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Interview Write up

Link to GCloud folder with interviews:

1) RQ: How do personalized recommender systems affect human behavior with respect to trust and safety according to user perception across different platforms?

2) Overall, the answers from the interviews helped us answer our central research question because from the start, we were thinking about the research question while writing the interview script. As a result, we felt that we didn't need to make many changes when we started interviewing because we thought we were obtaining good data.

3) All the questions in our interview, as well as the research question were all about user perception. As a result, there are not many methods other than interviews that can capture data about something that tends to be extremely nuanced. Even if perceptions might be similar, why that perception came to be will most probably be different for everybody. As such, an interview was the best method for this.

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4) Interview Questions
   a) Introduction
      i) How do you define personalized recommender systems? What do they require to work, and how do you think they work?
         (1) For this question, we are trying to get the participant to start thinking about personalized recommendations and their workings at a high level. This is to make sure that we have a general idea of what the participant thinks of the inner workings of a personalized recommender system.
         (2) While this isn't directly relevant to the research question, this question primarily gets the participants thinking about the personalized suggestions and how they come, and what goes into it.

          (3) This gives us a better idea of the general perception of the participants with regards to recommendation systems.

          (4) No changes made to this question.

ii)   Can you name a few platforms in which you encountered personalized recommendations? How often do you use those said platforms?

          (1) This question tries to scope out what platforms they use where personalized suggestions come up.

          (2) One of the things we are trying to find out is whether the perception of personalized recommendations changes across platforms, and this establishes what platforms participants use that we'll ask them about later on.

          (3) This question very directly asks what platforms participants are using, and that gives us valuable information.

          (4) No changes made to this question.

iii)   What is your general perception of personalized recommendations given to you by an app? Do you trust them? How would you define trust?

          (1) Before we go into specifics of each app, we want to get the general perception of personalized recommendations. This provides us with a baseline to which we can compare perception of specific personalized recommendations later.

          (2) This helps us answer our research question because it provides a general baseline for recommendations as a whole, and see if there are specifics that come up later that.

          (3) This question is a good way to find out because it is placed before we get into specifics, and primes the participants to think deeply about the influence of personalized recommendations.

          (4) No changes made to this question.

iv)   Do personalized suggestions affect your time spent (or other resources, like money)? If yes, do you think it's excessive? Does it get in the way of you fulfilling your other responsibilities?

          (1) This specifically delves into the safety aspect of the research question. If the user finds that personalized recommendations do not excessively increase time spent, then they are more likely to not view personalized recommendations as a safety issue because it is not harming their well being (this could be psychological and financial).

          (2) It's relevant because if it increases watch time or causes addiction, then personalized suggestions are indeed holding users captive and the theory mentioned by Seaver would have been correct. Of

course, it is important to keep in mind this is all perception, so some users might be more honest than others.

      (3) This question directly asks the perception of participants with regards to resources spent, and so we are almost certain to get that information out.

      (4) No changes made to this question.

   v) How much do you value data privacy generally? Is there a type of data that you want private more than other types of data? Why?

      (1) This will tell us if the interviewee is aware of privacy risks and also if they are conscious about what data they are sharing and whether what they are sharing depends on the platform.

      (2) This question is regarding safety of the information and if the context affects their privacy concerns.

      (3) The question is open and allows the interviewee to give their opinion.

      (4) No changes made to this question.

b) For each different platforms listed:

   i) Do you think that personalized recommendations are relevant to your interests?

      (1) We are trying to find out what the users' expectations are from a system and whether the users think those recommendations are useful or not.

      (2) It is relevant to our research question because it gives us the users' perception of the utility of a recommendation system.

      (3) It is an indirect way of asking the users whether they believe in the systems to spew out relevant content and to gauge the interviewee's trust in the system.

      (4) No changes made to this question.

   ii) Do you feel that recommendations are biased towards certain types of content?

      (1) We are trying to find out whether the users think that the recommendations try and manipulate the content that they see

      (2) It is relevant as it gives an insight into the users' trust in the system and whether they feel manipulated by the recommendations.

      (3) This is a good way to find this out because it directly asks the user whether they feel the bias in the recommendations or not.

      (4) No changes made to this question.

   iii) As mentioned, personalized suggestions require a lot of personal data. Do you trust those platforms with your personal data? Why or why not?

        (1) We are trying to find out the trust level for each platform and whether it depends on the content of the recommendation (e.g. music, news).

        (2) This is about the perception of trust in the system and if their behavior depends on the platform.

        (3) It reminds the user that personal data is required for making good recommendations and that their behavior may influence the results.

        (4) No changes made to this question.

iv)   Would your personal safety be at risk if there was a data leak?

        (1) This question is about how serious the user is about their data safety and about how much private information they are willing to share.

        (2) This question relates to the perceived trust into a system and how much data they are willing to share..

        (3) This is a direct question about a serious concern. Users should be concerned about data leaks.

        (4) No changes made to this question.

c) General questions

  i)   Are good recommendations worth collecting more personal data? Why or why not?

        (1) We are trying to find out the users views on personal data collection and the extent to which they are comfortable sharing their personal data.

        (2) This question relates to not only user trust but also the users perception of data collection they are comfortable with. It also determines the limits to which a user is willing to trust the system for a desirable output and what the interviewee considers to be personal data.

        (3) This question gauges the trade off between privacy concerns and desirable output.

        (4) No changes made to this question.

  ii)   Do personalized content have a positive or negative impact on society as a whole? Why? If negative, is there a way to make the impact positive?

        (1) This would generally give us how our participants view recommendation systems, and we hope to use this in context of everything provided before to find out what makes them favorable or unfavorable. This will also find out whether participants dislike the current implementation of personalized recommendations, or do they view the entire concept as unfavorable.

           (2) This connects to our research question because this gives us a very high level picture of user perception, and distinguishes between implementation and concept (some users might like the idea of personalized content and are okay with its tradeoffs, but are not okay with current implementations).

           (3) This very directly asks the participant exactly what it is that we want to know, and hope that this concludes a nuanced discussion.

           (4) No changes made to this question.

      iii) Have you personally been notified of a data breach and if so, has that affected your online behavior in any way?

           (1) This will tell us if the participant has personal experience with a data breach.

           (2) This connects to our research with regards to trust and safety. After a data breach trust might be broken. The question is to what degree.

           (3) This question tells us how the participant has dealt with a breach in trust safety and how it has affected their behavior.

           (4) This question was added at the end of the first interview, because the way the interviewee talked about how they handle personal data gave the impression that they may have had some prior experience with data leaks and it appeared to be an opportunity for a response regarding this matter.

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5) Interview Method

For the interviews we recruited six participants using convenience sampling. We conducted semi-structured interviews using Zoom video-conferencing, although we only recorded the audio to keep the participants anonymous. During the recordings, auto-transcription was enabled to aid with the manual transcriptions of the interviews. Each of the six interviews was conducted with one participant and two members of the research team. One member of the research team was the main interviewer and another member was the observer. The observer took notes and was allowed to ask questions at the end of the interview, in case something was missed or required further clarification. Before the recording was started, the main interviewer asked the participant for their consent to the recording. All participants consented and as a result, six interviews were conducted with the corresponding recordings. All interviews were conducted in the same setup using the same method.

6) During the interviews, there were a few topics that were consistently touched on several times. Before getting into the result, it is important to provide a little background on our participants. All six participants were in either undergraduate or graduate programs at the time of interviews. The platforms mentioned by our participants were streaming platforms such as Spotify and Netflix, social media such as Instagram, Youtube, and Tiktok, as well as ecommerce platforms such as Amazon. Given that, there are several prominent topics that came up that were addressed by most, if not all of the participants. Among those topics addressed was the nature of data, company size (which was a factor for both better and worse), echo chambers, as well as bias.

Company Size:
For almost all of the participants, company size was a huge factor in determining how much they trusted each company with their data. Several participants mentioned that they would trust companies like Facebook (as referred to by the participants) and Google with their data because of their sheer size. The participants mentioned that their trust came from the fact that these were very profitable companies that would have a robust cybersecurity infrastructure that would prevent massive leaks. On the flipside, several participants were not at ease with the amount of data conglomerates like Google and Facebook (as referred to by the participants) had on them, and did not trust them. One participant said that no matter how strong the cybersecurity infrastructure, there is always a risk of leak. As a result, they would trust Netflix and Spotify a lot more because streaming companies would have less data about them. Size of the company factored into the safety as well, because more participants mentioned that their safety might be at risk if data is leaked, because Google or Facebook leak would mean a lot more personal data is in danger, as compared to Netflix and Spotify (one user mentioned that their music and show preference is public anyways).

Recommendation Quality:
Most of the participants mentioned that some social media platforms, like Instagram and YouTube were very aggressive with their recommendations. Participants that used YouTube and Instagram said that clicking on one video would completely change their recommendations. Many of our participants were very concerned with that for two reasons. The first reason given was that their recommendation quality was worse. The second reason was that it presents a danger of falling down a rabbithole. Based on what the participants said, the researchers thought that it was similar to the theory presented by [Seaver, which was basically that recommendation algorithms were a trap](#)[1]. By aggressively altering the recommendation based on one click, it seems that the platform wants to have the user fall down the rabbit hole. This did not seem to be a problem when it came to streaming services. However, most of the users thought that there was a bias

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1 Also referenced in the Literature Review

present towards the bigger creators. One of the users, who had an interest in automotives, mentioned that pretty much all recommendations were from the bigger creators in the automotive space.

7) We used convenience sampling for the recruitment of our interviewees. This worked well because we only needed two interviewees each and a small number of interviewees is usually easy to find among family and friends.

8) We think our participant pool was a good mix of people who had a good enough knowledge of recommendations and those who didn't know much about its working. If we were conducting these interviews for research we would diversify our participants a bit more in terms of age and region.

9) If we were conducting interviews for research we would recruit differently. Convenience sampling would not work very well, because we would not be able to get enough participants and diversity. For research, the participants should be more diverse so that the provided answers would cover a broader range. Family and friends may be more aligned to certain technology and viewpoints, therefore in order to get a wider wider spectrum of experience and opinions, recruitment needs to draw from a more diverse audience.

10) Observing fellow group members taught us that there are different ways in which an interview can be conducted, and how the script is followed. The reason for that is when we are interviewing, the focus is solely on data and making sure that all the questions are asked and not really in the method itself. Having someone observe was helpful for the interviewers too because they would get feedback from the observer about how the interview went which helped make the interviewer better.

11) We learned how easy it is for participants' information to slip up during the interview which might encroach on their privacy. This information goes unnoticed during the interview and comes to light during the transcription process.

12) We did not use other resources to learn about drafting, conducting, or transcribing interviews.