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SOCIAL NETWORK, A POTENTIAL TOOL FOR UX RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT
According to Statista, the number of worldwide users of social media is expected to reach some 2.95 billion by 2020, around a third of Earth's entire population. Since social networks feed off the interaction between people, their impact on user experience will be stronger by population growth in the future. We often forget about social network's potential as a tool for user experience research; hence this paper discloses how social networks can contribute to generation of richly ethnographic material for design through a student project case study in Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. When it comes to design methods, traditional tools like interviewing or observation help designers to touch the surface of the users´ lives; however a deeper understanding of user's feelings and thoughts will be obtained through generative methods like user experience research.

Keywords: User experience, design tools, social network, cultural probe, context mapping

1 THIS IS THE DIGITAL CULTURE WE HAVE ACHIEVED, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

The lovechild of the World Wide Web is social media, which comes in many forms, including blogs, forums, business networks, photo-sharing platforms, social gaming, micro blogs, chat apps, and last but not least social networks [1]. Since the apparition of social network and afterwards its popularisation in all walks of life, controversial subjects such as circumstances of interaction between people have been discussed. Regardless of how positive or negative the impacts of social networking on people's lives are, nobody can deny that leading social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter are the most dominant forms of interaction between hundred millions of people daily. Figure 1 shows a framework provided by IDF NGO that presents user's expectation while hanging out in social media, in four different quadrants: information seeking, focused entertainment, purpose driven and socially driven fun.

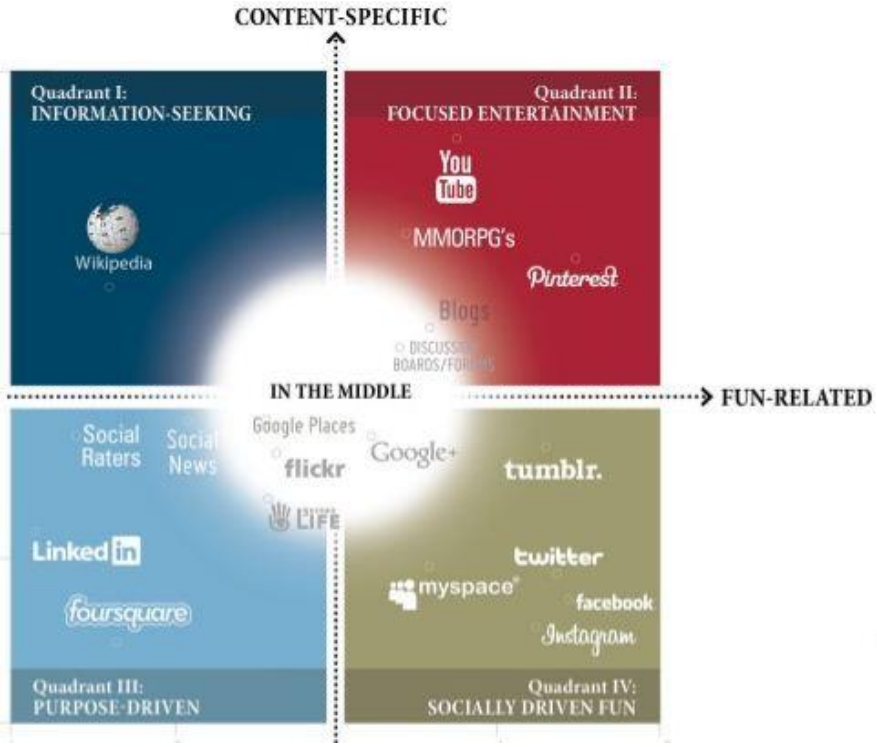

Figure 1. Author/Copyright holder: Fors Marsh Group. Copyright terms and license: [9]

2 A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Whether we are designing a mobile app, a professional online platform or an interactive museum exhibition, it is essential to understand users and the context in which they will use our design. Traditional methods such as interviews and observations will help us to touch the surface of their lives; however a deeper understanding of what our users feel and dream (incognito experience and interaction) comes from generative techniques [2] such as user experience research tools. User experience design principles are based on empathy, meaning the users need to be understood and brought along the way of design process in early stages by implanting empathy. Social media is a potent source of data about users that enables empathy by showing us their world and their notions on it and even their concealed desire about its future. As designers we can get updated about people's real concerns through social media rather than asking them straightforwardly to evoke their experiences as regards, nothing is better than getting information from user's language. In all social tools, the content by which users communicate is more than it appears. It is invested with the interests of its creator, it is intended to communicate to others, it is motivated by the investment its owner has placed in the medium and his or her place in it, it is subject to interpretation by means of what it is and the context in which it appears and it is read by viewers according to what those people know of the author, and how [4]. Besides it is voluntarily shared by the users so we will not face common ethical restrictions while doing design research. This paper will use a case study as an example to indicate that user experience research tools can be modified according to different users and contexts by getting help of social network's visual sharing feature as an ethnographic probe kit used in design universities. Design probes support user participation in information gathering, expressions of needs, dreams and design problems [5]; they can therefore be integrated in pedagogical approaches in product design education when it comes to applying diverse tools in user experience research.

2.1 Research question

The research question was explored through a project done in Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. Integrating social media into interaction and user experience research has been evolving recently and although this is not a new approach, there is a need for a diversity of educational methods that aim to add context and insights into the process of designing user's experience in universities. Stakeholders have looked at social network as an opportunity to expand their commercial service among users, conversely, in the academic world; social media has been immediately

recognised as an interesting primary source of data [6]. Popularisation of social media in everyday life of users, offers a new opportunity in user experience research, how can leading social platforms like Instagram, step in as an ethnographic probe for design students to enhance the understanding of user's concealed life?

3 METHOD

This paper will ingeminate two methods (probing and mapping) used in a case study, a master project in product design education with emphasis on social media as an ethnographic probe in user experience research, made the empirical data. The primary intention of research method in that project was including productive tools that make the user actively participate in generating insights, like cultural probing rather than interviewing. A typical probe kit includes materials for activities over a short period. They evoke personal responses to a stimulus or a question. Probes need to be designed in a way that playfully invites users to share rich clues about their lives rather than gather factual information about them. Preparing the right kind of probes kit is essential for gathering rich insights into the target group that will inspire the early stages of design [2]. Second method is called Layered-scenario-mapping, "a technique used to gain insight into the 'situation one designs for'. It is a systemic technique and emphasises presenting information in different layers going from an overview to very detailed information. The technique proposes a structured approach to collecting and presenting data and provides a template for sorting and presenting the data in a layered manner hierarchically, spatially, and temporally [10]".

3.1 A case study from Augsburg to Oslo

A 26-years-old Iranian woman got married to an Iranian-born-German, so she moved to Augsburg to start her married life. When she was in Iran, she was living with her mom and grandma that is why she has such a strong emotional tie with them. This is a scenario of her daily life in a period of 3 weeks. Since she is an active member in social media, I asked her to tag me on her everyday-shots on Instagram and write a caption about her feelings and thoughts related to that specific moment. Later on I analysed this data to empathise with her.

The project was organized as a scenario based on user's life, with a storyline and different characters presented in a contextual map. All kinds of relations and interactions between characters shown in the map got conducted from relation-library developed by Birger Sevaldson [3].

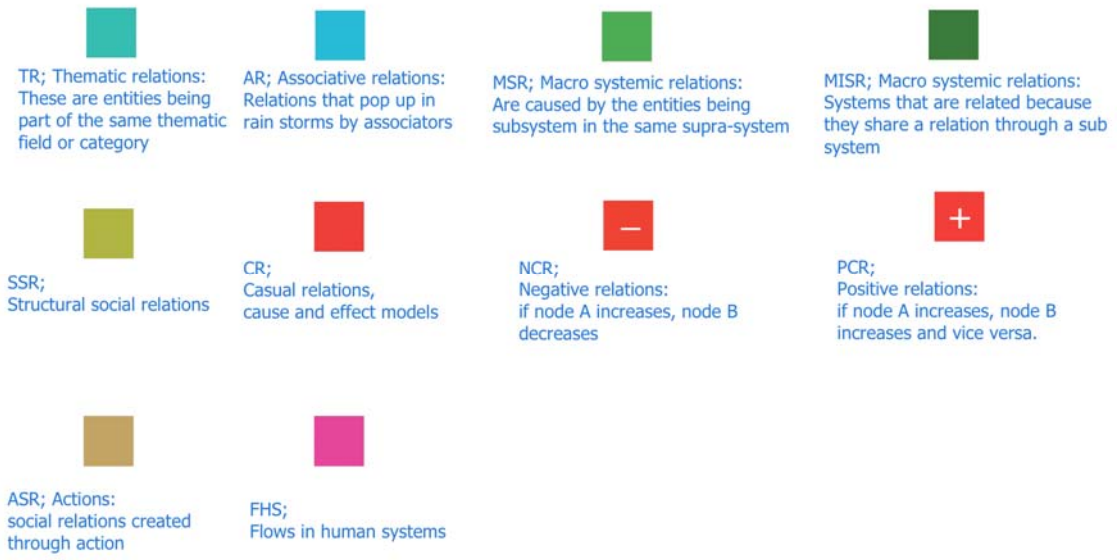

Figure 2. Types of relations to describe contextual interactions between the users and people/objects

The contextual map itself consists of different layers (such as happenings, interaction with objects and people, location) and concealed aspect of the user's experience (including memory, desire, communication, occupation, worry, mindset, need), all the information and different layers in the map

are extracted from Instagram shots and their related captions, as a daily routine of user's online activity in social media. The user was simply asked to tag the designer of the project, on a series of photos with captions, taken and shared by herself on Instagram page within 22 days (Figure 3). The photos and captions were analysed in a scenario map to explore the relations between characters and experience rather than exploring the objectives.

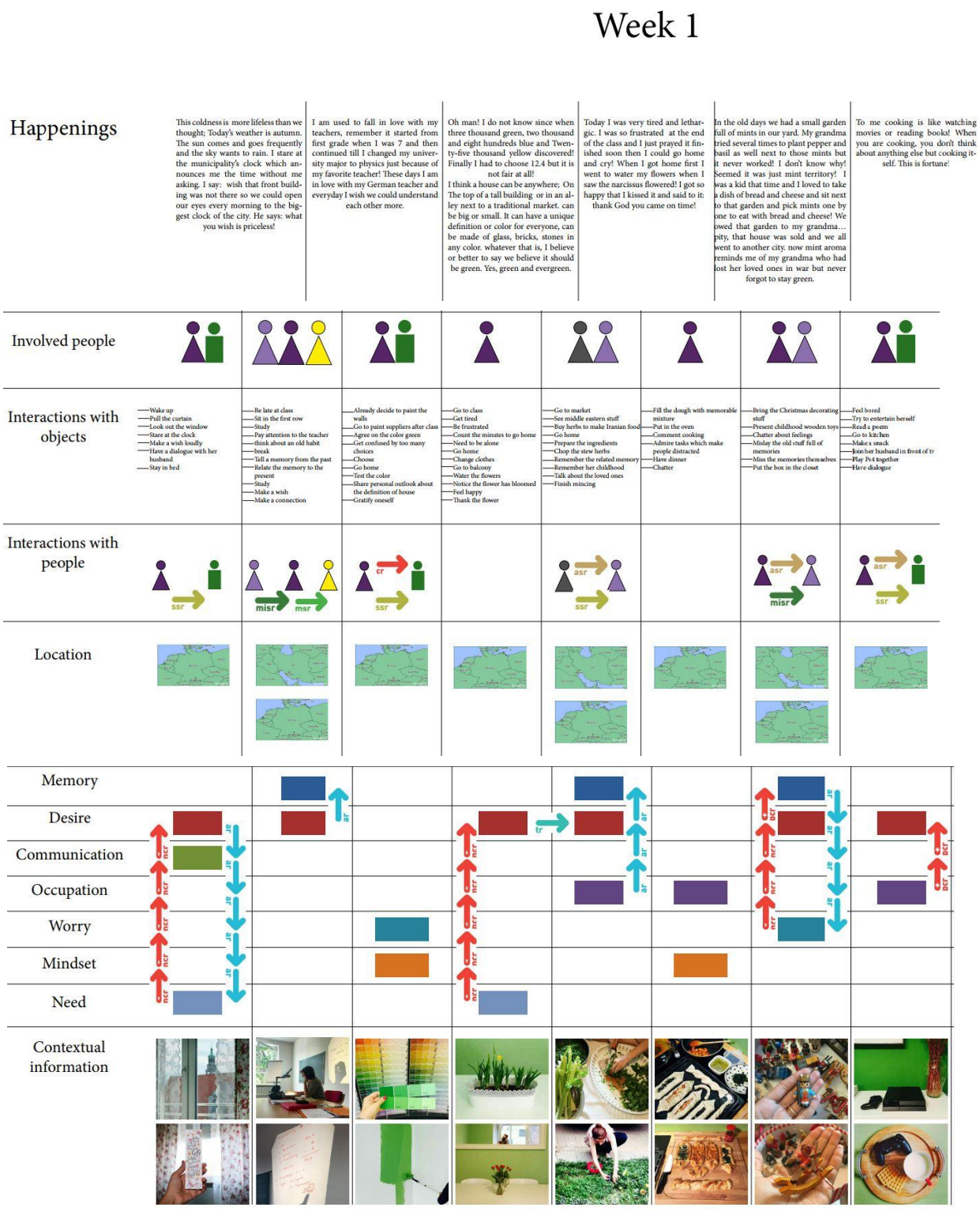

Figure 3. A small part of a bigger map, Instagram shots which were taken in 22-days period by user, analysis phase of the pictures and find relations in a "layered scenario map"

A key research challenge was to understand user's needs around everyday life of a newly arrived immigrant. Firstly, typical user research methods were used on this project, including interview studies and questionnaire, but project sought new ideas for gaining research insights, particularly those related to routine activities because it was felt that due to the long distance between user and designer, daily activities would not be well captured by the other types of research methods like observation. So to answer this gap, a concept of modified cultural probe has been developed in relation to user's high rate of activation on social network in general and Instagram application in particular. The chosen source was Instagram by reason of its popularity with user and its focus on visual sharing because of the fact that during user research process, not every person has something worthwhile to say but almost all of them have something to show. A period of 22 days got selected as research period.

4 FINDINGS

The user-centred technique used in this case study is somehow similar to mobile ethnography research method, allowing the user to gather time and location independently, because she could then define her own touch points within a 22 days timeline. Besides this technique can be used anywhere and at any time. All leading social network platforms that are popular among people like Instagram application enable self-disclosure in a voluntarily desirable way. Desirable interactions are something you tell others about, it has a strong emotional dimension, often giving a pleasurable experience from the interaction [7].

5 CONCLUSION

Self-disclosure by user's activity in social media can be seen as a process of communication in which concealed UX information get revealed, this process can be used by students acting like a design probe. According to Hernes and Bakken, (2003) communication should not be understood as mere information transmitted from a sender to a receiver, in the sense that the information is seen as parcels of information that move from one to the other. Instead information is seen as being created with the receiver through interaction with their existing cognitive framework [8]. Design probes activates users to record their experience as well as express their thoughts and ideas by self-documentation and further to record their daily lives including social, aesthetic and cultural environment, needs, feelings, values and attitudes by looking at personal context and perceptions and to experiment and explore [5]. This paper suggests an additional typology of probes namely mobile-ethnographic-probe as a modifiable user experience research tool in design education that can access users´ experience rather than just their saying. Users' online activities can be used as a mean for data generation while hanging out on social media and concurrently producing data without this being the main objective for their activities; the information obtained through this technique can be descriptive or evaluative. In comparison to traditional design research approaches like interview or observation and especially in such contexts where empathy plays an important role; this probe provides designers with a deep understanding of their users and their thoughts, goals, aspirations, feelings, dreams, successes, failures, fears as well as likes and dislikes.

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