Supporting Life Transitions through Facebook

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Abstract
With over two billion users at various stages and transitions of life, Facebook devotes research and resources into understanding how to support people during their life stages and transitions. This paper explores the typical research process Facebook uses to understand different life stages and transitions, as well as how it takes these findings and turns them into new products and features to best support people as they transition -- from helping someone cope with the loss of a loved one through memorialized accounts to technology to help someone find their life companion using Facebook Dating. We're excited about the potential to join the Life Transitions and Social Technologies workshop at CSCW to learn from others' research on ways technology can be more supportive of people during transitions, to share our own research, and to discuss how academic research can continue to push technology to be even more supportive of people's lives.

Author Keywords
Life transitions; social media; Facebook; research process

Introduction
Facebook has been around for more than fifteen years and has turned into a global platform serving more than two billion people throughout various life stages.

As Facebook has become a place people to turn to during times of transition, Facebook has devoted more research and products for supporting people throughout their life as they move from one stage to the next. Research questions and topics that are top of mind at Facebook involve prioritizing ways to support people throughout various life stages and transitions, assessing how Facebook currently supports people moving between different life stages, and what products can be built to better support life stages and transitions moving forward. This paper will discuss the research process we utilize at Facebook to understand how

Facebook as a product can better support people throughout life transitions.

Facebook's Approach to Researching Life Transitions

Facebook employs researchers who are embedded in teams throughout the company. Our role as researchers is to improve products and experiences in alignment with people's wishes, actions, and values. The goal of this section is to share how product teams at Facebook invest in understanding people's needs and how we translate those needs into products. While there is no one way to build a product or feature, we rely heavily on the following: foundational research, iterative design thinking, and evaluative product design research.

Foundational research

When designing for a product centered on a life transition, the research process starts by understanding the life stage or transition agnostic of product. What is the life stage? What are the associated needs? How many people are in this stage? How do people transition to and from this life stage? What role does or could Facebook play (both positive and/or negative)? This involves a series of efforts including understanding related external research to conducting new research in order to understand the reach and impact of a life transition. Below, we'll explain these in detail.

Literature reviews: We first search our own databases and academic journals for research related to the stage or transition we're planning to design for. We recap the literature for other researchers and product teams so we get a lay of the land for the particular life stage.

Interviews and ethnography: Often times, there are remaining questions about the life transition that we want to understand further, so we conduct new qualitative research to understand the factors that lead to various experiences throughout life transitions, and look for signal into how Facebook could best enhance various experiences on our platform. We rely heavily on interviews and ethnographies with people around the world to understand these various circumstances associated with each life stage and transition, including what it entails, how and why people experience it. We do much of this research ourselves, and where appropriate, work with local and specialized partners depending on the sensitivity of the topic or community, as well as how the Facebook brand might influence the findings.

Large scale surveys: We also sometimes need to scope the breadth and depth of the life transition. This often involves understanding the reach, frequency, and impact of the life transition. We run surveys to get a better understanding of these constructs. We explore how many people are impacted by a specific life transition or stage, as well as who is impacted. We also look at how long they are impacted and how many times throughout their days, months, years, or lives they encounter this experience. Lastly, we look at the various stressors and relivers associated with the life transition, how severe or impactful they may be on a person's life, as well what are the most common forms of support people turn to.

Ideation and Design

Once we have a more holistic understanding of the life transition, we then enter the design phase of creating something that will support people during a life transition. We often rely heavily on experts during this phase, conducting roundtables and workshops where we

often bring together academics, non-profit organizations, and people at other tech companies to brainstorm solutions. We sometimes also conduct more research with people experiencing the life transition to dig into concrete product ideas.

We then conduct an internal design process centered around the life transition of interest. The design process is an opportunity to unite researchers with product team members like engineers, product managers, and designers with the goal of refining current products or designing new products. Researchers often present their research at the start of the design event to anchor the actual design process on people's needs. Researchers stay involved throughout the duration of the design process, co-designing with others, and reorienting the designs as needed. Overall, the end goal of the design process is to create low-fidelity prototypes, ranging in complexity from simple printouts to interactive prototypes.

Product Evaluations
Once we have the low-fidelity prototypes, we initiate usability sessions to garner more feedback on the look, feel, content, and resolution of needs of the products. We continue to iterate on the products until we've reached a good place with people qualitatively. Sometimes we abandon our ideas and start over if we believe the product will not meaningfully support people as intended. When we do decide to launch, we usually make the product available to a small group, and then we understand how the product is doing. Is it doing what we intended? Is there still more room to iterate? Is it making people's lives better?

Similar to the academic world, Facebook researchers share out their research and evaluation of how the product is doing with the company in an effort to understand, improve, and spark new collaborations or inspire products. Even once the product is launched to everyone, it doesn't end there. Researchers and product teams stay dedicated to the product and continuously evaluate how it is doing, read up on new research, and continue to find additional ways to be more supportive.

Facebook Products Built to Support Life Transitions
Many of Facebook's core products are already utilized regularly as people transition from one life stage to another -- from sending a direct message to a loved one to announcing a new major life stage to one's network. Facebook Groups is also becoming more central to the Facebook experience as people turn to groups for their life stages and transitions that many of their closest friends and family members cannot relate [1]. In addition to these products that people can adapt to their life experiences, we've also built new features targeted for very specific life stages and transitions:

- Memories & Archiving
- Take a break
- Dating
- Marketplace
- Jobs
- Memorialization/Tributes
- and more

Here are a few case studies of how Facebook products were built to support specific life stages and transitions:

Memorialization

Memorialization helps support people as they cope with the loss of a loved one. Losing a loved one is one of life's most difficult experiences, and at Facebook we care deeply about the need for support, and understand the importance of community during this particularly sensitive life stage. Research has suggested that Facebook is currently both helpful (e.g., providing ways to contact others who knew the loved one) and hurtful (e.g. unexpectedly reminding people of loved ones in their News Feed) during times of loss. Researchers at Facebook spoke to academic experts and conducted new research to understand how Facebook could best support people and reduce the stresses stemming from loss, and particularly those that could be exacerbated because of social media use [2]. From this research we built features that allow people to decide what happens to their account when they pass away, in which they can delete their account completely or memorialize it so that it becomes a tribute for their life. In addition, people can set a legacy contact who can look after their account and make decisions about it once they're gone. Other changes were made on Facebook to be more supportive of loss and grief in our language and imagery. For example, Facebook's artificial intelligence system was refined to hide a deceased loved one from appearing in places around Facebook, like birthday reminders, to prevent additional distress from seeing loved ones. We're continuing to refine this product further, with new features such as Tributes, a dedicated section on memorialized profiles for family and friends to share their memories of their loved ones.

Take a Break & Dating

We've also invested in features to help people after they end a romantic relationship, as well as a new service to help people when they want to enter back into the dating market. Because breakups can be a very distressful transition time, we've developed the Take a Break tool, which allows someone to hide content and mentions of a specified person from showing up on Facebook. The tool can also be used to 'take a break' from anyone desired.

In addition, Facebook has created a new service where people can transition back into the dating world to meet their lifelong partner called Facebook Dating. Through research, we knew people were coming to the platform for dating, so we've created a dedicated space focused specifically around the needs of those in this life stage (e.g., taking into account safety concerns, and leveraging mutual connections and interests).

Memories & Archiving

Additionally, we have made improvements to how people can curate their current and former digital identities and memories on Facebook. We have conducted extensive research over the past couple of years involving methods such as card sorting, linguistic analysis, and lab studies to understand the taxonomy of memories and needs for reminiscence [3]. Our research has shown that people have a need for private reminiscence of previous life stages, especially after life transitions; as well as a need for curating the best of one's past life stages to showcase to their friends and family. We have turned some of this research into Memories, automated curated videos and photo collages, and Archive for stories. We are continuing to do more work in this space to help people tell the story of the past as they move forward, organize increasingly large volumes of personal content from

various life stages, and share memories with the most relevant audiences from past and present.

Conclusion

We're excited about the potential to come to this workshop to learn from others' research, for inspiration, and potential collaborations. Many of the researchers at Facebook come from academic backgrounds and we understand the importance of this community. In this workshop, we hope to discuss the similarities and differences between research in tech and academia around life transitions – and what we can do to better collaborate in research and product building to make Facebook even more supportive throughout people's life stages. In addition, we can offer tips and guidance on how academic research can continue to push technology to be even more supportive of people's lives including topics to study, ways to research, and thoughts on framing.

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