

Mundane Pleasures in Everyday Life

Marije Kanis

Brunel University
Kingston Lane, Uxbridge
Middlesex, UB8 3PH
United Kingdom
marije.kanis@brunel.ac.uk

Antti Salovaara

Helsinki Institute for Information Technology,
Helsinki University of Technology and
University of Helsinki
P.O.Box 9800, 02015 TKK
Finland
antti.salovaara@hiit.fi

Willem-Paul Brinkman

Delft University of Technology
Mekelweg 4
2628 CD Delft
The Netherlands
w.p.brinkman@tudelft.nl

ABSTRACT

What are the situations in everyday life that people enjoy and cherish? This paper presents a content and user study with two simple mobile phone applications called PosiPost to investigate this question and learn what people express as their pleasures in everyday life. Drawing from a corpus of 379 PosiPost messages that users shared, this paper presents an analysis of users' pleasurable moments. The results point to the importance of mundaneness of such situations, suggesting that creating sensational "wow" experiences, is not always necessary for giving rise to a person's positive affect.

Keywords

Mundane pleasures, positive messaging, mobile technology

1. INTRODUCTION

Already centuries ago, Aristotle [1] concluded that above all, human beings seek happiness. While happiness is sought for its own sakes, all other goals—health, beauty, money or power—are valued only because people expect these will make them happy [5]. In the field of HCI and computing, naturally, only the best-executed applications and technologies are even identifiable contributors to people's happiness—let alone the primary reason why people might consider themselves happy. Yet, connecting with this level of human need and desire could be considered as the Holy Grail of user experience and technology design [11].

Since the inception of the terms "affective computing", "user experience", "user needs" and "empathic design", identifying the characteristics of human's emotions, and accessing these through product design have become the silver bullet for a large research community in HCI. However, considering the time the pursuit started and the total activity taken place, there is surprisingly little that is known about the pleasant emotional experiences and happy moments that occur in people's ordinary life, with or without any technology. Although research in the rather new field of positive psychology has started to grapple with understanding happiness and the value of positive emotions [7], so far, a refocusing towards the understanding of pleasurable events in human lives does not appear to have filtered deeply into the theory and practice of technology design. This is perhaps surprising, as there is clearly an opportunity to employ technology for uncovering the nature of daily pleasures.

However, (novel) technologies and their often complex 'wow' features can sometimes impose considerable load, input and social demand on users. Thus, technology should be ideally designed in a way that does not add to the complexity of a person's daily life and practices. Remarkably, as mobile phones have become 'mundane' in the meaning that they have increasingly become pervaded and integrated in people's daily life practices, these mobile mundane technologies offer unique characteristics for the sharing and recording of people's day-in, day-out pleasurable moments, in a simple, non-invasive way.

This work aims to address this challenge. In this paper, simple applications, on top of mundane mobile technology, are presented as a non-invasive vehicle to record and share people's positive thoughts for providing a view of human pleasures.

2. RELATED RESEARCH

Designing simple technologies and applications that not only bring functional benefits, but also positive emotional benefits is a rather new challenge for the HCI community and requires understanding of people's positive emotions and daily likings. There is no long tradition in HCI, cognitive psychology or emotion psychology that would stress such a focus on positive emotions. Until recently, research efforts were focused on mental illness, cognitive shortcomings and negative emotions, such as grief and frustration [2]. The rising field of positive psychology [15] has recently contributed a lot in terms of empirical studies and understandings of positive affect and human flourishing. The only key concept from positive psychology that has truly filtered into HCI theories and practices is the Flow Theory [5], which describes the optimal psychological state (thus flow or zone) when people reach total enjoyment and engagement in an activity. Some pleasurable experiences can be described with Csikszentmihalyi's flow model, but the flow state does not manifest in all moments when people experience pleasure. It cannot cover many simple joys of life, for example moments when a person rewards herself with a cup of coffee after having finished a laborious task.

Compared with other pleasure frameworks [17], the typology by Tiger [16] illustrates a broader range of classifications for pleasure. His emphasis is not only on physical and cognitive pleasure (such as derived from a flow state), but also on the value of social interaction. He identifies four types of pleasure: physio-pleasure, socio-pleasure, psycho-pleasure, and ideo-pleasure. His classification has been used in the study described in this paper, which focuses on the pleasures

evoked through daily life events, rather than on provoked by products, as employed by Jordan [8].

Apart from work that led to the theory of flow, only a few studies have been published that have gathered and analyzed a corpus of everyday experiences with content analysis. However, in most of these studies the focus has been on rather dramatic emotional experiences (e.g., [12]) in which aspects of mundaneness and benefits of positive disclosure are not focused on. In a similar line, in a telephone survey by Scherer and Tannenbaum [14], respondents were asked to report the most recent situation that evoked strong emotional feelings. Possibly due to the method adopted (self-reported unaided recall), the responses were mostly related to normative grand moments: births of children, overcoming an illness, and so on. Similarly, the study by Brickman et al. [3] was focused on a grand moment. The researchers studied the radical positive moment of winning the Illinois State lottery, and surprisingly found that the multimillion-dollar winners ended up no happier than other people of the same socio-economic background. They reasoned that in the long run, this grand moment was mitigated through a process of habituation; the extreme moment diminished the pleasures found in mundane events.

While technology is nowadays part of our everyday communication and expression, in most studies, it is not used as a tool for data gathering. For example, Clark and Watson's [4] gathered information about positive and negative experiences among university students through written diaries, to learn about daily emotional events. Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter [6] reported on a similar study with teenage pupils. They reported that the top classes of positive experiences were pleasures arising from watching TV, talking with friends, and eating a meal. Although the mundane aspects of pleasure are typically disregarded, it is striking to notice the mundane nature of such reported experiences.

3. STUDY

As part of an iterative study process, two mobile messaging technologies were developed to investigate the prospective mediation of positive inner experiences by technology. In this case, these were used as research tools to find out what kind of pleasures people express when given the opportunity to anonymously record and share positive feelings with others. The applications were used as vehicles to enable the study of shared pleasurable moments and uncover its potential mundane nature.

3.1 Simple mobile technologies

Two mobile prototypes, *PosiPost Me* (a Mobile internet edition) and *PosiPost Be* (a Bluetooth edition) were built to facilitate expression and sharing of daily likings (Figure 1). Their design was purposely kept minimal. The systems just enable the user to write and share messages about positive moments anonymously. When creating a message, the user is asked to describe a positive moment by finishing a sentence starting with the prefix "Today, I like". Previous studies showed the potential for such a prefix-based elicitation of positive emotions [9].

PosiPost Me

PosiPost Me is a simple client-server based application that enables the prefix-based message sharing via mobile internet. The distribution of the messages is completely randomized and anonymous, so that contextual attributes —location, time and messenger of the postings— are not known to the receiver.

Retrieval is based on message pull: anytime the user likes, (s)he can ask the client to retrieve a posting. For more details on *PosiPost Me*, see [10].

PosiPost Be

With the other mobile version, *PosiPost Be*, users are able to automatically exchange messages with other posiposters who come in close proximity, via Bluetooth. In this design, users have the option to reveal clues about their origin. Due to the proximity, it is easier to guess the time, place and the possible sender of the posting. The sending of the messages is based on a decentralized peer-to-peer system, and uses a push method for receiving the messages. Users can moderate the postings, by having the option whether to pass on the received messages they like.



Figure 1. The two versions of PosiPost: PosiPost Me (Mobile internet edition) and PosiPost Be (Bluetooth edition)

The reason for two mobile applications is to increase understanding of the role the medium plays on the nature of the messages shared. Having two expressive media not only empowers users with two ways of sharing pleasures, but also enables other researchers in future to use these as research tools for exploring issues such as social differences and potential mental benefits in co-located and remote sharing.

In terms of the system development and Bluetooth's automated sending functionality of *PosiPost Be*, the application was far more complicated to build than *PosiPost's* mobile internet edition. However, the functionality of the systems for the user is very much the same; though the (known) context of posting is different, both media are built to receive and send positive messages.

3.2 Method

The study involved 15 participants, which were 20–40 year old post-graduates. They came from a wide variety of different nationalities, but were based in England and The Netherlands. The users in England belonged to a group of friends living near each other in London. In The Netherlands, the users were colleagues who worked in the same university building in Delft. These sites were chosen to ensure that messages would be regularly exchanged with people in close proximity, when using *PosiPost's* Bluetooth edition.

Both of the two systems were used by the participants for one week each. A neutral stop week was held between these two periods. The postings shared were recorded for later analysis. All participants were also interviewed after using both versions.

4. RESULTS

The study resulted in 379 (179+200) messages created with *PosiPost's* two editions (*Me* and *Be*, respectively). Based on

the postings shared with the two different versions, the study provides a content analysis of the pleasant moments that users expressed and shared with others. The messages generated in the study (e.g., “Today I like my new girlfriend” or “Today, I like warming the house”) were analyzed and coded into different categories. The categories used, shown in Table 1, were based on the findings from a previous study [9] and Tiger’s pleasure framework [16]. The content characteristics that emerged were categorized by two coders. The consistency of the coding allocations was analyzed by calculating a series of Cohen’s Kappa —Index of Inter-rater Reliability. For all categories, there was a high level of agreement between the coders, given that all values were above 0.80, which is normally considered as satisfactory [13]. In the few cases where the two coders disagreed, they discussed and agreed on a classification afterwards.

In Table 1, the elaborated categories in capitals are the ones that were found key in addressing this paper’s topic of mundane pleasures (see [9] for further details on the other categories). The vast majority of the postings (99%) fell in at least one of these key categories (e.g. *Mundane*, or *Pleasure* category). All the postings could be coded in at least one of all the categories each. The categories were not designed to be mutually exclusive. For example, a posting such as “Today, I like having cake with my colleagues” was classified as a *Socio-pleasure* and also placed in other categories such as *Mundane* and *Physio-pleasure*. Thus, each posting could have multiple codings.

Pearson’s chi-square tests were carried out to compare the codings of the messages generated with PosiPost Me versus PosiPost Be for the pleasure and mundane categories. No significant differences ($p.s > 0.05$) were found for these categories, indicating that the mobile medium used had no clear influence on the kind of pleasure or mundaneness reported. All the coded posted content is thus presented as one corpus in Table 1.

Two immediate conclusions can be drawn from this study. Firstly, from the four pleasure categories, *Psycho-pleasure* scored lowest. Even postings referring to *Leisure time* scored slightly higher. This can be seen as an indication that pleasure derived from active flow should not be the only concept of pleasure for the HCI community to focus on. Secondly, a very high proportion of codings fell in the *Mundane* category. This calls for a further analysis and discussion that could guide design efforts in HCI. Looking closer at the postings in the *Mundane* and *Situatedness* categories, a common underlying theme can be identified. There seems to be *some aspect of pleasure in all moments of mundane life*. This suggests that pleasurable moments can be at least partly *constructed*, created out of mundanity. Many of the messages, particularly the ones describing a ‘task-free element’ (e.g., *Leisure time* category), indicate that in the middle of doing something, users were able to detach themselves from the immediate task setting and notice something positive in the environment.

As can be expected, there were a large variety of such likable features —sunshine, rain, cold weather, quietness, and “symmetrical trees that blossom” being some of these postings, for instance. While a more thorough analysis of these assumptions still needs to be carried out, the Discussion is devoted for elaboration of these ideas.

Table 1: Numbers and percentages of postings according to topic category

Content category	Posted content that falls in category	
	Freq.	% (of total 379)
NEGATIVE: posting is not about something positive	0	0
OFFENSIVE: posting could be regarded as racially, sexually or politically offensive	0	0
PSYCHO-PLEASURE (progress, accomplishment) Enjoyment derived from a certain accomplishment progress or flow. Can refer to the satisfaction enjoyed as a result of individually motivated tasks or acts. “Today, I like solving difficult problems”	78	21
LEISURE TIME (break, rest): Posting contains task-free or relaxation moment “Today, I like sleeping” “Today, I like the weekend!”	91	24
IDEO-PLEASURE (personal values, attitudes): pleasure derived from books, art and music etc. that are in agreement with attitudes and personal aesthetic, political, ecological values. Can refer to ideas, images, and emotions that are privately experienced. “Today, I like fighting the system” “Today, I like what I do for a living”	101	27
SOCIO-PLEASURE (human, social): pleasure derived from social contact and relationships with others. “Today, I like getting to know my colleagues better” “Today I like getting good news from friends”	140	37
PHYSIO-PLEASURE (physical sensation): Pleasure derived from haptic, visual, audio senses. Can e.g. refer to the physical sensation obtained from eating or drinking. “Today I like the taste of chocolate melting in my mouth”	176	47
MUNDANE (everyday event): pleasure derived from a mundane, ordinary, simple thing happening in life. “Today, I like working at home” “Today, I like a bit of fresh air” “Today, I like my coffee in the morning”	238	63
SITUATEDNESS (right here, right now): a posting concerning what is happening at particular moment in time and place. “Today, I like writing the best posipost”	289	76
Emotion (explicit)	17	4
Overcoming negative emotions or experiences	18	5
Materialistic possession (novelty)	37	10
Activity	68	18
Time	72	19
Object (medium)	78	21
Location/environment	100	26

5. DISCUSSION

The study provides insights in the various pleasures people make out from ordinary happenings in life. The minimal ‘background’ applications, build on top of mundane mobile technology simply support the person’s capability to seek pleasure in such mundane events. The study raises many points needing further inquiry, two of which are discussed.

5.1 Learned happiness

This paper calls for a further discussion that could guide the design of technology for positive affect. The point raised is that technology can enable and empower the user to experience and notice positive moments. Supporting such noticings has been one of the leading design goals of PosiPost from the very start. Therefore, the presented findings and interpretations are promising, as they indicate that positive expressive technologies such as PosiPost may actually aid in paying more attention to positive aspects of everyday life.

The possibility of PosiPost’s effect on positive thinking leads to an idea of “learned happiness”, a concept reminiscent of the antonym of “learned helplessness” [15]. By tuning in to everyday pleasurable moments, users learn to create happiness, providing support to the concept that pleasure can be mentally and socially constructed, not only passively experienced. In interviews, some participants said that before posting, they often felt that their day was boring and that they did not have anything interesting or positive to express. However, through posting and thinking about something they liked during the day, the creation of the postings eventually made them feel better. Likewise, on the receiving end, retrieving a ‘mundane’ posting often seemed to inspire the receiver to reflect on his or her feelings in a more interesting, positive context.

5.2 Mundane is more?

PosiPost appears to serve the research in HCI also in another way than only increasing understanding of the nature of happiness and mundaneness in everyday life. Namely, it has a potential to make a contribution to simple design thinking by suggesting a new possibility of how mundane technology could possibly contribute to users’ happiness in general. Contributing to this second point, the approach behind PosiPost’s design—helping people construct and become aware of mundane moments—helps to go beyond the ‘wow’ experience rhetorics that treat user experience as a mere encounter with the technology, detached from the abundance and demands of everyday life.

PosiPost addresses mundaneness in two ways: by increasing users’ awareness of something that is, due to its mundanity, originally invisible, and through mediating a simple disclosure of this awareness to other users, who in turn can adapt the same remarks to their interpretations of everyday life. Signs of the importance of simply shared awareness can be seen in users’ behavior which show that users retrieved more postings than they created themselves, partly also due to its lower-effort cost.

By designing PosiPost as a simple background technology for shared positive expression, this paper has uncovered various mundane pleasures in everyday life that people engage in. In doing so, it demonstrates an opportunity for the development of simple technological solutions for supporting and encouraging positive disclosure. The strength of the designed technology did not lie in the abundance of complex ‘wow’ functionality, but in the rich mundane contents and notifications shared and created by its users.

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