

Introduction

Instagram acts as an avenue for self-expression [1], where users engage in positive self-expression. However, there are budding concerns that Instagram could be a platform for unhealthy competition for attention. Users create and maintain secondary accounts as a response to social pressure. Finsta, a portmanteau of fake and Instagram, refers to a popular type of secondary account. The content on finstas is humorous, personal, and unfiltered, providing relief from the demands of the competitive environment of users' main Instagram accounts, known in contrast as a rinsta. Previous studies have discovered context collapse and minimized pressure as functions of finstas [2]. However, the creation, use, and maintenance of finstas has remained uninvestigated.

Multiple Profile Maintenance

Multiple profile maintenance is not unique to Instagram. In fact, multiple profile maintenance has been analyzed in a variety of contexts, whether it be multiple characters in online games [3] or political journalists' personal and professional Twitter accounts [4]. In research conducted on various social media sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, among others, Stutzman examined the motivations behind multiple profile maintenance, with privacy, utility, identity management, and propriety being primary motivations [5]. However, the specific social media site or network can inform the reasons behind the creation and maintenance of multiple accounts. For instance, in social network sites like Reddit, users create "throwaway" accounts. Due to the relative ease of creating and abandoning an account on Reddit, users create numerous accounts to afford themselves temporary technical identities for the benefits of anonymity and privacy. On the other hand, multiple profile maintenance on Instagram has not been formally investigated. Because of the popular prominence of finstas in the cultural landscape and Instagram's dominance in social networking, it is crucial to more deeply understand the wider behavior patterns surrounding these accounts.

Core Research Questions

R1. What are the reasons users create, maintain and abandon secondary accounts?

R2. Do secondary accounts benefit users' mental health and well-being, for example by allowing users to present more authentically or receive social support in response to publicly discussing negative experiences, than regular Instagram accounts?

R3. How does the way people use secondary accounts and their motivation for using them evolve over time?

Cultural Probe

A challenge cited by past researchers is the users' hesitancy to disclose their experiences with finstas because of the sensitive and often inappropriate nature of the content. Cultural probes are used as a technique to elicit inspiring ideas from participants that might be otherwise difficult to recall or explain. Gaver, Dunne, and Pacenti cite cultural probes as "part of a strategy of pursuing experimental design in a responsive way. They address a common dilemma in developing projects for unfamiliar groups" [6]. By visualizing artifacts from participants' accounts, techniques of cultural probes critically involve users and prompt them to more thoroughly engage. In analyzing user behavior with respect to finstas, cultural probes are crucial because they elicit emotional content and impressions otherwise unexpressed. However, because probes "encourage subjective engagement, empathetic interpretation, and a pervasive sense of uncertainty as positive values for design," the emotional outcomes of probes cannot be objectively analyzed [7]. Thus, we employ a mixed-methods approach in our analysis of finsta creation and maintenance.

This particular cultural probe is comprised of digital artifacts, from both the participants' profiles as well as public feeds. Intended to explore the difference in experience between primary and secondary Instagram accounts, this probe will engage participants to share stories and visualize trajectories of their multiple accounts. In specific, the probe presents differences in accounts with respect to network structure, content, and social metrics, where users can see differences in accounts. The probe targets key points of data that directly relate to information about the creation and maintenance of multiple accounts, like followers, perception of Likes, and much more. Providing visual cues related to the questions of the interviewer, this probe acts as a guiding structure for in-person interviews.

Methods

Once users log in to the system with their accounts' information, data from their account is scraped and stored. The system then guides the participant through comparisons of visualizations of various data points of interest, such as descriptions of the differences and similarities in followers between accounts. The probe updates an online database in real time, making the data easily sortable and organized for later analysis.

Using the probe, participants are shown data from their accounts side-by-side, which provides them an opportunity to reflect on these differences. Furthermore, participants engage with a variety of tasks comparing and sorting content from both of their accounts.

Future Work

This probe will be used in in-person interviews as a part of a larger study about finstas conducted by UIUC and Stanford University, which will incorporate not only in-depth in-person interviews, but also large-scale online surveys. Previous studies analyzing secondary accounts on Instagram have largely employed small scale self-reported surveys. With regards to scale, representation, and depth of response, this study augments current research on the topic through two key approaches: larger scale online surveys and cultural probes. In particular, the larger scale surveys representatively sample the population to create a taxonomy of diverse motivations for secondary accounts. Participants will use the probe to complete given tasks and visualize data from their multiple Instagram accounts during open-ended interviews. Not only can this tool be used in the proposed study, but can also be used in any research regarding finstas, or more broadly comparing Instagram accounts.

References

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