

‘I Just Want to Hack Myself to Not Get Distracted’: Evaluating Design Interventions for Self-Control on Facebook

Ulrik Lyngs¹, Kai Lukoff², Petr Slovak³, William Seymour¹, Helena Webb¹,
Marina Jirotko¹, Jun Zhao¹, Max Van Kleek¹, Nigel Shadbolt¹

¹Department of Computer Science, University of Oxford, UK, {first.last}@cs.ox.ac.uk

²Human Centered Design & Engineering, University of Washington, Seattle, US, kai1@uw.edu

³Department of Informatics, King’s College London, UK, petr.slovak@kcl.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Beyond being the world’s largest social network, Facebook is for many also one of its greatest sources of digital distraction. For students, problematic use has been associated with negative effects on academic achievement and general wellbeing. To understand what strategies could help users regain control, we investigated how simple interventions to the Facebook UI affect behaviour and perceived control. We assigned 58 university students to one of three interventions: goal reminders, removed newsfeed, or white background (control). We logged use for 6 weeks, applied interventions in the middle weeks, and administered fortnightly surveys. Both goal reminders and removed newsfeed helped participants stay on task and avoid distraction. However, goal reminders were often annoying, and removing the newsfeed made some fear missing out on information. Our findings point to future interventions such as controls for adjusting types and amount of available information, and flexible blocking which matches individual definitions of ‘distraction’.

Author Keywords

Facebook; problematic use; self-control; distraction; ICT non-use; addiction; focus; interruptions

CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in HCI;

INTRODUCTION

Research on ‘Problematic Facebook Use’ (PFU) has investigated correlations between Facebook use and negative effects on outcomes such as level of academic achievement [35] and subjective wellbeing [58, 57]. A cross-cutting finding is that negative outcomes are associated with difficulty at exerting self-control over use, as well as specific use patterns including viewing friends’ wide-audience broadcasts rather than receiving targeted communication from strong ties [13, 58].

Much of this work has focused on self-control over Facebook use in student populations [2, 44, 46], with media multitasking research finding that students often give in to use which provides short-term ‘guilty pleasures’ over important, but aversive academic tasks [76, 88, 60]. In the present paper, we present a mixed-methods study exploring how two interventions to Facebook — goal reminders and removing the newsfeed — affect university students’ patterns of use and perceived control over Facebook use. To triangulate self-report with objective measurement, our study combined usage logging with fortnightly surveys and post-study interviews.

We found that both interventions helped participants stay on task and use Facebook more in line with their intentions. In terms of use patterns, goal reminders led to less scrolling, fewer and shorter visits, and less time on site, whereas removing the newsfeed led to less scrolling, shorter visits, and less content ‘liked’. However, goal reminders were often experienced as annoying, and removing the newsfeed made some participants fear missing out on information. After the study, participants suggested a range of design solutions to mitigate self-control struggles on Facebook, including controls for filtering or removing the newsfeed, reminders of time spent and of use goals, and removing features that drive engagement. As an exploratory study, this work should be followed by confirmatory studies to assess whether our findings replicate, and how they may generalise beyond a student population.

RELATED WORK

Struggles with Facebook use

Whereas many uses of Facebook offer important benefits, such as social support, rapid spread of information, or facilitation of real-world interactions [78], a substantial amount of research has focused on negative aspects [58]. For example, studies have reported correlations between patterns of Facebook use and lower academic achievement [77, 86], low self-esteem, depression and anxiety [51], feelings of isolation and loneliness [2], and general psychological distress [15]. Such ‘Problematic Facebook Use’ (PFU) has been studied under various names (including ‘Facebook dependence’ [87] and ‘Facebook addiction’ [5]), but a recent review summarised a common definition as ‘problematic behaviour characterised by addictive-like symptoms and/or self-regulation difficulties related to Facebook use leading to negative consequences in personal and social life’ [58].

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