



GREEKRANK.COM

How the flaws regarding interactive design principles and user behavior of the social media platform foster superficial communication.

BACKGROUND

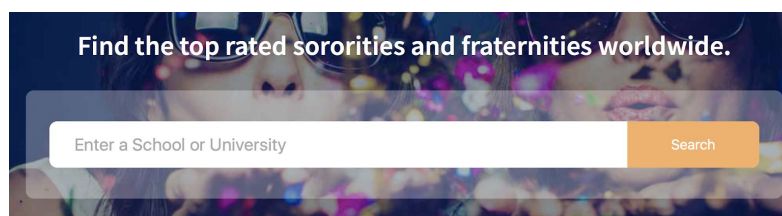
GreekRank.com is a website where college students rank and communicate about fraternities and sororities on various college campuses. It serves the purpose of informing “students, pledges, and rushes what the Greek environment is like on their campus,” potentially giving insight and assistance with decision making through recruitment processes (GreekRank). Users can conduct searches based on both individual Greek chapters and specific universities, or look at nationwide rankings. Through the use of ranking systems, message boards, and discussion threads, the platform’s mission is to provide an environment for the transfer of information among users in a beneficial manner (GreekRank).

I chose this platform for the Occupy Social Media project not only due to my involvement in Greek life here on campus, but also due to the consistently tainted spotlight and negative stigma that fraternities and sororities endure, both of which tend to be exacerbated on this site. The Interfraternity Council governs the social fraternities on campus,

and it seems as though they are regularly dealing with speculated allegations, with hazing being the most prevalent; however, the sororities within the Panhellenic Council of the University are frequently the subject of cross campus gossip. Regardless of the topic, both controversial concerns and general questions are frequently disputed by anonymous users on GreekRank. Though I went into this assignment having never used GreekRank and with very little background information on this particular social media, I was aware of the predominantly negative tone used on the site's discussion page, as many users utilize the site as a means for rumors and criticism.

This supposedly pessimistic environment is what was the driving factor for the goals of my presence; I hoped to post content that promoted more positive responses and advocated for a more constructive online environment for Greek life informavores. Additionally, I knew that people tended to post their own opinions in discussion sections and rarely consider the positions of other users. With that, I hoped to post discussion inducing topics and eventually mediate meaningful conversations between users. Due to the fact that I've been through sorority rush in the position of a "Potential New Member" and on the recruiting side, I assumed my background would allow me to relate to a multitude of the users on the site and help me to communicate in a significant manner with useful information.

Through the use GreekRank, I found that I wasn't able to meet these qualitative goals even slightly, and that the design principles of the site and the user behavior of those posting on the website will continuously promote and environment for inconsiderate and negative interactions. There are a myriad of flaws in terms of both interactive design of the platform and the social design principles regarding encouraging contribution and regulating behavior. These are tied in with the lack of civility within user behavior, affirming the claim the website is not built to enable a steady flow of beneficial information among users.

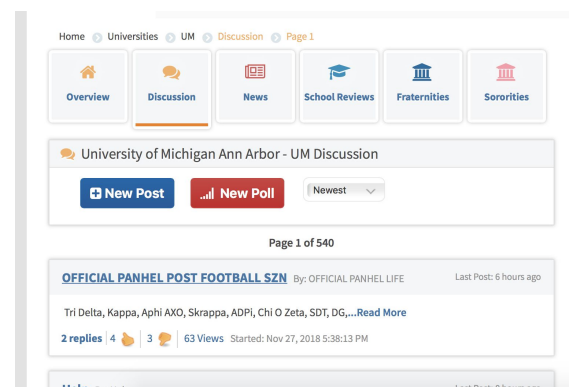


ANALYSIS OF DESIGN COMPLICATIONS

User Experience Design Issues

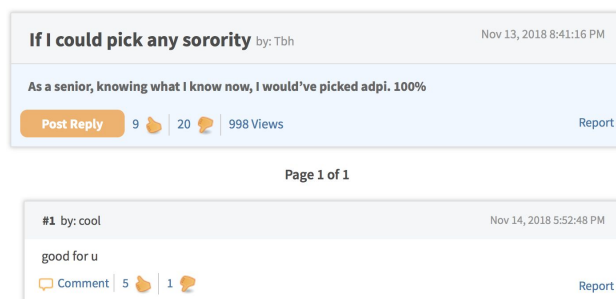
One of the major problems that inhibited my meaningful presence on GreekRank was the interactive design structure of the website and the usability principles it projected. According to the International Organization for Standardization, user experience is defined by the as “a person’s perceptions and responses resulting from the use and or anticipated use of a product, system or service” (Ergonomics of Human-System Interaction). User experience and its qualifications are used to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of a particular service, and in this case, the proficiency of GreekRank. A simpler analysis of this idea is used by conducting a heuristic evaluation, a term coined by renowned web usability consultant Jakob Nielsen. He defines it in his article entitled “Finding Usability Problems Through Heuristic Evaluation” as a “method for finding usability problems in a user interface design by having a small set of evaluators examine the interface and judge its compliance with recognized usability principles (the ‘heuristics’)” (373). There are ten different heuristics involved in Nielsen’s evaluation and they are often used as general guidelines to find faults in services or as he explains, “the goal of a heuristic evaluation is the finding of usability problems in an existing design” (Nielsen 373). The flaws of the usability principles in the design of GreekRank are highlighted by these heuristics and they help to explain why discussions cannot flourish on the site.

One particular heuristic involving user control and freedom claims that the design must have a “clearly marked ‘emergency exit’ to leave the unwanted state without having to go through an extended dialogue” (Nielsen). The design of Greekrank offers an “exit” however as show in the figure to the right, the only way to revert back is located in the top right corner with each opened page, making it very difficult for users to find, especially those who are



inexperienced. Additionally, the discussion page is formatted in a way that the top posts are those that received the most recent commentary, however if you scroll to one of the vast amounts of discussion posts with in the 540 pages and wish to “exit,” you are automatically redirected to the most recently edited discussion on the top of the first page. I found it very difficult to maintain meaningful discussions and facilitate conversations on my discussion posts due to this failing heuristic. With such a mass amount of posts, this type of redirection is very inefficient for users trying to view the input of others, and fosters their single minded behavior due to the effort and persistence required to find old posts.

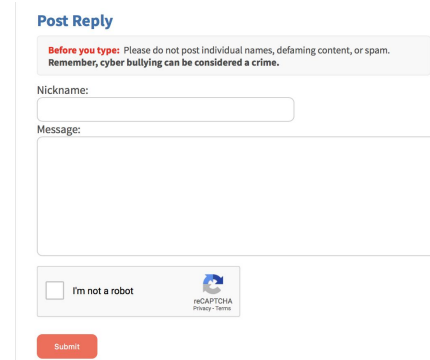
Another one of Nielsen’s heuristic Greekrank failed to achieve was one regarding the visibility of the system status within the interface design structure. Nielsen claims that the website “should always keep users informed about what is going on, through appropriate feedback within reasonable time” (Nielsen). GreekRank fails at this as well, as there is no way for it to notify the user of reactions to their submissions whether it is a “view,” “like,”



“dislike,” or an actual response. The posts are formatted like the image featured to the left, with a subject, description, and the respective responses. Users have the ability to reply without having their own account, but even if they are registered with the site,

there is no notification setting that alerts them of these responses. Another heuristic that capitalizes on the faults of the design principle regards the consistency and standards of the system. Nielsen explains that the interface design of the system should make it so the user doesn’t have to wonder whether different words, situations, or actions mean the same thing” (Nielsen). Due to the fact that Greekrank enables guest users to interact on the site without registering, they don’t require anyone to use a consistent name in any of their submissions. For example, my username on the site is umichgreek123, however through using the social media platform, I quickly understood that with each reply, users obtained a different name

pertaining to that particular post. When beginning to create a submission or respond to a post, the first prompt the user is given is “nickname,” as shown in the figure to the right, allowing them to choose whatever anonymous screen name they prefer, lacking consistency in the profiles of the users. The combination of difficulty finding previous posts as mentioned in the user control and freedom heuristic with the lack of feedback and consistency makes maintaining discussions and eliciting responses on GreekRank incredibly difficult, therefore fueling the ineffectiveness of my goals.



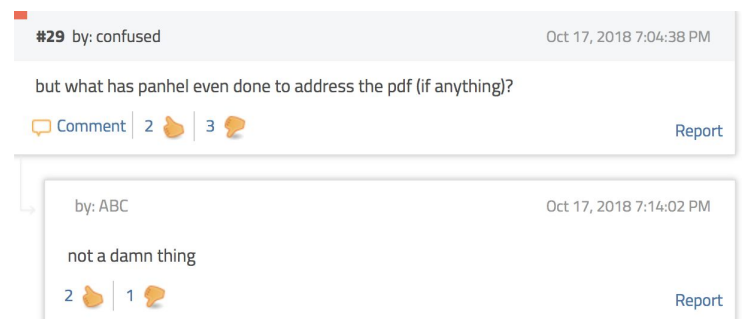
The screenshot shows a 'Post Reply' form. At the top, there is a blue header 'Post Reply'. Below it is a red warning message: 'Before you type: Please do not post individual names, defaming content, or spam. Remember, cyber bullying can be considered a crime.' The form has a 'Nickname:' label followed by a text input field. Below that is a 'Message:' label followed by a large text area. At the bottom, there is a checkbox labeled 'I'm not a robot' next to a CAPTCHA image. A red 'Submit' button is at the very bottom.

Social Design Issues

The design principles that permit the efficient flow of information within online communities are not just limited to the usability principles; the social science behind the design principles also are necessary to consider for quality communication. Though the social media platform meets some of the social design standards, once again, the flaws in GreekRank became quite apparent and outweighed the successes, as they inhibited the flow of useful information. As Paul Resnick and Robert Kraut explain in their book about successful online communities, the social platform should “integrate newcomers, encourage commitment, regulate behavior when there are conflicts, motivate contributions, and coordinate those contributions to maximize benefits to the community” (3). In terms of starting a new community, Resnick and Kraut explain that the social platform should have a “rich inventory of content that attracts new members,” and with 540 pages of discussion material on just University of Michigan’s page, Greekrank greatly exceeds this requirement (3). It is in the following steps of social design where Greekrank begins to fail. Attracting and socializing new members of a particular community is an important part of maintaining the success of the online environment, and one of the challenges in doing so is identifying and encouraging “potential members who have the characteristics, skills and motivations to contribute” (Kraut and Resnick 3). Additionally, these online communities should look to “screen out

inappropriate members,” and GreekRank is not successful in doing either (Kraut and Resnick 3). As previously mentioned, users are enabled to participate in discussions and respond to posts as guests of the site without actually registering for an account; therefore, there is no requirement or assessment of the user prior to posting, thus making it impossible for them to eliminate users deemed inappropriate.

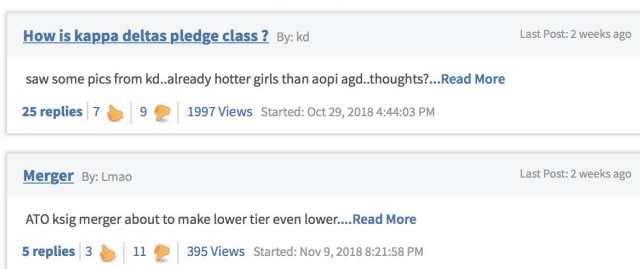
In terms of encouraging commitment to the online community, it is necessary for the users to feel an attachment to the social media platform and the users with which they interact. This is key to maintaining successful and efficient flow of information, as “commitment underlies members’ willingness to stay in the community and contribute to it,” meaning it reduces their likelihood of leaving the online environment, a result that would lead to a reduction of information on the site (Kraut and Resnick 4). On GreekRank, there is no incentive for staying involved in the community, as everyone who posts remains anonymous and obtains a different “nickname” with each post, therefore making it impossible to create meaningful interactions and build positive relationships with those in the community. Additionally, because of its faults in the visibility heuristic and the lack of feedback users receive on their posts, there is nothing drawing the user back to the website or even reminding them of their interactions, even if their content generates a lot of responses. The figure to the right features one of my responses to a particular discussion post (my nickname for this post was “confused”) attempting to develop a



discussion; it also shows the response generated by my post (2 “likes,” 3 “dislikes,” and a reply). Despite having an account on the website, I was not made aware of any of these interactions. For users only using the site for individual thoughts and comments, the lack of notifications and feedback make it very easy to forget about their singular submissions, thus

reducing their likelihood of constantly being involved and contributing to the online community.

One of GreekRank's major faults in terms of social design principles is the absence in their capability of regulating behavior. Resnick explains that "most large online discussion groups - especially those that deal with controversial topics - attract trolls, people who post controversial, inflammatory, irrelevant, or off topic messages to provoke other users into an emotional response" (Kraut and Resnick, 5). This concept of trolling is directly applicable to the social design of GreekRank.com, as most of the content posted is very opinionated and emotionally charged, and elicits the same kind of responses. Due to the fact that the site is entirely based on the premise of ranking sororities and fraternities, the majority of the



discussion posts are simply the user's personal views on where each chapter should fall, which tends to be provoking material in itself. However, the figure to the left gives examples of users' contributions that are not solely a ranking of the "top"

sororities and fraternities, but more vain material. In "kd"'s post, they are only valuing and comparing particular sororities by their looks by claiming one New Member class has "hotter girls" than others. In "Lmao"'s post, they state their opinion that a particular action will "make a low tier even lower," which is also controversial and negative message, but still typical for the site. Resnick and Kraut claim that the driving forces that facilitate this trolling behavior are the user's ability to remain anonymous and enter or exit as they please, both of which GreekRank enables (5).

ANALYSIS OF USER BEHAVIOR ISSUES

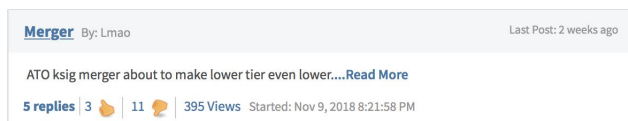
Though the user experience design principles of GreekRank contributed to the lack of meaningful and maintained interactions, the user behavior and norms of the site also inhibited

the flow of useful information. According to Jay Hmeilowski and colleagues, “we are currently living in an age of online incivility,” which directly epitomizes what occurs on GreekRank (1198). While civility is defined broadly as “civil behaviors that enhance democratic conversation,” incivility is considered the opposite (Papacharissi 259). There are various forms of incivility, but three of the most predominate examples on GreekRank are histrionic, insulting language, and flaming. Histrionic incivility refers to the deliberate use of exclamation points and upper case letters, while

flaming involves habits engaging in aggressive behaviors online with a “can’t be turned off” mentality (Teplovs). In the figure to the right, both histrionic incivility and flaming are portrayed with the use of the uppercase letters



and redundancy. This is obviously a very single minded and opinionated user, voicing their thoughts in manner that is unwelcoming to discussions, which is a common theme on the site. Incivility in the form of insulting language can include name calling, mockery, character assassinations, and condescending language, which is the most prevalent in this case



(Teplovs). The figure to the left features a common tone of the posts on the site, comparing chapters and demoralizing the perceived lower chapter. There

tend to be little evidence in most of the opinionated ranking besides the user’s own opinion on the looks of the sororities or parties thrown by the fraternities; almost never is there more substantial evidence to back their argument, nor the invitation for a discussion involving other opinions. Due to the fact that these types of uncivil interactions occur so frequently on the social media platform, it then becomes considered an acceptable behavior or norm by the users, which in turn creates a perpetual cycle of incivility (Hmielowski 1198). Zizi Papacharissi, head of the Communications Department and professor at the University of Illinois, explained the detrimental effects that this online behavior evokes as “offensive verbal

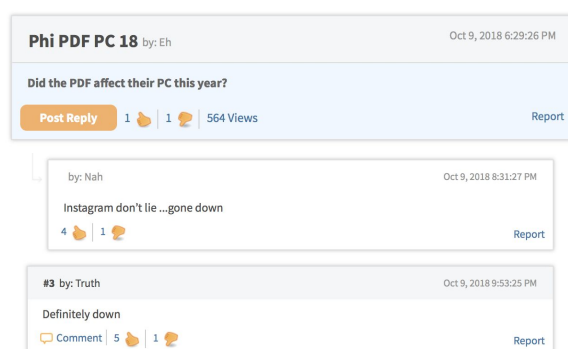
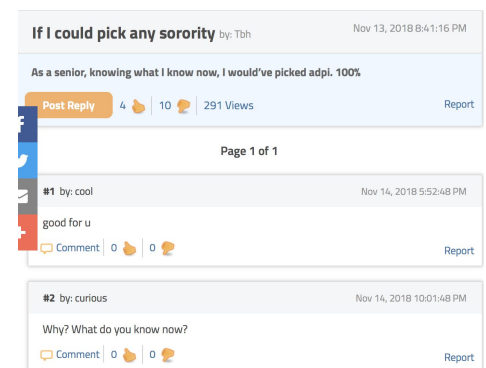
exchanges and verbal manipulation have frequently endangered the cohesiveness of online communities” (269). She also explains how the anonymity component of social networking sites completely eliminate the boundaries of the user’s actual identity in real life, exacerbating the incivility issues. The uncivil behaviors demonstrated by the users on GreekRank have essentially destroyed the possibility for an information sharing environment, as the negative, aggressive, and opinionated tone from flaming, histrionic incivility, and insulting language dominate the site.

MY INTERACTIONS

As previously mentioned, my interactions on Greekrank did not go as I intended. I created an account (though I eventually found it was unnecessary because the site enables anyone to post from any screen name), and observed interactions for a week on the University of Michigan discussion page before my first post. I quickly realized that it was not necessarily a “discussion” page at all, it was simply users spewing their opinions on who the best fraternities and sororities were, and primarily disregarding any of the other posts. While it was difficult to track users and interactions because of the usability design principle flaws, I began to post in accordance to what I perceived as the norms. For the most part, my posts intending to create and facilitate discussions were disregarded entirely and left with no responses. For example, in the figure to the right, I responded with the screen name “curious” in hopes of initiating a discussion, but the post got buried by a myriad of others, leaving my contribution without any interactions. I noticed that some of my discussion posts generated more responses than my comments on

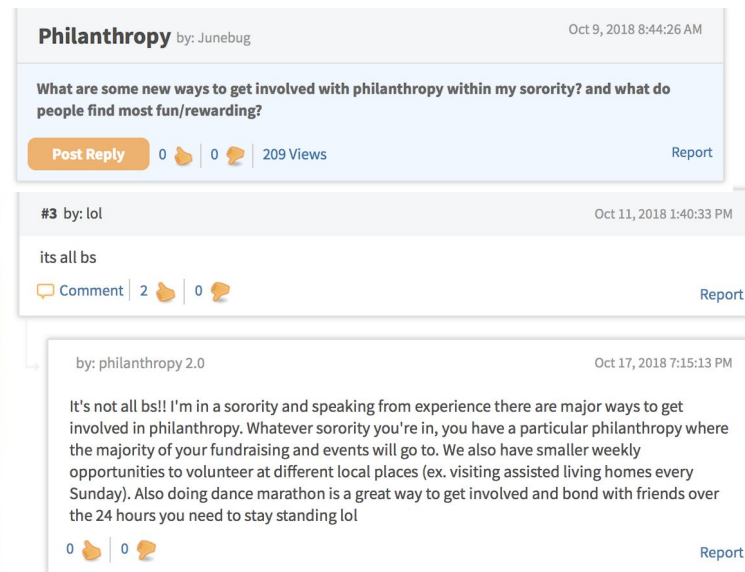
other users’ posts,

but the replies were generally condescending and fit the tone of the majority of the content on the site. The figures to the left feature one of my



discussion posts (with the screen name “Eh”) and the responses I received. I attempted to create a discussion inducing post that was relevant to the topics being discussed on the site at that time, however the responses about that particular sorority’s new member class only valued them on their Instagram pictures.

Another goal I had was to try to bring a more positive tone to the site and combat the negativity. In the figures to the right, a user (“Junebug”) is shown inquiring about philanthropic opportunities within Greek life, while another user (“lol”) completely patronizes them and their post. However, their negativity generated more positive feedback than my attempt at supplying optimistic information (with screen name “Philanthropy 2.0”), furthering the point that the online community on this website does not enable or encourage the flow of information or meaningful interactions.



CONCLUSION

I went into the Occupy Social Media project with an open and optimistic mind that I could engage in meaningful interactions and create a more positive environment on this site. After interacting on in for several weeks, I found that the user design principle issues and the social design issues that the site manifests makes it difficult to build a cohesive online community with a stable flow of information. This project and my interactions opened my eyes and unfortunately enhanced my prior notions about the superficial and patronizing content on GreekRank. It wasn’t until I interacted with the users on the site when I realized that the uncivil behavior used on the site is so common that my individual behavior would be far from enough to provoke a change.

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