

# Aesthetics of Facebook: Observations on the Design of Behavior

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## Hedonic Ensemble

Facebook is an aesthetic artifact. Its design has some elusive quality, a subliminal force that leads users to pleasure and engagement. Its functionality enables human expressions that evoke emotional, cultural, and value judgments. Seemingly trivial information – books she reads, what she is doing now, or her photos with a trendy group of friends – tend to influence complex human behaviors. On closer observation, this property of Facebook reflects a *design* of human behavior. Its visual form is not only important in itself, but also for shaping another type of form that manifests in the experience and behavior that unfolds in its use. It is in this unique form that aesthetics of Facebook are revealed. This chapter outlines some of such unique ways of observing the design of Facebook – the design of behavior.

Artists and designers often advocate for an artifact's pragmatist (or utilitarian) and hedonic (or non-utilitarian) attributes. Hedonic attributes are the ones that provide engagement, excitement, and uniquely personal stimulation in the use of artifact. Hedonic attributes are also the ones that enable individuals to present themselves in a desired way. As we will see later in this text, Facebook is an artifact that is focused on providing such hedonic experiences, rather than fulfilling any practical needs.

Facebook is not a tool or a means to achieve any task, but an end in and of itself for the intrinsic pleasures it provides. It is a social artifact, where a provision for non-utilitarian, inchoate, social dialogue has been meticulously crafted. As dialogue evolves amongst its users, it defines and redefines its own form through the social interaction it provides. Through the growth and continuation of social experience, infinite sources of personal

meaning come into being. It is this quality of Facebook that makes it a wonderful candidate, at par in the league of aesthetic artifacts that have existence for their own sake.

## **Aesthetics in Action**

To understand specific cases of aesthetic influence on our behavior, consider the following:

### **Influence on Unconscious**

The Facebook home page is a thoughtful arrangement of many elements, demonstrating its purpose to focus our attention to the best element at a given moment, and hide the immediately unpersuasive. The page-layout has similarities to the historically-famous persuasive design of *Mandala* (Figure 1a), an artistic collection of number of Indian deities packaged in a small square-space (Ekuan 1998). Meaning in Sanskrit as “having or containing essence,” Mandala consists of the Buddha, the symbol of wisdom, placed in the center, surrounded by numerous subsidiary deities, with the deities of lesser prominence placed in the outermost circle. It is used as a guide to *ideal* spiritual frontier by focusing the attention of aspirant disciples to the specific sacred God. Psychoanalysts explain that Mandala’s symbolic nature can help one “to access progressively deeper levels of the unconscious,” ultimately assisting the viewer to experience oneness with the whole universe. Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961,) founder of analytical psychology, for instance, called Mandala as “the representation of the viewer’s unconscious self.”

The genius of Facebook, like Mandala, also lies in the fact that a mere glance at screen helps us ascertain our position, our target within the scheme of conflicting elements. The layout of each page, like Mandala, acts more than a pretty picture. In a given dynamic state, the pages represent a miniature of our social life, of our unique place in the farther ends of our social network. Through infinite streams of friends’ activities, they help us interpret their lives relative to our own.

Each time we land on our homepage, we are engaged by the ‘News Feed,’ the top stories that our friends indulged in. While we consume the most interesting stories, we see

requests and invitations, hugs and kisses, and advertisements and applications peeking out from here and there (Figure 1b). The whole page becomes like a diagram reminding us of our unique relation to the infiniteness of things going therein. The pages bring in front of us the world that extends beyond and within our minds (Figures 1c and 1d). We are persuaded to interact with the elements that identify with our yearnings and endeavors – people, things or stories that are personally (and uniquely) significant for us. We view consciously, but the viewing experience connects us unconsciously to the social world that exists outside. This phenomenon perpetuates and keeps us to want to come back.

### **Abstractionism and Flow**

Facebook maintains constant newness. Emergence of novelty, along with some thrill and meaning generated on the interface, facilitate a mental state where all of our attention gets totally focused on the activities therein. Social Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi named this kind of mental state “flow,” and defined its characteristics as: openness to new things, increased exploratory behavior, positive feelings, being involved in an activity for its own sake – “A state where time flies,” every action and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, “like playing jazz.”

Facebook aesthetics are crafted to provide such a flow. The Facebook User Interface (UI) does not just demand “OK/ Cancel” interaction, but stimulates an affective involvement from the user. Unlike conventional interfaces, there is some sort of ‘ambiguity’ involved in every interaction. People’s reactions to status updates, photo uploads, or event invitations are never pre-known. Behavioral possibilities are yet uncovered, and chances need to be taken. The unpredictability of others’ responses, rather than the foreseeable, obvious things on the interface brings some sort of thrill, stimulation and novelty in everyone’s experience (Figures 2a and 2b).

Based on the concepts of stimulation and unpredictability, Mihaly also posited that even looking at a piece of art is a flow. The growth of inner consciousness that one gets looking at a painting or sculpture depends on the stimulation it contains: “A lot of art pieces are straightforward, but others provoke some sort of stimulation, and stay in your mind.”

Art history, which is tightly knit with the field of aesthetics, helps us appreciate the proper works of art. In context of modern interface design, it tells the difference between the representation or realism (i.e. looking at) and the represented or abstractionism (i.e. looking through.) While realist art invites appreciation merely by looking at, abstract arts are judged only on being able to ‘look through them.’

The art in Facebook is no different. The logic of ‘art as stimulation’ or ‘looking through’ is apparent in Facebook interface, which is not just a means to mundane, boring tasks, but an exploratory end in itself. It provides a personal lens, a way of reflecting on the circle of life that exists outside the screen. Each visit to the interface is more than just visit, involving a profound mix of personal feelings. There is some sort of affective “excess” in each interaction, making the interface personally meaningful and art-like experience.

### **Hypnotism of Hollywood**

Another form of art lies in Facebook’s ability to persuade like movies. Jon Boorstein, a famous director and scriptwriter, defines the magic of movies in terms of three distinct pleasures, which he calls *visceral*, *vicarious*, and *voyeur’s* (Boorstein 1992, Norman 2005). Each employs a different set of persuasive techniques; each has its own rules of time and space, its own way of shaping our reactions. As we use Facebook, Boorstein’s three pleasures compete within us to persuade:

The *visceral* relates to gut reactions and passions aroused in us – the thrill of seeing a friend on a rollercoaster, visiting the Great Wall of China, or flaunting a bright dress in a party – ephemeral sensations, not emotions (Figure 3a.) Visual prominence exerts extra visceral appeal. Facebook rotates our friends’ albums each time we visit: today one friend is prominent and others are diminished; tomorrow someone else shines.

Visceral persuasion is evident in people’s desire to express themselves in creative ways. People have mental pictures of how it will feel like in different situations. Facebook offers them a vent, a limitless expressive platform. People attempt creative profile pictures (Figure 3b,) and convey their dream personas or looks: how they will look when they grow old, for example. They comment on their looks, and persuade others to participate (Figure

3c.) Facebook provides dialogue-boxes right next to the picture, making interaction irresistible. It takes only a few clicks, and users have innumerable ways to insinuate what they otherwise cannot say in real relations.

Visceral often leads us to the *vicarious*, which is the deeper level of persuasion. At this level, we see with heart: seeing someone having dinner with a woman of our dreams, for instance. If vicarious experience is projected well, we experience others' activities as if we are participating in them ourselves. We want to jump into our friends' situations, and judge that situation for ourselves. Vicarious experience persuades our yearning to matter, to be taken seriously, to have our emotions count.

It is worth noting that visceral and vicarious persuasion coincides with psychological concept of *identification*, i.e. an unconscious mental process through which individuals make part of their personality conform (relate) to the personality of another. Design of Facebook facilitates our identification with friends and their activities. In movies, characters are carefully designed and skillfully shot to identify their condition in the movie with viewer's emotions; on Facebook, people strategically exhibit their positive identifications. They improve their standing by posting their best pictures, linking to high-status friends, becoming member of esoteric networks, or making calculated decisions about listing hobbies or favorite movies.

Finally, the *voyeuristic* level is that of the intellect and mind. This is where we reflect on the stories of our friends, and come to logical conclusions. As Boorstein points out, the "voyeur's eye is logical, reflective, picky and literal." While watching a movie, the voyeur in us is mindful of the most mundane concerns: "How did he get hold of the pistol?" "He's already used all six bullets; how can he still be firing?" Unlike sensations or emotions, this level is about hard information.

The Facebook profile page (Figure 4) presents a parallel to the voyeuristic movie experience. This is one of the first, and most often used, Facebook pages that we see before approving a friendship. If an activity or membership in a network leads my friend to a coveted job, I will think and be convinced to join that network too. Perceptions about a person's trustworthiness, conveyed through the profile page, lead to increased trust for

information, increased acceptance of advice, and increased belief in the person's overall social activity on the site (Fogg 2002, 2002a, 2003.) Voyeuristic level is also the level which compels us to compete or cooperate with, or recognize others.

## Conclusion

The diverse perspectives presented above intend to broaden the reader's understanding of persuasion on Facebook. It is intended that readers move away with a conceptual understanding of aesthetics, and its role in making the Facebook compelling. Facebook is an important cultural artifact of our era. Its psychological strategies are changing our social lives, the business and the world politics. While it is being studied from various angles, including technology and marketing, this text attempted to observe it through the lens of aesthetics.

Although common notions of aesthetics mean beautiful look and feel, aesthetics of Facebook are grand and deep. By playing on the principles of hedonism and human psyche, Facebook influences our behavior. With aesthetics as our guide, there is no reason that the subject of persuasion (on Facebook and beyond) should remain fuzzy. For the design strategy of Facebook, the *design* of behavior might become an important and mainstream innovation approach that will guide the growth of the social web itself!

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Figure 1a: Mandala



Figure 1b: Facebook as compared to Mandala: News Feed corresponds to Buddha and the rest of page is like subsidiary deities: Someone makes a comment about unusually hot weather in Michigan, and attracts others to participate who are equally disgusted by the bad Michigan weather.

**31 You have an event invitation.**

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 **Career Services** Pre-Thanksgiving Break Networking and Resume Prep Party (Michigan)  
Monday, November 15th, 5:00pm at 412 West Hall

You have been invited by Kumud Bihani.

Add an RSVP note to the event profile: (optional)

Will you attend this event?

[Remove from My Events](#) | [Ignore All Invites From This Friend](#)

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**B You have a (lil) blue cove request.**

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 Anran Leaf sent a request using (Lil) Blue Cove:

Here is a HumuHumu fish for your (lil) Blue Cove. Could you help me by sending a fish back? Together we can fight Global Warming!

[Block This Application](#) | [Ignore All Invites From This Friend](#)

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**🇺🇸 You have an american accent test invitation.**

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 Kumud Bihani sent an invitation using Your American Accent:

Kumud Bihani wants to know which American Accent you have. Is your accent western, neutral, Boston, canadian, or something else? The only way to find out is to take our linguistics test.

[Block This Application](#) | [Ignore All Invites From This Friend](#)

Figure 1c: Users receive invitations and requests on infinite aspects of social life. Although they interact with only what matters to them, but such feeds unconsciously connect them with farther concerns of social life.

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|--|---|---|--|
| <p><b>2008 Free Credit Report</b></p>  <p>Absolutely free instant online credit report and scores! Get yours free now because we don't know how long we'll keep this offer for!</p> <p><input type="button" value="Like"/> <input type="button" value="Comment"/></p> | <p><b>The Slightest Philosophy</b></p>  <p>Liberty Magazine called it "A bold and (wonder of wonders) beautifully written work of philosophy."</p> <p><input type="button" value="Like"/> <input type="button" value="Comment"/></p> | <p><b>Coldwater Labradors VA</b></p>  <p>Beautiful AKC English Lab Pups with Gentle Dispositions! Superior breeding and guarantee program. Shipping available.</p> <p><input type="button" value="Like"/> <input type="button" value="Comment"/></p> | <p><b>10 Mistakes Guys Make</b></p>  <p>The ten most dangerous mistakes you probably make with women and what to do about it.</p> <p><input type="button" value="Like"/> <input type="button" value="Comment"/></p> |
|--|---|---|--|

Figure 1d: Advertisements on Facebook present infinite aspects of social life.



Figure 2a: A user throws open a rambling on English words starting with X and generates excitement among all users whose reactions are not apparent beforehand.



Figure 2b: A user throws open a rambling on elevator experience and generates excitement among all users whose reactions are not apparent beforehand.



Figure 3a: Profile pictures of a user in heroic activities stimulating sensations in others.



Figure 3b: Different profile pictures of a same user demonstrating creativity and expression



Figure 3c: A creative profile picture that creates excitement and 'non-utilitarian' dialogue among users.

| Wall                        | Info   | Photos | Boxes |
|-----------------------------|--|--------|-------|
| <b>Basic Information</b>    |  |        |       |
| Networks:                   | Michigan Alum '07<br>Ann Arbor, MI<br>Ford Motor Company   |        |       |
| Sex:                        | Male   |        |       |
| Birthday:                   | July 3, 1960   |        |       |
| Hometown:                   | Flint, MI  |        |       |
| Relationship Status:        | Married  |        |       |
| Political Views:            | Conservative   |        |       |
| <b>Personal Information</b> |  |        |       |
| Interests:                  | Cognition, Diagrams, Design, Communication, Information Visualization, Usability, Information Architecture, Interaction Design, Information Science, Music, Bicycling, Ruby, Ruby on Rails, Objective C, Cocoa |        |       |
| <b>Contact Information</b>  |  |        |       |
| Email:                      | hmm1@umich.edu   |        |       |
| Current Town:               | Ann Arbor, MI  |        |       |
| <b>Education and Work</b>   |  |        |       |
| Grad Schools:               | Michigan '07<br>MSE, Human-Computer Interaction<br>Northwestern '03<br>MS, Computer Studies in Music   |        |       |
| Colleges:                   | Michigan '88<br>ESE (Computer Engineering)<br>Michigan '88<br>ESE (Electrical Engineering)<br>Northwestern College (Watertown, WI) '82<br>BA (Liberal Arts)  |        |       |
| High School:                | Michigan Lutheran Seminary '78   |        |       |
| Employer:                   | Ford Motor Company   |        |       |
| Position:                   | Senior Business Analyst  |        |       |
| Time Period:                | June 2008 - Present  |        |       |
| Location:                   | Dearborn, MI   |        |       |

Figure 4: An info page of a person that leads to establishing the trust and credibility in the social network.