Pinterest User Experience Report

Evaluating the user experience of new users

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Terms of Reference

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Contents

Introduction

The report details the outcome of a study conducted recently at the request of Pinterest to evaluate the user experience of new users opening an account and 'pinning' items for the first time using the UK Pinterest website uk.pinterest.com.

The study

The study is made up of two parts - the heuristic evaluation conducted by an expert reviewer and the cooperative evaluation reviewed with the aid of volunteers. Combined these two evaluation methods provide an overall picture of Pinterest's user experience.

Heuristic evaluation

The heuristic evaluation (Nielsen, 1995) was conducted to identify and document usability problems by inspecting and evaluating the user interface against a set of established usability principles (heuristics) and was conducted by an expert.

Cooperative evaluation

The cooperative evaluation (Macaulay, 1996) was conducted with the aid of seven volunteers in order to observe their user experiences and gather their feedback by asking them open questions, and requesting that they 'think aloud' to provide a running commentary about what they were doing and thinking as they completed three specified tasks.

Volunteers were aged between 18 and 25 with no previous experience of using Pinterest used their own laptop, in their own home to replicate the way they would normally access the internet.

The tasks

The scenarios for each task were designed to explore some of the main functions of Pinterest.

Open a Pinterest account

As a critical task and gateway to accessing Pinterest it was important to gather first impressions, success rates and the time taken to complete this task.

Create a 'pinned' list of items for your favourite topic

In order to ensure users were emotionally invested in the activity users were asked to create a list of items they were particularly interested in.

Pin items you like from other sites and log out when you are finished

As a primary feature the Pinterest browser button was included in the study and observed prior to users logging out of the system (a critical security feature) to complete the final task.

The findings

The study revealed themes in line with the three tasks undertaken by users including their first impressions of Pinterest.

First impressions

Users were asked for their first impression of the homepage prior beginning the first task. Several studies (Lindgaard, et al., 2006) have shown that visual appeal can be assessed within 50 milliseconds.

100% of users were unsure about the purpose of Pinterest when shown the homepage with only a login box present in the centre of the page. Users also stated the homepage felt cluttered as it was obscured by blurred images.

> *"Things are obscured - I'm not sure why, it's unclear what the site is for."*

Users were also shown the main Pinterest feed after opening an account. Users felt it was unstructured and chaotic with items listed in no particular order making it challenging to locate items of interest.

> *"It would be better if it wasn't mixed up categories."*

Aspects users liked

Users said they liked the images in the feed as they looked interesting. The rounded corners of the design and neutral colour palette felt relaxing. Users also felt the clean design was easy to look at, although the menu doesn't stand out very well.

> *"I like the design, the rounded edges. It feels relaxed and pleasant to look at."*

> *"I like the neutral colours, but the menu doesn't stand out."*

The heuristics

The heuristic evaluation bore similar results the user experiences. The homepage provided minimal information about the purpose of Pinterest, other than the title 'He used Pinterest to start his collection' which did not explain what was being collected. The only element on the homepage was a box allowing visitors to open an account or log in. The background images make the homepage look very busy, but don't serve a purpose.
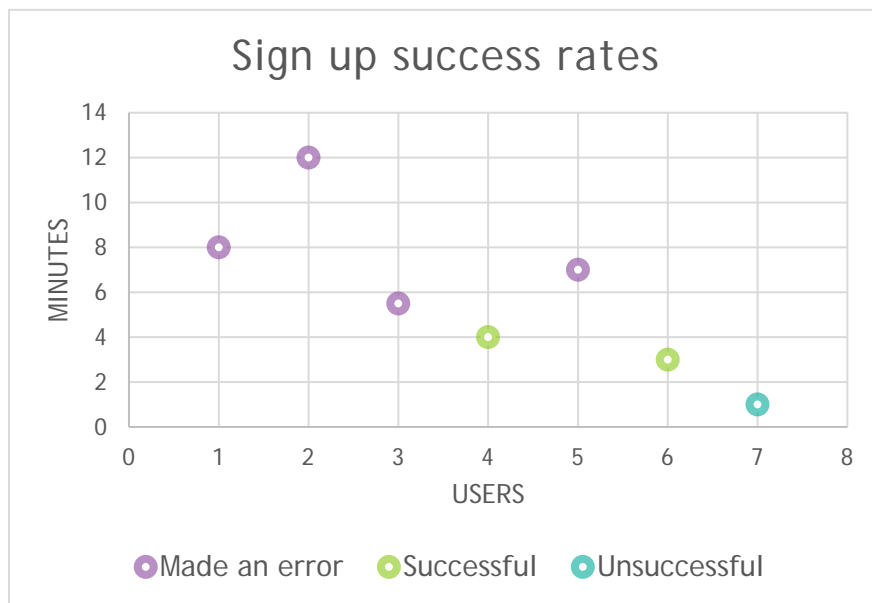
In addition there was no guidance provided to help users on the main Pinterest feed, which looked similar to a mood board. The minimal design though visually appealing did not indicate the functionality of the navigation, forcing the user into a learning curve. The neutral colour palette ensures that images within the main feed look striking and attractive whilst reducing the visibility of some key features within the navigation, such as the menu, updates and search.

Immerging themes

The themes identified during the study aligned with the tasks set for users during the study.

Theme 1: Problems signing up

The success rate for opening a new account was 86%. In contrast the error rate experienced by users opening an account was 71%. Each user who experienced the error selected the red 'Sign up' button on the homepage. The users did not realise that the login fields were also used to sign up for an account. This double usage caused users to make mistakes. In addition the time taken to complete the task was an average of 8 minutes compared to the 3.5 minutes for users who did not make a mistake.

In addition 6 out of 7 users skipped installing the Pinterest browser button because they felt it was too early to know if they wanted to use the service. Users were unsure about the purpose of the application and did not want to clutter their browsers tool bar. Users commented that the 'Skip' link allowing them to bypass the install was hidden below a very large red button and located below the viewable area of the screen.
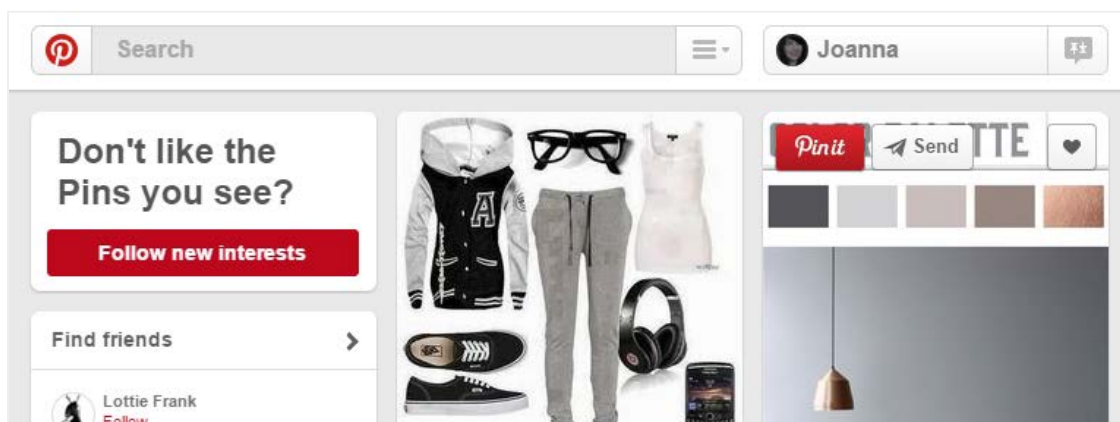
The heuristics

In contrast the heuristics evaluation found the sign up process straightforward with minimal information being requested and each step of the process being clearly signposted. Topics of interest are presented clearly, however it is unclear what will happen once topics are selected. The consultant also installed the Pinterest browser button with no issue.

Theme 2: Tutorial or walkthrough

The success rate for pinning items was 71%. A lower success rate than for opening an account. The error rate experienced by users for pinning items was also lower at 43%. 5 out of 7 users created a board but encountered problems returning to the main Pinterest feed to pin items.

Users found it challenging to create a board to pin items to. The function is located in the personal account section of the website and is not instantly viewable on the main Pinterest feed. There is also no top level menu item linking to the function.

Half the users experienced issues pinning items as there was no guidance for new users. The function was not immediately obvious and users could only access it by hovering over each item image listed on the feed to reveal the 'Pin it' button.

Users accessed the help section of Pinterest to get additional guidance to complete the pinning task, but were unable to locate detailed instructions that would help them. Users commented during and after this task that a walkthrough or tutorial would be extremely helpful.

> *"A walkthrough or tutorial would have helped. The navigation is unclear."*

> *"I'm unsure how to create the board. There's no tooltip help when I hover over things."*

The heuristics

There is no guidance about pinning items after arriving on the main Pinterest feed. Hovering over images reveals buttons allowing users to 'Pin it', 'Send' or like it. Although it is unclear what will happen once buttons are selected, as there is no tool tip or label displayed.

The 'Pin it' button is striking in bright red. When selected a modal appears offering suggestions for boards. However there was no option to create a new board. Investigating the modal revealed that a board could be created by typing a name into the search bar.

Using the search to create a board is more complex than providing an obvious 'Create board' option, and users may not logically search for a board that is yet to been created.

In addition once a board was created it was a challenge to locate. Once located it was challenging to return to the main Pinterest feed. The dashboard may benefit from having additional signposting back to the feed.

Theme 3: Simplify external pinning

The success rate for pinning items from other websites was the lowest at 57%. The error rate experienced by users was also the lowest at 14%. The low success rate indicating that the task may be particularly challenging. This low success rate appears to be due to the fact that 6 out of 7 users did not install the Pinterest browser button. Users were unable to locate a function to reverse the decision and it was not possible for any of the users to install the Pinterest browser button retrospectively after the initial option had been bypassed when signing up to an account.

Users also had difficulty locating an alternative method to pin items from other websites. Users that found and alternative method used Pinterest buttons located on other websites, but this meant first searching for a website that had Pinterest buttons installed on it. Another method users located was the 'Add a new item' option on their Pinterest board. It took a while to locate this option however and many users were unable to locate the function.

One volunteer was unable to pin items from external websites. The volunteer selected items from the main Pinterest feed and opened them in a new window, believing this to be an external website page and then proceeded to pin the item to their board.

> "Sorry, I cannot locate the app to install it or find another way to pin items."

> "I looked in my profile, my settings and even a link called apps and used the help, but I'm unable to pin items from other websites."

The heuristics

Several ways to pin external sources of content were revealed during the heuristics evaluation. The Pinterest browser button is unobtrusive with no change in status or notifications appearing. Upon visiting any website of interest any image could be pinned by selecting a Pinterest button that appeared in the top left hand corner.

Alternatively the Pinterest browser button could be selected revealing a row of images from the website that could be chosen for pinning. There were several options for pinning external content presented in the 'Add a new item' option. Once items were pinned a confirmation message stated which board the image had been saved into.

The consultant did not experience the same challenges as users who had skipped the installation as the Pinterest browser button was installed and utilised without issue.

Additional findings

Aside from the main themes and first impressions, there were some significant additional findings worth noting.

Compatibility issue

The site is incompatible with the Mac Book Pro with Mac OS X. One volunteer experienced a major compatibility error whilst signing up for an account and was unable to complete the procedure as pages were not rendered correctly in Safari browser.

Personal data

57% of users did not feel their age was of relevance and did not understand why Pinterest requested it when users were opening an account. It was unclear to the users that entered data, that the age field was optional and not mandatory.

Logging out

71% of users had difficulty logging out. The 'Log out' option was not immediately visible on the navigation bar, as it was located within two separate menus. Two users were unable to log out of the system and resorted to closing the browser in order to exit Pinterest.

Experiential reflection

After having used Pinterest users felt Pinterest was a similar experience to viewing content posted by others on Facebook and using Google search to view topical content. For this reason 50% of users did not feel that Pinterest had a useful purpose.

In contrast the remaining 50% of users felt that content was interesting because it had been selected by others and it was not simply a list of everything they would find in a Google search and they also enjoyed searching for new and unexpected content.

Heuristic comparison

As shown in some of the findings the heuristic and cooperative evaluation differ. The difference is likely to occur as the heuristic evaluation is a more technical study of the user interface itself rather than an evaluation of the user experience the user interface may produce. However this may be explained by the fact that the consultant is an expert reviewer and therefore more experienced and less inclined to make errors using online systems such as Pinterest. The consultant is also more likely to be impartial to installing applications necessary for the reviewing process itself.

Furthermore the heuristic evaluation is unlikely to replicate all user experiences identified by multiple users interacting with a system as the evaluation was undertaken by only one consultant and so there is a limited variation of activities.

However heuristic evaluation is a valuable tool for gaining a technical understanding of whether a system meets specified usability principles.

Conversely if the goal is to gain a better understanding of user experience then cooperative evaluation is a valuable tool for understanding how users feel and experience a system.

Summary

In conclusion the user experience study carried out for Pinterest using heuristic and cooperative evaluation revealed usability and user experience issues including:

- The sign up button and login fields cause many users confusion
- The Pinterest browser button is challenging to install if skipped
- A compatibility issue that should to be investigated

There are also several updates that can improve the user experience.

- A walkthrough or tutorial would help new users and improve user experience
- Users are not keen about entering personal data they view as unnecessary
- Logging out could be more convenient to avoid leaving a negative impression
- Tooltips and labels would help users to identify navigational elements

Positive feedback was also received regarding the overall style of the system.

- Users like the content which provides unexpected surprise and interest
- The interface style and palette are pleasant for users to look at
- Users enjoyed searching for interesting content posted by others

Both heuristic and cooperative evaluation offer valuable user experience and usability insights although each method differs in focus.

References

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