A Case Study of User Vetted Social Networks: DontStayIn

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Social Networking

Since their introduction, social network sites (SNSs) have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices. As of this writing, there are hundreds of SNSs, with various technological affordances, supporting a wide range of interests and practices. While their key technological features are fairly consistent, the cultures that emerge around SNSs are varied. Most sites support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, political ones, or activities. Some sites cater to diverse audiences, while others attract people based on common language or shared racial, sexual, religious, or nationality-based identities. Scholars from disparate fields have examined SNSs in order to understand the practices, implications, culture, and meaning of the sites, as well as users' engagement with them.

Social network sites might be defined as web-based services that allow individuals to   construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks. This can result in connections between individuals that would not otherwise be made. On many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily "networking" or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. To emphasize this articulated social network as a critical organizing feature of these sites, we label them "social network sites."

DontStayIn

DontStayIn, commonly abbreviated to DSI, is a social networking site based around clubbing. Primarily covering the UK it lists nearly 185,000 events and has over 430,000 verified members. The social media on the site is gathered by encouraging members to upload picture galleries to the site for events they've attended, add events and venues and otherwise contribute.

One of the most interesting things about dontstayin is the way the site works to build up its user base in a very organic way. If someone were to go clubbing in certain places they might have their picture taken by a spotter from dontstayin who would give them a card saying "you've been spotted" with the dontstayin.com web address.   This difference in strategy is worth being explored. This method of drawing people into the site ensures that the all important "seed members" are dedicated clubbers who will then draw in similar people. It also means that the spotters can focus on attracting valuable members to the site.

'Spotters' are a sub-group of DSI members who review and photograph events and promote DSI. Dontstayin offers a number of features to spotters, all of which help to create a community around club nights. Spotters on dontstayin undertake the following activities:

- Help users build a profile on the site to share what music they like, where they go clubbing and who their connections on the site are.

- Upload photos of recent nights out which are linked to their profile and used by other users "Spotted" in them.

- Comment on photos, events and articles and generally regulate the happenings of the network.

The strategies adopted by DontStayIn are for a major part deviant from the norm for social networks.Their approach of allowing users to vet other prospective users insure that only people who are dedicated to the interest, in this case clubbing, are allowed to form an identity and participate in the social interactions online.

This work proposes to study the success of these strategies and the benefits and pitfalls of adopting such a stance.

The plan for the above work is to gather information from users, spotters and the administrators to ascertain how well these strategies are accepted at various levels.

BACKGROUND WORK

While most SNSs focus on growing broadly and exponentially, others explicitly seek narrower audiences. Some, like HotEnough and Squ.are, intentionally restrict access to appear selective and elite. Other activity-centered sites like Couchsurfing and DontStayIn are limited by their target demographic and thus tend to be smaller.

With a look at the ever increasing popularity of SNSs, a shift in the organization of online communities has been identified [1]. While SNSs dedicated to communities of interest still exist and prosper, SNSs are primarily organized around people and their connections in the offline world. Early interest based communities such as Usenet and public discussion forums were structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies, but social network sites are structured as personal networks, with the user at the center of their own community. SNSs today share more in common with unmediated social structures, where "the world is composed of networks, not groups" [2].

SNSs are continuously incorporating additional features to bridge online and offline Social Networks. The work presented attempts to illustrate this very fact taking DontStayIn as a case study. This specific SNS was chosen because a user's online social capital is dictated by their offline activity.

Most available research suggests that SNSs primarily support pre-existing social relations. In [3] , Ellison et. all

have suggested that Facebook is used to maintain existing offline relationships or solidify offline connections, rather than meeting new people. Within these relationships there is typically some common offline element among individuals who friend one another, such as shared experiences, interests or friends. The presented work attempts to add to existing research into how online interactions interface with offline ones. In [4] Ellison et. all found that Facebook users would rather search for people with whom they have an offline connection rather than browse for complete strangers to meet. This also iterates the fact the users are consciously looking to connect with like minded people with shared experiences.

Given that SNSs enable individuals to connect with one another, it is not surprising that they have become deeply embedded in user's lives. In the case of DontStayIn, from April 2006 to December 2008 it was ranked in the top 3 websites in the UK for the "Entertainment - Nightlife" category. What is deduced from the above is that people would rather trust a user regulated SNS rather than commercial establishments promoting themselves. It might be assumed that this stems from the fact that people trust other like-minded peoples opinions. The presented work attempts to ratify these assumptions.

[5] presents work on Membership, Growth, and Evolution. The authors pose some interesting questions regarding the same [5]:

- Membership. What are the structural features that influence whether a given individual will join a particular group?

- Growth. What are the structural features that influence whether a given group will grow significantly (i.e. gain a large net number of new members) over time?

- Change. A given group generally exists for one or more purposes at any point in time; in our datasets, for example, groups are focused on particular "topics of interest." How do such foci change over time, and how are these changes correlated with changes in the underlying set of group members?

[5] looks at the question of membership based on the concept of "Diffusion of Innovations" first proposed by Everett Rogers [6]. Diffusion of Innovations is a theory of how, why, and at what rate new ideas and technologies spread through cultures.

Based on the above, the presented work will attempt to gain an insight into vetted communities to explore the first two questions posed. The third question of change is not relevant as the entire goal of the SNS in question is a singular common interest.

Another avenue of research into user regulated communities might be in correlating it with socio-economic theories [7] looking at relationships on a SNS through cost-benefit analysis. This is beyond the scope of this work but might be invaluable non the less.

PROCESS AND RESULTS

To reiterate the goals defined above the aim of this work is to study the strategies adopted in vetted communities and their success from the following perspectives:

• Prospective users

• Existing users

• Administrators

Perspective users

The study of user motivation to join and be part of a social community was based on the wealth of existing literature available and observations made within the vibrant madeirian nightlife. Open-ended informal interviews were conducted to ascertain specific motivations a user might have to join a vetted community as opposed to a open community. The interviews were not of a highly formal and structured nature so as to put the interviewees at ease and also the environment in these sorts of social gatherings do not support long intrusive conversations.

It was observed that people new to the nightlife in madeira were looking for acceptance within one of the more visible social groups. This helped new-bees to acclimatize to the clubbing scene on the island and build their social capital amongst it's populace.

Joining such an exclusive group gives them access to a wealth of information, such as, various events which are not known to the general populace or insider information about venues, such as, when a certain venue is worth visiting or that when a certain venue is hosting an event the other venues are easier to gain entry to.

These social groups mimic a vetted social network as the visible groups are only comprised of members that are dedicated to the interest and there is an innate social vetting process before any new member is allowed to join the group.

Existing users

When considering existing user, 'Spotters' in DontStayIn were focused on as they were most involved in the vetting process. Questionnaires were distributed and an attempt was made to interview respondents further to gain an insight into their motivations and levels of satisfaction within the community. These results are still awaited.

From the observational viewpoint described above it is abundantly clear that a social structure similar to that of 'Spotters' is prevalent in the social groups described above. Within every group there exist certain members that are socially more adept and vocal, who usually introduce new-bees to the group. They usually look at what value a new member can add to the group. The value addition can range

from their contacts at venues to the image they portray of the group. Though this might seem counter-intuitive as making the the group seem elitist but as described by Michihiro Kandori in [7], where the exclusivity of groups make them more desirable.

Administrators

Information from the administrators was meant to be collected through a number of questionnaires. The purpose of this interaction was to ascertain what factors they believe contribute to the popularity of the community and whether user regulated communities are more contextually aware and therefore more popular. These results are still awaited.

The results would be verified against other vetted communities and via observations made on ground.

CONCLUSION

Based on the popularity of DontStayIn it can be assumed that the strategies of vetting prospective users works rather well. Why they work so well can be ascertained based on the observations discussed above. The vetting process that exists within physical social networks in Madeira seem to mimic the 'Spotter' vetting process in DSI.

Such a system benefits every kind of user whether perspective or pre-existing. It allows for the sharing of social capital amoungs't a network allowing it to grow and and it's users thrive.

The questionnaires are still awaited and should further validate the observations mentioned above.

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