Hi Kiosk! Help me plz

Performative interactions in a restaurant

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ABSTRACT

We see an increasing number of self service kiosks around us today: self-checkout kiosks in supermarkets, ATMs, vending machines, check-in kiosks at airports, ticketing kiosks, self order-and-pay kiosks in fast food restaurants and so on. These kiosks support contactless payment; customers can go through the process of ordering and payment without interacting with a human being.

The paper explores issues of performance and identity in interactions with a self service kiosk in a fast food restaurant. This is studied in context of a youth populated site-a fast food restaurant at a University Campus. I conducted ethnography in a Jack in the Box restaurant, a popular American chain. The focus is looking at performative aspects in social and public settings. All interactions with the kiosk—the choice of using it to order food, glances, playful interactions, and looks when others are using it— are viewed as exhibits of performance. Even non-interactions and ignorance of the kiosk display an aspect of performance.

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INTRODUCTION

People of all ages, irrespective of their technology skills and background, are expected to use kiosks without any special guidance, tutorials or human help in most places. User-centered design and touch screens are expected to make the kiosks easy to use and self-explanatory. Intended benefits of kiosks include increased efficiency, convenience, quick hassle-free transactions, reduced transaction time and labor, and saved costs. Kiosk usage becomes further interesting when users have the choice of interacting with a person or a kiosk.

Kiosks are undeniably a form of pervasive technology. The use of kiosks is not restricted to formal, lab or office settings. Kiosks are increasingly installed in highly social environments like grocery stores, supermarkets, airports, malls, restaurants, and movie theatres. Kiosks are referred to by other names like terminals, machines, point-of-service, checkout machines, self service technologies(SSTs).

When humans interact with technology, it becomes a 'social process'. Emotions, mental models, and socio-cultural factors begin to matter. When people are given a choice to make around technology, their perceptions and expectations affect their decision. How do kiosks affect the dynamics and interactions of a place? What are the factors that influence the decision to use (or not use) the a kiosk? My research explores the ways in which technology is adopted or rejected. It looks at the underlying motives, expectations, benefits, and concerns of kiosk usage. The paper looks at the human experience of using a kiosk. It looks beyond the technology and efficiency factors, and includes the social factors, emotions, perceptions and performances of people.

WHAT IS PERFORMANCE?

According to Turner, an eminent anthropologist who studied performative aspects of play and ritual, performances are not generally "amorphous or open-ended, they have diachronic structure, a beginning, a sequence of overlapping but isolable phases, and an end." [7]

Schieffelin looks at performance as unique, ephemeral and alive. Performance is as a contingent process due to the social, historical, cultural, spatial and temporal circumstances in which it takes place. "they create their effects and then they are gone – leaving their reverberations (fresh insights, reconstitutes selves, new statuses, altered realities) behind them. It [performance] is also made unique by its quality, for example the extent to which it was successfully carried out in aesthetic or practical terms. Performance, in this sense, is interactive and risky as it may always fail."[6]

Marvin A. Carlson, a scholar of theatre and drama, discusses performance in his book: Performance: a critical introduction. He emphasizes a more conscious form of performance. "The recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior raises the possibility that all human activity could be considered as "performance," or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself. The difference between doing and performing, according to this way of thinking, would seem to lie not in the frame of theatre versus real life but in an attitude--we may do actions

unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this introduces a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance."[3]

Goffman emphasizes the context and dynamics of reception more than the skills and actions of the performer. He explains performance as structured, partially unconscious, improvisations for impression management and framing social interactions. He looks at performance from a social perspective; using it to explain role playing in social situations. He does not emphasize conscious performance in everyday life. "The legitimate performances of everyday life are not "acted" or "put on" in the sense that the performer knows in advance just what he is going to do, and does this solely because of the effect it is likely to have. The expression it is felt he is giving off will be particularly inaccessible to him."[4]

In Jacucci's discussions of performance, "Performance contributes with a situated (place and time), participative, and experiential epistemology. Ways of gaining knowledge (techniques?) need to be reinvented every time anew. This contrasts with positivistic movements thatstrive towards repeatable methods and techniques in design. Performance proposes the individual, the local and the emergent, as opposed to the universal, the general and the static." [5]

My research looks at performance as dynamic, situated and formed 'in the moment'. A performative perspective allows for subjectivity and uniqueness. Performance allows us to view actions/events as a "happening" or a "social experience". Performance emphasizes the role of humans as actors and spectators, both as individuals and as groups.

METHODOLOGY

My research uncovers perspectives of performance and identity through an ethnography of a recently-installed self-order kiosk. The ethnography focuses on the target population of young users. Most of the interviewees are aged between 17 and 25. The site for the study is Jack in the Box, a popular fast food restaurant in a University Campus. I present early findings of kiosk use among a specific demographic – the youth.

I have completed six weeks of ethnographic study, and conducted twenty interviews. My methods include participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations. I would like to expand the research by further analyzing the data, including non-users in the study, and exploring other aspects and research questions.

The semi-structured interviews are focused around the human experience of using a kiosk. They are typically conducted in an open ended way, in the form of conversations and discussions about kiosks. Study participants are encouraged to talk about the choices they make, and their motivations, reasons, concerns, and expectations about kiosk usage. Participant-observation includes hanging-out in the restaurant, shadowing, and close observations of people using the kiosk as well as overhearing casual conversations around kiosks.

THE SETTING

Jack in the Box is a fast food restaurant across the road from University of California, Irvine campus in Southern California. I start with a picture description of the place on any given day. The location of the site attracts many young customers-mostly university students. There are students hanging out in groups, sitting for long hours, eating, talking, and having fun.

The restaurant has facilities like free Wifi internet, and is open 24 hours. These are added reasons why the place attracts a lot of students and young customers. These facilities also make it an ideal place for students to read, study, work on their laptops, and complete assignments, individually and in groups. In addition to counting the number of people at any given time, I also note the number of computing devices being used. At a busy time, one would typically see around twenty-five people, and 10 to 15 laptops or netbooks.

There are two ways to go through the process of ordering food. One is the conventional method of ordering from a person at the counter. Like many fast food restaurants, a customer can go in, order food, get a token number, and wait for his order to be ready. Once the order is ready, the cashier calls out your token number, and you are expected to collect your food from the counter. To make it clear and consistent, I refer to the person at the counter, who takes orders for customers, as the cashier. The other method is via the newly installed self order-and-pay kiosk. The kiosks support contactless payment; a customer can go through the entire process of ordering food without interacting with any human being.

The kiosk has a touchscreen, and has the looks, size and shape of a typical kiosk one sees in grocery stores or for self check-in at airports. The screen keeps changing its display. It commonly shows screens like "Order Here", "Try Me" or "I am Fast and Easy". The kiosk also has audio—a female voice that reads the main text loud in English. Examples of sentences one would hear are: "Would you like to upgrade to a Combo?", or "More Options", or "What beverage would you like?"

FINDINGS: EXHIBITS OF PERFORMANCE

Performance unfolds in everyday actions. It may not always be displayed in grandiose or conspicuous gestures. We can see performance at play in everyday settings in many subtle ways. Ethnography at a fast food restaurant is a perfect example to catch exhibits of performance. As humans, all our actions and decisions, when enacted in a public setting, can be seen as instances of performance. My research identifies two forms of performance.

1. Choices based on Identity and Performance

Kiosk usage becomes interesting when users are presented with the choice of interacting with a person or a kiosk. The site is chosen where both the options are available. At every order, the user makes the decision to order from a cashier, or to place the order in the kiosk. Performance and identity issues are explored in the context of self image affecting the decision. The ethnography explores how perceptions of the students, both as individuals and as a generation, affect their choices and actions.

The youth are commonly viewed as early adopters of technology. They are the technology-savvy generation, who are comfortable with and willing to accept new technologies as part of their lives. They have a passion to try and explore new gadgets and technology innovations. This generation has grown up with the development of cellphones, internet, touchscreens, ipods and social media. They have a higher level of comfort and familiarity with these technologies. These sentiments are expressed in the answers and comments of interviewees.

Study participants reflect awareness and display of the self. Examples are seen in terms of the persons they 'see themselves as' or 'believe themselves to be'. Answers also indicate the persons they 'want to be seen as' or 'who they wish to portray themselves as'. Perceptions of self image are reflected in their attitude towards technology. The students associate themselves with certain traits and characteristics, as individuals and as a generation. These sentiments are seen in their choices, conversations and actions: discussed below are some examples from my findings.

The youth show a sense of being the supporters and promoters of technology. They display a strong sense of accepting new technologies as a part of their lives. As one person remarked," I have grown up with computers...life would seem weird without them".

The youth also reflect a sense of distinguishing themselves from the older generations. The kiosk users often mentioned that they used self checkout at supermarkets too. As one person talked about the idea of having more of such kiosks in public places, he remarked, "It might be a bad idea where there are many elderly people…you know...who'll struggle with things like these...like for some people...it takes forever to checkout groceries and stuff they bought. You just have to wait for long [in line] behind them…for them to get done."

The higher familiarity and comfort levels with technology were seen in the attitudes of study participants. They were pretty comfortable with using touchscreens and self-service technologies.. Generally, users of the kiosk did not have any major difficulties in ordering through the kiosk. They thought it was simple, easy to use, and easy to figure out. "It was as fast as my computer. I knew exactly what I was doing".

Some interviewees said the kiosks were "cool". This may stem from perceptions about technology, computing devices, the latest games, gizmos and gadgets. The possession or ability to operate technology may be perceived as the "in" thing. This reflects issues of performance in the form of impression management and branding of self.

I could observe the eagerness and willingness of the interviewees to explore new technologies. One girl, after the interview, ordered food only so that she could use the kiosk. She said "I just wanna order something..as I want to try [the kiosk] out". The step was less out of the need to order food or out of hunger, but more because of the urge to use the kiosk, as she had not used it before. The conversation got her excited about using the kiosk.

2. Performance at Play: "Just like that" interactions

Another form of performative actions is interacting with the kiosk in play-like ways. I observed many playful interactions with the kiosk. It felt almost as if when people see a touchscreen, they are tempted to touch it. I saw people touching the screen once or twice, and then leaving. One might think that they leave because they struggled with the kiosk, or did not know what to do next, or how to order via the kiosk. On the contrary, most of these interactions are not attempts to order via the kiosk. They do not have a particular purpose. On the surface, they seem like actions to pass time, goof around or have fun when people are getting bored. This is why I call them "just like that" interactions.

These interactions were carried out for a screen or two, and as soon as the cashier line moved forward, the person indulging in these random interactions would move ahead. People did these play-touches as they waited, or when they crossed the kiosk, or even when they were just hanging around the space. These were observed both when people came alone, and in groups.

The interactions were not very long, involved or deep interactions. The line moving forward was not the only time when such interactions come to a halt. The interactions stopped after a screen or two, or in minutes even when the person kept standing in front of the kiosk.

The interactions seem to be forms of playful interactivity.Playful interactivity is explained as any human computer interaction that has at its core no pragmatic goals- in such situations users are more interested in enjoying themselves than they are in achieving a specific task.[2]

DISCUSSION

The title hints at the friendly attitude of the youth towards technology. It uses the shortened form of please; reflecting SMS language, abbreviations and slang used commonly in chats, text messaging and microblogging services. The

youth are actively involved over the internet and social media. They use cellphones, PDAs, gaming and multimedia devices. Activities of young users over the internet, social media, games and virtual worlds reflect various aspects of performance. The role of participants and spectators while using large sized displays has been explored; Opinionizer attempts to reduce social barriers of interaction in public settings.[1]

With a performative perspective, we can look at an event as something more than a mundane, predictable and repetitive act of ordering. Performance gives importance to the role of actors (as individuals and as groups) and spectators. It allows the analysis of the event as a sensing experience. The uniqueness, variations and contingencies of the action are given importance. The act can be viewed as being socially dynamic, constructed in the moment.

An interesting thing about playful interactions is that they are not expected or forced in any way. There is no need or obligation to touch the screen I would like to point out here that touchscreens, for the setting and population in the study, is not an entirely novel technology. There are self-order kiosks seen commonly in airports, university, theaters, grocery stores etc. It is not as if the users are seeing it, or have the chance to interact with it for the first time.

Can we design technologies that seem more like play? Play is natural to most people--they do not need to be taught how to play. If we can build systems, that offer similar pleasure or satisfaction like play, we may be able to reduce the apprehensions and fears against technology use. The work only covers the perspective of the kiosk users. The boundary between users and non-users is getting blurred. There are people who use the kiosk to order, look at it, and interact with it in playful ways. On the other side are people who ignore the kiosk, or deliberately choose not to order via the kiosk. Exploring the attitudes of non-users will provide a comprehensive view to the study.

Ubiquitous computing strives to make technology a part of everyday lives. Interactions with large sized displays, touch screens on personal devices like cellphones and PDAs, tangible and gesture-based devices are becoming common. The workshop offers new perspectives of understanding performance, play and interactions with technology in public settings. The workshop can offer insights into the role and acceptability of technology in society.

What is it about touch screens that tempts people to touch it, even when they have interacted with it before? Is there something about the agency of technology that pulls people towards it? Does technology seem to be hiding some deep, dark, mysteries behind it? Is there a pleasure or satisfaction derived from such interactions? Are people building some superficial connections with technology via such interactions? I would love to answer these questions with further research on this topic.

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