

“Hey World, Take a Look at Me!”: Appreciating the Human Body on Social Network Sites

Bernd Ploderer¹, Steve Howard¹, Peter Thomas¹, and Wolfgang Reitberger²

¹ Department of Information Systems, The University of Melbourne, Australia
berndp@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au, {showard,petert}@unimelb.edu.au

² ICT&S Center, University of Salzburg, Austria
wolfgang.reitberger@sbg.ac.at

Abstract. Social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook have the potential to persuade people to adopt a lifestyle based on exercise and healthy nutrition. We report the findings of a qualitative study of an SNS for bodybuilders, looking at how bodybuilders present themselves online and how they orchestrate the SNS with their offline activities. Discussing the persuasive element of appreciation, we aim to extend previous work on persuasion in web 2.0 technologies.

Keywords: Persuasive technology, social network sites, web 2.0, persuasion, appreciation, recognition, fitness, bodybuilding.

1 Introduction and Background

Social network sites (SNSs) like MySpace, Facebook or Cyworld have attracted millions of users. These sites allow users to present themselves on a profile page, to establish visible friendships with other users and to exchange messages. Compared to other web 2.0 technologies, SNSs also tend to be better integrated in offline activities [1], which makes them a useful tool to help people change their lifestyles. Fogg [2] even states that in 2007, Facebook has been the most effective persuasive technology.

This paper investigates how SNSs persuade people to adhere to a lifestyle based on fitness training and healthy nutrition. The persuasive element we are looking at is *appreciation*, the recognition users get online [3] and the feeling of empathy people experience in their interactions with others who have had similar experiences.

Bodybuilding is an example of an individual-oriented sport that provides a contrast to the interconnectedness of SNSs. Bodybuilders use SNSs (in this case an SNS called BodySpace) as a support tool to adhere to their lifestyles based on training, diet and recuperation. On the SNS they present their physiques and exchange appreciation for their achievements in preparing and competing in bodybuilding competitions.

Our aim in this study is to start to extend previous work on persuasion in web 2.0 technologies [4, 5, 6] and help to inform the design of persuasive technology promoting sustainable healthy lifestyles.

2 BodySpace: A Social Network Site for Bodybuilders

BodySpace (www.bodyspace.com) is an SNS with a current base of more than 125,000 gym users and bodybuilders. Similar to other SNSs, people can create a profile page to present themselves and establish publicly articulated friendships with other users. They can also leave comments on other people's profile pages or exchange private messages. The site has additional features that allow people to describe their goals and to monitor their progress using body and training statistics. For example, the progress pictures feature allows users to upload photos with a timestamp to create a visual history of their transformation as in figure 1a. Beyond that, BodySpace is integrated with a photo gallery, individual blogs, a discussion forum and an online shop for fitness equipment and food supplements.



Fig. 1. a) The progress pictures illustrate the participant's transformation from an obese to a muscular physique. **b)** The profile picture shows the participant posing after a victory.

3 Field Study

We used a qualitative approach to explore, how bodybuilders orchestrate the use of BodySpace with their offline activities. Our approach used semi-structured interviews and participant observation – both online on BodySpace and offline in bodybuilding gyms and bodybuilding competitions. We conducted 10 interviews with BodySpace users (3 female, 7 male; aged between 20 and 56 years). The interviews were conducted face-to-face, on the telephone and via email. We also collected data from the participants' BodySpace profiles, which included their personal descriptions, photos and a total of 1968 posted comments. The participants were recruited through a private message on BodySpace. Using a purposive sampling strategy allowed us to recruit bodybuilders at different stages of their careers, ranging from bodybuilders preparing for their first competition to bodybuilders who competed on a professional level. Two further face-to-face interviews were conducted with experienced bodybuilders who are not on BodySpace, as a way to verify our findings. We analyzed the rich set of data using a 3-step coding process [7] leading to various themes. In this paper we focus on the theme of appreciation and discuss, how appreciation offline in the gym and online on BodySpace relate.

3.1 Seeking Appreciation

The absence of appreciation offline was a common theme in the interviews: The group of competitive bodybuilders reported that only people who also went through the “hell of preparation” (Bill¹, 27) could relate to what they had achieved. Bodybuilding competitions are the most important place for appreciation where people present their bodies on stage in front of a knowledgeable audience. Despite the competitiveness in these places, most participants reported a sense of mutual awareness among bodybuilders for their hard work; but elsewhere they felt a lack of understanding by their friends, families, and often even by their gym peers. For example, two people reported negative remarks in the gym: a woman was criticized in her gym for not looking lady-like and a man was accused of taking steroids.

Similar to presenting oneself on stage in a bodybuilding competition, BodySpace allows bodybuilders to present themselves online - presentation being a prerequisite for receiving appreciation. One participant said: “*It gives us a place to post our picture for the whole world to see... Bodybuilders need to be noticed... It feeds our muscle ego, it motivates us*” (Dave, 28). The participants used profile pictures to highlight their favorite body parts, show themselves on stage (see fig. 1a), or to attract the attention of magazines to work as a photo model. Competitive bodybuilders used the progress pictures to document their progress in the preparation for competitions. One participant used the progress pictures to present her transformation from an obese body to a lean body, and then to a muscular bodybuilding physique (see fig. 1b). Before sharing the photos on BodySpace, she used them at home to remind herself of the progress she had made.

Self-presentation does not only take place on one’s own profile page. Recent updates of pictures, goals and statistics are automatically featured on the BodySpace homepage. Some participants looked proactively for appreciation. They left comments on their online friends’ profile pages, to let them know about profile updates, or how they performed in competitions.

3.2 Exchanging Appreciation

All participants had established connections with friends on BodySpace, ranging from 8 to 147 mutual friends. They reported a feeling of empathy through the connections with people who went through similar experiences, although only two participants had a friend on BodySpace, who they also met in real life.

The non-competitive bodybuilders in this study used the network as a resource to seek advice from experienced bodybuilders. The profile description allowed them to approach people for specific advice according to their achievements, which was seen as an advantage to more anonymous discussion forums. The appreciation they received, was either some form of advice or the offer to help based on more detailed information, together with a compliment on the progress they had already made, for example: “*Your transformation kicks ass! ... Great Job!*” (Catherine, 24).

All participants on BodySpace used comments to leave compliments on other people’s profile pages. Most comments were related to the body parts featured on photos

¹ The names of all participants have been changed.

or to the goals expressed on the profile page. Usually they contained a statement of positive reinforcement, e.g., “*Keep it up man! You'll look huge with an extra 8kgs of muscle on you*” (Jarvis, 23). Appreciating other people's achievements was typically reciprocal and led to the reception of a similar comment.

The highest form of appreciation was receiving a message that one's work is an inspiration or a role model for the other person. One participant stated “*Other female competitors telling me they want to look like me when they next compete - this blows me away!*” (Monica, 35).

The feedback of other BodySpace users sometimes even went beyond the mere appreciation of the bodybuilding achievements. Several participants reported that they received propositions online by other people of the opposite sex and the same sex.

4 Conclusions and Future Work

In this paper we have started to explore various forms of appreciation that bodybuilders exchange in a social network site and related offline environments. The BodySpace site is a tool to provide a permanent form of self-presentation and to connect individual athletes. Compared to offline environments, BodySpace provides an environment of enhanced mutual appreciation based on recognition and empathy.

This study highlights how an SNS like BodySpace allows experienced bodybuilders to exchange appreciation with peers, and in future studies we will look at how this works more generally – for example for new gym users or athletes in other sports. We have also started to explore the way in which sites like BodySpace work as persuasive environments that promote activities such as comparison and social learning. In future studies we will use existing theory on persuasion as a lens to further examine these themes.

References

1. Boyd, D., Ellison, N.: Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 13, 210–230 (2007)
2. Fogg, B.: <http://captology.stanford.edu/facebook.html>
3. Fogg, B.: *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do*. Morgan Kaufmann, San Francisco (2002)
4. Fogg, B., Eckles, D.: The Behavior Chain for Online Participation: How Successful Web Services Structure Persuasion. In: de Kort, Y., IJsselsteijn, W., Midden, C., Eggen, B., Fogg, B.J. (eds.) *PERSUASIVE 2007*. LNCS, vol. 4744, pp. 199–209. Springer, Heidelberg (2007)
5. Kapoor, N., Konstan, J., Terveen, L.: How peer photos influence member participation in online communities. In: *CHI 2005 Ext. Abstracts*, pp. 1525–1528. ACM, New York (2005)
6. Khaled, R., Barr, P., Noble, J., Biddle, R.: Investigating Social Software as Persuasive Technology. In: IJsselsteijn, W., de Kort, Y., Midden, C., Eggen, B., van den Hoven, E. (eds.) *PERSUASIVE 2006*. LNCS, vol. 3962, pp. 104–107. Springer, Heidelberg (2006)
7. Strauss, A.L., Corbin, J.M.: *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks (1998)