Exploring Design Opportunities for Social Intimacy Through Everyday Objects and Practices

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Abstract
This paper describes a design-driven exploration of how social media services can be made tangible through everyday objects and practices. The exploration was focused on the gaps and opportunities of how people experience intimacy in the social media context. We refer to it as social intimacy.

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Social interaction design, social media, social intimacy, everyday practices

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

Introduction
Social networking services increasingly pervade our everyday life and reconfigure the way we connect and interact with each other. Yet the most we use is usually the tip of our finger on the screen of a handheld device. As designed interaction becomes embedded into everyday products and environments [3], we are challenged as designers to think how we can bring social networking to fit more neatly around our life by
exploring new tangible interactions in the realm of everyday objects and practices.

Intimacy in a social networking context, hereafter referred to as "social intimacy," was chosen as a promising direction to conduct in-depth user research. Though in HCI it has been discussed and studied how mediated touch could be better optimized to enhance remote communication [5], in most cases research focuses on one-to-one intimate expressions of intimacy [1,4,7]. Questions concerning what tangible interactions are appropriate to sustain social intimacy in a digital networking context have not been fully explored yet. At the same time, we witness a trend towards more intimate social media services like Couple [2] and Path [7], which aim particularly at addressing the issue of oversized social networks. But none of them take tangible interaction into consideration as a design strategy.

This paper briefly describes the user research that informed our design vision, and the exploration of relevant everyday objects and practices conducted to enrich the interaction qualities of our vision. A design example is provided at the end.

Exploring intimacy in the social media context

Intimacy map
We conducted extensive interviews with 13 college students (age 20-29) to gain an overview of how people communicate intimacy through social media. A sensitizing form was made to assist the participants in drawing and commenting upon their own intimacy map [Fig.1].

Most participants mentioned that they use social media tools like Facebook, Renren (Chinese version of Facebook) and Weibo (Chinese version of Twitter) mainly to interact with their good friends, lovers and siblings. However, according to participants, most of this communication happens in a "fragmented" and "occasional" fashion. In Facebook, for example, that would be the case of someone posting or sharing content on their friend’s Wall. This often attracts other friends to view that content and casually react and comment [Fig.2]. Reported instances of such a fragmented and occasional social intimacy include: friends making in-jokes only understood by themselves while commenting upon someone’s posts; someone sharing a content that uniquely fits their friend’s special interest; and, someone always being the first caring to “like” and respond to a friend’s posts.

Self-reflection diary
To obtain an in-depth understanding of how people experience social intimacy, a self-reflection diary was prepared and delivered to 12 participants from the same target group. Participants were asked to collect examples from their own social media sites. These examples had to illustrate instances of social intimacy that they either enjoyed or disliked when (a) expressing, (b) perceiving, and (c) witnessing an intimate exchange.

A qualitative analysis [Fig.3] of the diaries identified a set of factors that seem to contribute to enjoyable experiences of social intimacy. These factors include: (a) receiving or witnessing content from (or about) people we care about; (b) being thought of and remembered through the content shared; (c) sharing the memory of moments experienced together; (d)
expressing romantic love in subtle and poetic ways; and, (5) sharing intimate content in a fun and clever way so to inspire unexpected responses.

In many of these cases, we observed that participants thoughtfully crafted intimate content and interactions. Examples include: a girl posting a picture of the shadow of herself together with her boyfriend instead of their actual photo; a girl photoshopping the picture of a famous couple and replacing their faces with those of herself and her boyfriend; a boy taking a picture of four animals arranged in a particular order to allegorically represent four friends’ nicknames. We thus conducted further analysis and identified a set of three latent desires underpinning the way people craft and express intimacy on social media platforms. These include: (1) the desire to communicate creatively, in a way that shows what an interesting person you are; (2) the desire to communicate in a unique and personal way, so to assert and reveal your level of intimacy; and, (3) the desire to communicate in an implicit and subtle way, which can help you filter your real friends. The first two desires seem to address the need for a sense of ‘authenticity’ in an intimate exchange—which is somehow missing in current social media interactions where only a head icon, a posted image and a column of texts are available to assist the communication. Finally, the third desire seems to address the ‘preciousness’ of intimate communication. This also is perceived as missing on social media platforms, where communication is somehow easy and cheap.

Exploring tangible opportunities for social intimacy
As interaction designers, we were inspired by the crafting of social intimacy emerged from the user research. Based on such understanding, and taking into consideration the short and fragmental properties of social media communication also emerged from the user study, we formulated and decided to pursue a design vision of light and playful social intimacy.

Unstructured interviews
To substantiate this design vision and creatively bridge social media and everyday practices, we conducted an exploration of light and playful physical interactions between close friends. We conducted several unstructured interviews during casual conversations with friends, in which we asked participants to recall everyday, physical interactions between intimate friends that they considered ‘light and playful.’ All the collected examples were then coded and clustered into different types of ‘light and playful’ physical interaction, including: physical secret (e.g., a wink or a whisper); friendly oppose (e.g., two men pretending to fight against each other); guess what (e.g., writing on the palm of someone’s hand or playing hide and seek games); cheer (e.g., high five); compete (e.g., a breath-hold battle); reasonless play (e.g., kicking a paper ball); ‘impolite’ way of sharing (e.g., grabbing the chewing gum); and, tease (e.g., making someone stumble) [Fig.4].

Creative session
For further exploration and idea generation, we then organized a creative session with 4 industrial design students [Fig.5]. In the creative session, we asked participants to reflect on the light and playful character of the collected examples, select one of the physical interactions presented, and redesign an intimate social media interaction on the basis on the selected everyday interaction. As a result of the initial reflective activity,
participants identified and summarized the social intimacy of the presented examples as a matter of: (a) instant feedback; (b) tacit understanding; (c) high tolerance; (d) being truly yourself; (e) mutual effort; and, (f) satisfaction from ‘exhibiting’ intimacy. These results are interestingly similar to those identified through user research of the social media context (i.e., social intimacy as a matter of creative, personalized and implicit communication). At the same time, (a) intuitional sense, (b) genuine expression, (c) mutual attention, and (d) consensual infection were identified as valuable qualities that are missing in social media interactions. Together with the design ideas generated in the second part of the creative session, these findings deepened our understanding of the design vision and revealed the interaction qualities needed for a light and playful social intimacy.

A design example: A clock for playing with the future
Inspired by the further visualized design vision and the mapped interaction qualities, a design example called “Back to the future” was created [Fig.6]. This concept provides a new experience for unpacking past social traces and delightfully unpacking “future” social situations through a tangible interaction of dialing backwards or forward the needle of a clock.

Conclusions and future work
We have presented a process of exploring design opportunities to make social media services tangible. Social intimacy was chosen as the focus to conduct user research. Through user research, it was found that social media platforms do create chances for communicating and being intimate in an occasional and fragmented fashion. It was also observed that the “crafting” of social intimacy in fun and interesting forms is an interesting phenomenon that represents people’s desire of being creative, personal and subtle when expressing intimacy.

In the future, experimental prototypes will be made and tested to explore whether the envisioned tangible interaction and playfully generated “future” predictions are a suitable way to sustain and enrich social intimacy, thus bridging online and offline interaction in an elegant and meaningful way.

References