Characterizing iPhone Web Surfing Patterns / by Tali Abramitzky

Abstract:

This study addresses the following questions: What are the main themes and information behaviors that characterize web surfing via the iPhone? What are the context factors that influence surfing behavior? And how does iPhone use affect users' daily lives? The iPhone was chosen both because of its popularity and because its "closed source" operating system, which does not allow users to make interface changes, allows a meaningful comparison across users.

To address these questions, this study employs a qualitative research strategy called the "Grounded Theory", in which a hypothesis is constructed from the data collected without previous assumptions. Twenty subjects in the age range of 26-44 have been selected, ten men and ten women, who use third or fourth generation iPhone devices. Semi-constructed interviews were conducted, and then follow-up questionnaires were given to subjects to collect information on their use of iPhone applications, in order to complete and validate the data collected via interviews. Content analysis of interview transcripts was used to derive broad categories that characterize most users. These categories were then used to identify core categories. In addition, the analysis identified differences in web usage patterns across users with different traits and life styles.

The analysis suggests that web accessibility and availability are key factors in evaluating iPhone surfing patterns. Specifically, the study identifies how mobile web surfing influences people's daily routines, social interactions and work-life balance. Web surfing on the iPhone takes place anytime and anywhere, from the shortest breaks during the day to social

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interactions. The increased web availability through the iPhone changes substantially users' daily lives: users surf their iPhone whenever they have a spare moment, their browsing sessions become shorter, and they change the way they use their personal computers. Mobile web usage is perceived by users to help them perform everyday tasks, to replace their need to memorize, and to support decision making. The iPhone use also changes the traditional boundaries between home and work. Finally, the iPhone allows users to divide their attention: They are able to be updated during social situations and quickly change focus on different tasks.

Furthermore, the study identified four user groups with similar lifestyles that present common surfing patterns: young university students who consider the iPhone to be a status symbol using it mainly for social and communicative needs, executives and founders of private businesses with families who use the iPhone as a business management tool and exploit its financial functions, freelance artists and designers with families who use the iPhone creatively by exploiting its visual and graphic capabilities, and full-time career employees with families who display a private use pattern by objecting to the use of the iPhone for work. This study makes a number of contributions. From an academic perspective, the contribution of this study is in identifying the context factors that influence iPhone surfing patterns, creating a model to describe and explain the main surfing themes, and analyzing the influence on users' daily lives. Moreover, this is the first study to characterize the phenomenon in the Israeli context. The findings of this study may form a base for future quantitative research; for example large-scale user-group identification and comparison of surfing patterns. Finally, from a business perspective, this study could assist application developers understanding usage patterns and user demands.

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