Face to Face Makes a Difference – Recommendation Practices of Users of Mobile Services

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ABSTRACT
The mobile app stores and markets provide companies, independent developers and researchers alike with possibilities to distribute innovative designs for mobile devices on a global scale. However, reaching a large numbers of users does not in itself ensure a large number of users adopting the mobile application or service. Large-scale adoption depends on additional factors such as novelty in service design, ease of use, enjoyable interaction, built-in mechanisms for further distribution of the mobile service as well as the practice of word-of-mouth recommendations. In this position paper we present the background and preliminary findings from a study aimed at investigating the motivations and practices by which users recommend mobile apps and services among their acquaintances. We discuss our perspective on distribution of mobile applications and services on a large scale and end this paper by suggesting questions for discussion and future research.

Author Keywords App stores, viral marketing, distribution, recommendations, practices.

ACM Classification Keywords
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms Human Factors.

INTRODUCTION
The mobile app stores and markets have provided companies, independent developers and researchers alike with possibilities to present innovative designs and concepts for mobile applications and services through distribution techniques on a global scale. App stores and markets with a reach to a large user base enhance the possibilities to understand usage patterns and use preferences for particular design choices. The app stores also enable observations of the spreading of mobile services over time and geographical space. The adoption rate of users of specific mobile applications and services depend on factors such as novelty, enjoyable interaction, efficiency of use and utility of the app. In addition, adoption is affected by the built-in mechanisms of the service to promote further distribution of the service and the practice of word-of-mouth (WOM) by which users recommend a mobile service to their friends, family, colleagues and other acquaintances.

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In the Mobile 2.0 project at the Mobile Life Centre we started the Mobile Service Distribution project, in which the first phase of the project focus in particular on the means by which users recommend mobile applications and services to others in their direct or indirect acquaintance. In this paper, we present a brief background motivating this project together with some preliminary findings of our first study into recommendation practices of users of mobile services.[1]

WORD-OF-MOUTH (WOM) AND VIRAL MARKETING
The spreading of mobile services is affected by how users talk about the services to their peers. One user's positive message about the service, possibly complemented by explicit recommendation of the service, may lead to adoption by new users.

The practice of WOM has been richly discussed within the area of marketing research, in particular of its observed influence on product and service sales. In light of both successful and unsuccessful marketing campaigns, WOM can have a great influence of product or service adoption. Companies that seek to reach out to large audiences often seek to control the influence of the WOM by *viral marketing* and taking advantage of *influencers*. A viral message in this context is a analogue to a pathological or computer virus, where the aim is to eventually reach the viral message to an influencer who becomes 'infected' and have them in turn spread the word to others. Influencers in this context are early market adopters, trusted in opinion by others and hold a large social network [4].

Additional perspectives to viral marketing look to the emotional connection established between the marketing campaign and the receiver to ensure further distribution of the 'virus'. By using provocative (such as violence or humor), striving for intriguing, fun, or unique content or otherwise promote engagement (i.e. by embedding interactive games in the message), the viral message is more likely to be spread further by consumers to their acquaintances. The success of such efforts is seen in the context of the phenomenon of social sharing of emotions. With our inherent behavior of sharing our everyday emotional experiences with family, friends or others in our close circles, we are likely to share information or messages that have influenced us or otherwise triggered emotional reactions in significant ways [1].

[1]For the remainder of this paper, we will refer to mobile applications and services simply as mobile services

WOM practices may be influenced by viral marketing strategies such as the ones described above, but may depend on additional factors such as branding, trust, estimated value of the service, the actual service experience or hedonic qualities such as enjoyment. However, the influencer's ties with the receiver can have a great affect on the outcome of the WOM, be it a loose or strong tie.

In studying recommendation practices, we find the body of literature on viral marketing informing for our understanding of person-to-person recommendations of mobile services. We consider the drivers of WOM practices can be present in mobile service recommendations as well, albeit with some differences to practice and perspective. The differences, to our knowledge, lie in the underlying ecosystem in which the app stores and markets are parts of.

APP STORES AND MARKETS AS CASE STUDIES

The dominant distribution model for mobile services today has the mobile markets and app stores at its core. With each mobile phone manufacturer providing their own dedicated app store and markets emerging for the open developers' communities, the availability of mobile services for users continue to expand. There is a great interest from HCI researchers to understand the dynamics of the mobile markets to learn how greater numbers of participants in field trials, distributed over the world, can be done [2]. The markets not only challenge us to consider what it means to do large scale recruitment for our testings of prototypes and concepts. It also challenges us to consider techniques to elicit both quantitative and qualitative feedback on usage, taking into account the users privacy. In e.g. [6], the authors experiment with different ways of asking users for their consent of collecting their performance data. Taking advantage of reaching users through mobile markets not only provide (culturally) diverse feedback to a concept or prototype, but also enable user-informed design through multiple feedback channels [5].

In ongoing research endeavors to understand the dynamics of the mobile service markets, we have yet to understand various actors and ongoing practices on how mobile services are distributed. Actors such as lone developers, companies as well as new startups. Channels that have an effect on mobile service distribution such as articles in newspapers, online blogs, through various social networking channels such as Facebook and Twitter and finally person-to-person recommendations of mobile services among everyday users. In the first phase of the Mobile Service Distribution project, we aim to look in specific to the current practices of recommendations of mobile services between user-to-user. We find this relevant for three reasons.

The first reason to study recommendation practices is to gain a broader perspective on distributing mobile services through channels such as the mobile markets, possibly additional public channels such as social media. This is done in greater part to understand their impact on service awareness and (viral) spreading over time. The second reason for our topic is to broaden our understanding of motivations for further recommendations of mobile services between users. Is it service design, built-in mechanisms for further distribution of a service (such as automatic generated invites, point systems for friend invitations etc.), functionality, user experience or social ties that motivate a user to recommend a mobile service to someone else? The third reason is to design better mobile services, as well as better techniques for supporting peoples regular recommendation and distribution practices.

OUR RESEARCH GOALS AND METHODS

The existing perspectives of WOM has focused on information about a product/service which is re-told for sharing both good and bad experiences. We decided to look in particular to situations where a recommendation of a mobile service has been done to share positive experiences. We have therefore formulated a working definition for the term *mobile service recommendation*, which we define as *'a person-to-person recommendation of a mobile application or service by communicating qualities of the service, triggering an interest in other(s), eventually leading to the other(s) acquiring and trying out, and possibly using the service'*.

Our main goal of the first phase of the study was to understand the current practices and motivations for recommendations. This would help us set the scene for the further study phases where we can research more detailed recommendation patterns, including the ways by which positive user experiences drives recommendations.

Observing recommendations is challenging because of the difficulty in distinguishing between regular conversations with information sharing tied to a particular product/service. This is in particular true for mobile services that e.g. post (either automatically or manually) the user's preferences, achievements or other information on service use on public channels such as the user's social media networks (such as Facebook, Twitter etc.). Besides experiments conducted to observe consumer reactions to personalized pieces of information (i.e. through e-mail in [3]), surveys are a common method used for eliciting examples of WOM practices. Faced with similar challenges, we chose to do a survey study for initiating our project. We designed a web survey for reaching an international audience to reflect an international market. While we set to capture several aspects to mobile service use, we were in particular interested in the motivations, context and means by which users recommended mobile applications and services to others and were in turn recommended these by others.

The survey included questions regarding the respondents' habits with their handsets, their habits with mobile services, alternatives for describing situations where they recommended/were recommended a mobile service to/by someone else and lastly alternatives for describing their

favorite or most used mobile services.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The link to the web survey was distributed using various mailing lists as well as through public posts on Facebook and Twitter. The link was also distributed to acquaintances who were asked to further spread the link to their social networks and mailing lists. We had a total of 203 respondents, 64,5% male, 33.5% female and 2% other. The countries in which or respondent lived in were Sweden, Finland, England, Germany, Spain, Italy, Netherlands, France, Poland, Ireland, Austria, Qatar, Canada, USA, Japan and China. While the survey included several aspects to mobile service use and recommendation practices, we will in this paper mention two aspects in particular.

Means of recommending

From our collected data, we found a wide variety in mobile service recommendation practices; giving a recommendation over e-mail, over a phone call, face-to-face recommendations, posting information over public channels, during chat conversations on IM services etc. A distinguishing finding was that a clear majority of respondents mentioned face-to-face recommendations as the typical means by which they recommended mobile services to others. In several cases the respondent would not use one means of recommending a service, but multiple, such as complementing the face-to-face recommendation with sending an email or mentioning it again during a phone call. While face-to-face recommendations were most common, the second most common means was sharing the information publicly via social media. The third most common means was by sending information about the service over e-mail, and the fourth most common means was during a phone call. Despite automatically generated invitations becoming more common to embed in mobile service design, it seems they are less used when communicating a persuasive recommendation. When the respondents were asked to think of an occasion where they were recommended a mobile service by someone else, there was again a clear majority mentioning face-to-face recommendations.

Me, you or the service as motivation

The respondents were asked about their motivations for giving a recommendation of a specific mobile service. They were provided several alternatives, such as the service promoting further recommendations, the service design requiring more people to use it, the respondent having a good experience with it etc. The two most common reasons to recommend a mobile service was that the respondent personally had a good experience with it, and that the respondent believed the receiver of the recommendation would appreciate the mobile service. Though there were other motivations such as the respondent being asked for recommendations for a particular mobile service, or that the respondent was trying to impress the receiver of the recommendation.

When the respondents were asked what they believed the motivation was when they themselves received a recommendation of a particular mobile service from someone else, the most common assumption was that the person giving the recommendation appreciated the service. The second most common assumption being that they believed the person giving the recommendation had thought that the respondent would appreciate the mobile service. There were also motivations such as the lack of automatic invites in the service or that the person giving the recommendation had in turn heard good things about the service though other channels.

DISCUSSION

The data from the survey give us valuable insights into users' mobile service recommendation practices. While our findings can not be generalized to any specific target groups or cultures, we find that they give us a good starting point to continue our research from. However, in time of writing, our analysis of the data is still at an early stage hence the short overview provided here. Related to our research and in line with the aims for the workshop, we would like to address and discuss the following questions with the other workshop attendees;

- *What are the design implications for supporting mobile service recommendations?* Given that the survey results emphasize the importance of face-to-face recommendations, what are the possible electronic means by which recommendations can occur in mobile services? How can we better design mobile services to support easy recommendations and the sharing of them? How can positive user experiences with the service be communicated effectively over electronic channels?

- *What roles do people making a recommendation hold, in relation to others that receive the recommendation?* What roles do influencers hold when persuading others to consider service adoption? In what ways does the relationship between an influencer and receiver matter in the context of recommendations?

- *When designing future distribution techniques for mobile services, should we consider additional channels to be included?* With international forums, blogs, social media networks and novel service distribution techniques used by commercial services, it is easy to raise awareness of a mobile service other than through ratings in the mobile markets alone. Should we take this into account when researching on the dynamics of the current mobile service markets? Do we need to consider this when designing mobile services and deploying them internationally through app stores and markets?

- *What ways are there to design recommendation techniques which are alike viral marketing messages, where the recipient will feel motivated to pass on the "virus"?* To make viral marketing -type recommendations more effective, are there ways to transmit emotional

messages over electronic means of sharing? Or is this specifically tied to the relationship between the sender and the receiver of the recommendation?

NEXT STEP OF OUR RESEARCH

In the next phase of our research on mobile service recommendation practices, we will apply a more qualitative and in-depth approach to gain understanding of specific recommendation practices of mobile service users. Eventually, with our research, we aim to help develop techniques by which good user experiences can be shared and valuable mobile services distributed in easy, even fun ways by various users in the global market.

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