Undergraduate Students' Preferences for Friendsourcing on Facebook Vs. Group Messaging Applications

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Abstract

When people have a question one strategy they can use to get an answer is friendsourcing – broadcasting the question to one or more of their social networks. For example, people can post a question via a status update on Facebook or send a message to a group chat on a messaging app. To better understand people's decisions about what media to use for question asking and answering, we interviewed 17 undergraduate students about their friendsourcing practices. We found that interviewees preferred to friendsource via group messaging rather than Facebook. They gave two reasons for this preference: (a) increased likelihood of finding the kinds of answers they wanted and (b) ease of managing self-presentational and interactional concerns. We provide design suggestions for enhancing friendsourcing on group apps and Facebook.

Author Keywords

Friendsourcing; Social Network Sites; Group Messaging; Q&A; Information Seeking

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Group and Organization Interfaces

Types of questions we asked during the interviews:

"How often do you post on Facebook?"

"What groups are you a member of on messaging applications?" "How often do you send messages to those groups?"

"What do you do when you have questions?"

"What do you do when you have a question and you can't search it on search engines?"

"What do you think about the quality of responses people provide on messaging application groups versus on Facebook?"

Introduction

The term "friendsourcing" refers to the asking and answering of questions to friends on social network sites [9]. Investigators have explored different dimensions of friendsourcing behavior, including the types and topics of questions asked [9], factors affecting the quality of responses [13], cultural differences in motivations to friendsource [14], and the relative benefits and costs of seeking information via friendsourcing vs. search engines [10,11].

While friendsourcing on social media can be an efficient way to get answers to questions, people sometimes choose not to engage in this behavior. Previous work suggests that perceived social costs associated with broadcasting questions to large numbers of friends and not friendsource [10]. For example, people may be concerned that they will appear ignorant, or worry about taking up others' time.

However, social network sites with large numbers of acquaintances are not the only way people can friendsource. Smart phone messaging applications such as GroupMe, which are popular among users age 18-29 [8], provide another option for their users to reach groups of friends through group chats. While group chats can vary in size (the current maximum size for GroupMe is 200), many consist of small work, hobby, or friendship networks [12]. Because the groups are substantially smaller than Facebook networks, posting and answering questions in these groups of contacts provides another form of friendsourcing, one that might reach fewer people but have fewer social costs.

To better understand friendsourcing via group messaging, we interviewed 17 undergraduate students

about their everyday practices of friendsourcing via Facebook and group messaging applications. We found that interviewees preferred friendsourcing via group chat over friendsourcing via Facebook. They gave two reasons for this preference: (a) increased likelihood of finding the kinds of answers they wanted and (b) ease of managing self-presentational and interactional concerns. We conclude with design suggestions for making group messaging apps more suitable for friendsourcing and for helping people manage self-presentation on larger social network sites.

Method

For this study, we interviewed 17 undergraduate students at a large U.S. research university (10 female, 7 male). Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and have a Facebook account. We focused on Facebook as it is the most widely used among the study population (U.S. undergraduates [8]). Our focus was on undergraduates because they are frequent users of both social network sites and group messaging apps.

We conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant. With participants' permission, we audio-recorded the interviews for further analysis. In the 30 to 40-minute semi-structured interviews we asked participants about (a) their general Facebook and messaging application usage, (b) their strategies for finding responses to their questions, and (c) their opinions on the effectiveness of each strategy. Since we were interested solely in the feature of being able to direct messages to small numbers of friends and acquaintances, we allowed participants to respond to our questions in terms of any group messaging application they used (including the group messaging feature of Facebook Messenger).

We transcribed and coded the interviews using Atlas.ti [1] software. We did the coding in six steps. First, we randomly picked three of the interviews and coded them. Second, we went through the codes from these three interviews and merged the ones that had semantic overlaps. Third we did the same process for three more interviews and again did a clean-up of repetitive or overlapping codes. Fourth, we coded the rest of interviews and add more codes whenever it was necessary. Fifth, we did the cleanup for the last time and finalized the list of codes which contained 57 codes at this level. Sixth, using a grounded theory style of analysis [5], we grouped related codes in families and defined several emerging themes, described in the next section.

Results

We identified two main themes related to friendsourcing behavior via Facebook and messaging applications: (a) friendsourcing as social interaction and (b) friendsourcing as an information exchange process. These themes are not mutually exclusive. However, they help answer our research question. We elaborate on each theme below.

Friendsourcing as Social Interaction
Among all participants, 14 of them reported having social concerns when engaging in a friendsourcing interaction. Regardless of whether concerns pertained to asking or responding to questions, we categorized these concerns into three types: (a) self-presentational concerns, (b) interactional social concerns, and (c) conflict avoidance.

Self-presentational concerns. One important social consideration that 10 of our participants mentioned was

self-presentation. Interviewees indicated that they tried to present themselves in a way to please others, consistent with Goffman's self-presentation theory [3]. Interviewees saw posting on Facebook as broadcasting to every member of their network (none reported using techniques to limit their Facebook audience). Because posts went out to their entire network, interviewees expressed concern about how their questions would affect others' perceptions of them.

I feel pretty self-conscious [posting questions on Facebook] because I know everyone is going to see it, so I have to make sure that I really want to know the answer, or I don't mind having everybody see this content … just be aware of … how you present yourself or how others can see you. (P8, female)

If someone asks what's the best digital camera, then maybe on Facebook you could provide links and brief thoughts, because you don't want to take up too much room on their newsfeed or their profile page or look obnoxious in like bragging about your knowledge. (P7, female)

In contrast, interviewees reported less concern with self-presentation when using group messaging apps, because they knew who would see their question or to whom an answer was directed.

On the messaging app since you know exactly who will see it … you have maybe less of a filter in some ways … [Whereas on Facebook] you have your audiences' values and beliefs so … at least me personally would be more careful about what I was asking and how it like made me look or my

recommendations like how they'd made me look. (P2, female)

Interactional social concerns. Feeling comfortable asking questions in a group formed around a shared interest was another point that some of our interviewees mentioned. They felt it was more likely that the audience of a group message would be interested in the question, and in the discussion of other members around answering it, since they had a shared interest for joining this group.

[groups like GroupMe] would have formed because of a certain interest sometime so more people are interested at the foundational level … if someone asks the group a question and then another person answers it like that conversation in itself is interesting because like they're your friends. (p7, female)

For personal issues and requests that need a higher level of social interaction, participants said that they preferred a small group of friends. This strategy gave them a sense of control over potential respondents as they limited them to people they knew and trusted.

I try to go through the smaller groups first. Especially for something like trying to get rides. I'm friends with a lot of people on Facebook that I don't know very well … But I usually use the smaller [group messaging groups] because I'd rather go through the people I know better because I'd rather get responses whether they're to join me in something or they're to send me something, I'd rather get it from a smaller group of people that I really know really well that I trust a lot better than like just spitting it out

there for anyone who's on my network to see. (P6, female)

Conflict avoidance. Interviewees also mentioned concerns about posting questions on controversial topics.

Anything controversial I've tended to stay away from that type of stuff because that always ends with people arguing over on Facebook … it's really annoying and dumb. (P3, male)

However, even for questions about controversial topics, some participants said that they had groups of friends on messaging apps that they could post to without being worried about a potential argument.

I guess if you have a lot of group chats in GroupMe and they're all your friends one will be just because they're close high school friends so we can have different political, religious affiliations or opinions but then maybe I have a GroupMe with people from my church then we'll have similar opinions about laws and stuff like that so then I can just shoot them anything and they'll respond in a supporting way. (P11, female)

Friendsourcing as Information Exchange
The second main theme that we identified in our interviews revolved around the informational purposes and respondents' perceptions of useful strategies for getting high quality responses.

Quality of response. One important motivation among our participants for using Facebook for friendsourcing was the view that they could get more diverse

responses from their Facebook friends than from a group of their close friends on a messaging app.

> *The people in the group message is the stable area whereas there are so many people on Facebook I don't actually talk to all of my friends so if I wrote a post there I should expect more variety, diverse opinions whereas in my group message we all have the same ideas. (P17, female)*

However, when participants were asked about how they decided whether to answer a question when they saw it on Facebook, they mentioned that the relationship they had with the question-asker was an important factor in their decision:

> *It [answering or not] mainly depends who it is. I wouldn't really comment on someone's post who I haven't spoken to in years or I don't like or I don't really know that well. (P12, male)*

Respondents also pointed to the higher level of perceived privacy in messaging application groups as a reason for providing more details than they would on Facebook.

> *I think we would go much more into detail in the messaging apps since it's private or to some extent private so people are more willing to like type or tell you more whereas on Facebook it's really concise. (P8, female)*

Targeted groupsourcing. The term groupsourcing has been proposed by Gao *et al.* [4] as, "intelligently using information provided by a sanctioned group comprised of individuals with disparate resources, goals, and

capabilities," (p. 3). Chamberlain [2] has defined groupsourcing as, "completing a task using a group of intrinsically motivated people of varying expertise connected through a social network." (p. 23). We suggest that posting questions to groups on messaging apps can serve as a type of groupsourcing. Thirteen interviewees mentioned that they are members of groups that enable them to direct their questions to the relevant persons instead of broadcasting it to the whole network. We call this targeted groupsourcing.

> *For instance, I have a few GroupMes that I'm in. I feel like those GroupMes are created based on a common interest or a common thing which is like good friends, my staff, my E-Board, so posting a question there, assuming it's a relevant question it's going to be more helpful than posting something aimlessly to Facebook. (P16, male)*

Furthermore, some participants talked about targeted groupsourcing as a strategy they used to make sure they would get a response to their question.

> *Because what if no one posts to it [on Facebook]. Like you're not guaranteed an answer. But if you post it to a [group messaging] group that's designed for that thing you're guaranteed an answer. Because that group is designed for that purpose. But if you just posted to your friends [on Facebook] they'd scroll through like "oh whatever". (P3, male)*

Discussion

This study explores participants' concerns and preferences in choosing messaging application groups versus Facebook for friendsourcing and groupsourcing. Our findings indicate that self-presentational and social

interactional concerns are two major factors shaping our interviewees' decisions about what tools to use for friendsourcing. Targeted groupsourcing was a strategy most of our participants mentioned using to elicit question responses.

Prior literature has focused on friendsourcing via large social network sites like Facebook and Twitter (e.g. [7,9]). Our findings suggest that at least for college students, friendsourcing via group messaging may play an important role. The majority of our interviewees reported that they did not use Facebook for asking questions, and the reasons they gave revolved around the size of the audience. They agreed that broadcasting a question to a large network had the benefit of getting useful responses from weak ties [6,7]. However, they felt these benefits were outweighed by social concerns.

Groupsourcing was participants' preferred medium for asking and answering questions because of the sense of comfort and control it provides. Groupsourcing allows group messaging users to pick the audience according to their understanding of other members' knowledge or experiences to increase the likelihood of getting responses from the right people. Interviewees also reported fewer self-presentational concerns when asking questions on messaging groups in comparison to Facebook because it is easier for them to adjust their interaction to match the expectations of the audience.

One limitation of this study is the fact that our sample consisted of undergraduate students at a single large U.S. university. More research is needed to determine whether similar findings would be obtained from other demographic groups. We also limited our scope to group messaging and Facebook; future work might examine other venues for friendsourcing.

Design Implications
Given that group messaging was preferred for asking and answering questions, one set of design implications concerns how we can better support friendsourcing via these apps. For example, a simple, yet practical feature would be to allow users to pin a question to the top of a group discussion to ensure members see the post. Additionally, we might support preferences for targeting questions to specific groups by allowing users to define subgroups within a group on a messaging app.

Our findings also suggest that undergraduates appreciate the diversity of Facebook acquaintances for friendsourcing but they are reluctant to post due to concerns about self-presentation. While Facebook allows people to target their posts, interviewees reported they did not use this feature. An alternative approach would be to suggest potential message recipients based on the content of the message (e.g., shared likes of technology pages when posting technology-related questions).

Conclusion
In this study, 17 undergraduate students were interviewed on their preferences of Facebook versus messaging application group chats for asking and answering questions. Interviewees generally preferred messaging groups due to reasons such as greater comfort with broadcasting to a smaller number of people versus their whole network on Facebook, and the possibility of directing the question to a particular group of friends.

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