
Beyond ‘Engagement’ Metrics: How Can We Design Technology for Meaningful Experiences?

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Abstract

Technology is often designed to maximize engagement. Yet this can lead to experiences that while pleasant and entertaining, ultimately lack meaning. My research examines what experiences people find meaningful and meaningless and how we can design to support the latter.

Author Keywords

Positive computing; eudaimonia; hedonia; affective computing; positive psychology; meaning.

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H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Many people express dissatisfaction with the time they spend attached to their digital devices. They install tools to block or limit their usage, quit Facebook, or go on a digital detox [6].

To understand this user dissatisfaction, one common approach is to examine which types of media use leave people ‘feeling bad’. In studies of media use, this negative feeling is often measured in terms of

emotional valence [2,8]. This approach aligns with a *hedonistic* tradition that views subjective well-being (and sometimes happiness too) in terms of affect balance: the presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect [1]. Yet affect balance alone may not fully capture why people are dissatisfied with aspects of their technology use.

Meaningfulness in the eudaimonic tradition

Another way to study well-being is to follow the *eudaimonic* tradition, which focuses on living life with a sense of fulfillment and meaning [1]. One key component of the eudaimonic conception of wellbeing is *meaningfulness*. It is true that meaningfulness is positively related to affect balance: most meaningful experiences also make us feel good. However, the two concepts still differ in important ways. For example, scrolling through pictures of adorable kittens might cheer one up, but feel meaningless. Conversely, messaging one's ex-girlfriend to apologize might be a sad experience, but meaningful. In contrast to hedonic happiness, people associate meaningfulness with giving rather than taking in relationships, enduring unpleasant experiences in pursuit of future goals, and reflecting one's ideal self [1].

Determining what users *really* want is both methodologically and theoretically challenging [7]. The field of positive psychology made great progress in understanding how to cultivate happiness in the hedonic sense, yet it is only more recently that scholarship has turned to the eudaimonic notion of meaningfulness. Similarly, in positive computing [3], valuable work has investigated happiness and engagement, often drawing upon the sensing technologies advanced by affective computing [9], yet

there seems to be less emphasis on studying meaningfulness.

Designing for meaningful experiences

In recent research, colleagues and I examined what smartphone use people find meaningful or meaningless [5]. We found that participants reported productivity, information-seeking, and active communication to be the most meaningful types of use. By contrast, entertainment and passive social media use found to be largely meaningless. Participants also shared that meaningless experiences were closely associated with a loss of autonomy. Our work suggests that to support meaningful experiences, designers should consider how to restore the experience of choice to users rather than drawing them in by auto-playing the next TV episode or displaying an endless feed of new updates. In other prior work, colleagues and I studied how social norms can be presented online to encourage people to engage in meaningful activities, such as childcare [4].

In current work, I am investigating how an intervention from positive psychology (*Three Good Things in Life*) can be implemented in an online environment to support improvements in psychological wellbeing over a long period of time. In addition to standard measures of depression and happiness, we are also evaluating how the online intervention supports people in their pursuit of meaningful experiences.

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