “investments.” Often, an owner may become emotionally attached to an investment because he feels as though he has put so much time into the investment that it has become a “part” of him.

An investment is usually thought of as a monetary asset. Take for example a house. People invest in a house so that they can build equity. They spend money and in return they buy a box with rooms made out of wood, and because of their large investment, people then maintain all that is relevant to the house; they mow the lawn, plant

flowers, repair leaks, replace appliances, and so on. These things are not necessary for the house to remain a shelter, but they are carried out to maintain the investment into which the people placed their money. Homeowners may find it hard to move once they have invested so much time and money into their property. They feel that the house is not just a building, but a *home* because so much of themselves has become “part” of the house.

Business owners also invest in their companies, both monetarily and mentally. Owners invest money to start and maintain a business. They then work hard, spending more money and a lot of time, to maintain the business and to continuously build their clientele. Business owners may venture out and use other companies or resources to better their company, but they always come back to their investment. Once an owner has put a lot of work into his company, he may find it hard to sell it because so much of himself has become a “part” of the business.

1.4.2. Presence as an owner in Facebook. Through Facebook’s interactive nature, users arguably begin to feel as though they *own* their online selves or that their online selves are just an extension of their “real” self. They begin to care for their online selves as they would their offline selves. They also use the medium to support their other online, and even their offline, identities (as explored by Turkle [1995] regarding MUDs).

The more an online profile mirrors an offline identity, the more connected a user is to his online persona (Nowak & Gomes, 2011). Facebook, because it is designed to mirror offline interaction, leads users to create profiles that are very similar to their offline selves, both physically and psychologically (Cirucci, 2012b). Therefore, the users are very connected to their Facebook personae. Although the users have not created the site themselves, they arguably feel as though they are owners of their online identities, and therefore the space that holds their profiles. Users have noted that they are sure to keep their profiles updated (Cirucci, 2012b) and that they realize the effects that careless online actions can have in the offline world, such as ruined relationships and problems with employers (Cirucci, 2012a).

Facebook aids in the “presence as stakeholder” by allowing its users to experience elements of control. A user can choose how private or public his profile is. He can choose to fill out as much or as little information as he wishes. He can choose who his friends are and who can see his posts. Because Facebook gives its users so many choices, the users begin to feel in control. Users begin to desire to interact with the site more because they feel as though it is their duty as owners. This has led Facebook

to be successful because it keeps users active on the site. Also, users are likely to recommend the site to friends, much like business owners market their products. Users have reported that they signed up for the site because they heard from other users that it was the “cool” place to be (Cirucci, 2012a). Users have invested so much into their Facebook profiles – time, personal identities, friends, etc. – that much like any investment, they feel the need to protect and maintain their “products.”

Facebook users have reported the site as acting as a type of “tentpole” medium (Cirucci, 2012a). In other words, a user who also uses sites such as Twitter or Tumblr still goes back to Facebook for more information about other users. Much like any company has a home base, Facebook has arguably become the home base or tentpole for all social networking sites. This makes sense since Facebook users have invested so much time and information into Facebook themselves, they assume that others have done so as well. This means two things: (1) Facebook users know that the most in-depth information about people can be found on Facebook. Therefore, even if users are lurking through Tumblr or Twitter, they will go back to Facebook to research that user, and (2) because many users are feeling presence as stake holders, they are unlikely to deactivate their pages or even let them wane.

Facebook promotes this process by allowing the applications of many other social networking sites to connect to Facebook. Users can connect their Twitter feed or Tumblr accounts to Facebook. When users “pin” something to their Pinterest board, Facebook can post it to their walls. Recently, Facebook acquired Instagram, making it even easier for users to post pictures through the application (Zuckerberg, 2012). Facebook’s openness to these competing products allows users to feel a strong sense of presence as an owner, using the site as a home base or tentpole medium to organize all other social networking personae.

Mark Zuckerberg recently echoed these sentiments. In a video outlining Facebook’s missions and goals for possible investors, he noted that he hopes one day Facebook will be integrated into every application people use. Zuckerberg wants all experiences to be social, and for that social quality to be brought to you by Facebook. The Facebook creators noted that in order to create a vast social network, it is up to the users, or the “owners,” to take responsibility in building their profiles and networks (Facebook, n.d.).

2. Future Directions

This paper has argued that Facebook is successful due to its power to evoke a sense of presence. Through the four themes of *I am Immersed*, *I am Social*, *I am There*, and *I am an Owner*, this paper showed how presence plays an important role in Facebook usage. Although Facebook is currently the most successful social networking site, there are other ways that Facebook could evoke even more presence.

Facebook evokes strong feelings of social presence, but it does not evoke much perceptual presence; this kind of presence stimulates the human senses (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Sight is partially used since that is how Facebook is perceived. Pictures make this visual presence richer. Future versions of Facebook, however, may arouse more of its users' senses. For example, a user may be able to add smell to his profiles. This means that visitors to his profile could possibly smell the kind of cologne he likes to wear.

Facebook could also arouse more of its users' visual and aural senses. A user may be able to eventually record himself moving around and speaking. This video could then be used in the place of a profile picture. A shopping website provides an example. MyHabit.com (MyHabit, 2010) does not have conventional pictures of their products for sale. Instead items, such as clothing, are displayed by playing short videos of models wearing the product. Clearly, the model was filmed in front of a green screen, and the background is programmed to match the site design. Although the models in this example do not normally speak, Facebook users could make similar videos that act as their profile pictures so that viewers can feel a greater sense of presence while surfing the site.

The above examples may be fruitful for Facebook; however, the site also has to be aware of falling into the "uncanny valley." First explored by Mori in 1970, the uncanny valley explains why, when certain human-like robots become too human, humans are suddenly turned off. When a prosthetic hand, for example, is created to closely resemble a real hand by adding skin color, veins, finger nails, and maybe even warmth, the fake hand becomes too "creepy." Perfect robotics would be able to create a robot that is so life-like, humans would not be able to tell that it was not real (Mori, 1970). However robotics, and certainly Facebook, is not at this point just yet.

Making avatars or recordings of users to act as guides through profiles could teeter on the edge of the valley. Facebook may be successful because of the presence it evokes in its users, but the site also has to provide a

certain level of comfort. It would be naïve to think that any and all presence is positive. Users may feel odd lurking through profiles if they feel they are being watched. Creating a profile avatar or video that is too life-like may actually cause users to visit the site less.

Although this paper has cited multiple sources to support the claims of Facebook success due to presence, there are many unexplored areas. Future research should explore each kind of presence – immersion, social, being there, and ownership – as they relate to Facebook and other social media. Through this exploration, not only will Facebook improve, but there will be clearer outlines of how to create successful social networking sites through utilizing the phenomenon of presence.

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