Chapter 98
Motivation in Online Environments

Victoria C. Coyle
University at Albany/SUNY, USA

Dianna L. Newman
University at Albany/SUNY, USA

ABSTRACT

As the number of Internet users grows, and the opportunities for online activity increase, it is worth considering what motivates or drives people to participate online. Considerable time and effort are spent in online environments; users produce content, play games, and create or maintain relationships. Motivation to participate in online environments can be influenced by the appealing qualities of technology and instantaneous nature of the Internet, which provide incentive for users to create or maintain social connections, seek entertainment, or generate and distribute creative content. Research from the learning sciences, communication sciences, and sociology provide insight into user motivation in online environments. Scholars in these varied fields study the relationship between motivation and online engagement, examining user variables such as personal interest and goals; social and psychological factors that motivate users to fulfill personal goals or needs; and the creation of affiliations that have online as well as offline benefits.

INTRODUCTION

Motivation describes a psychological state characterized by persistent attentional focus, a state in which an individual experiences an inherent satisfaction of the activity at hand; as it relates to behavior in online environments, the attentional foci include the online environment, the media, the context, or goal. Engagement in an online environment can consume time and attention, and for users, the involvement is internalized and in some way pleasing and rewarding. For some individuals, online engagement may be driven by rewards or situational interest; for others the activity may be obsessive or compulsive. Problematic engagement will not be discussed in this article.

OVERVIEW

In a 2009 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, 74% of American adults reported using the Internet, with 60% of American adults connecting to the Internet using broadband connections, and 55% connecting wirelessly (Rainie, 2009). Jansen (2010) reported that in 2010, 58% of Americans reported researching products and services online. In 2011, more than 50% of American adults used social networking sites to connect with friends, family and co-workers. Six years prior, in 2005, only 5% of adults used similar sites (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). Technology development has provided myriad of tools to access online environments and activities. Users participate with whom they want, when they want, and how they want; and users are choosing to access online environments more frequently than ever before. User control, or autonomy, over choice of modes and varied purposes provide elements necessary to motivate or continuously engage individuals in online environments. Aside from the novelty of the technology, user control includes, but is not limited to choices of hardware (personal computer or tablet, cell phone, game console, etc.), mode of communication (video conferencing, voice, e-mail, text, etc.), selection of activity (sharing by creating or receiving content, internet surfing, gaming, reading, etc.) and context of use (education, communication information seeking, entertainment, etc.). Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Games (MMORPGs) support hundreds of thousands of users simultaneously. Programs that allow creation and publication of personal work are inexpensive and readily available at the touch of a finger; distribution of personal work can reach millions of online viewers instantly. Social Network Sites (SNS) allow individuals to create a profile to be shared with members of public or semi-public networks, creating and maintaining relationships that also may be experienced offline. The nature of the Internet provides a motivational aspect in around-the-clock access, allowing participation at the whim of the user. Research into user motivations in online environments can be found in different disciplines including psychology, information sciences, communications sciences, and organizational science. There is often significant overlap between theories of motivation, but each theory offers unique insight into the user's motivation to engage in online activities. Turkle (1984), an early scholar of online environments, has studied social networks and mobile technology; Bartle (2004) pioneered research on virtual environments and game player personality; and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), proposed "flow" to describe a psychological state of immersion, a characteristic that is especially applicable to online motivation. Current scholarship in online motivation is being conducted by Joinson, director of the Interactions Lab at the University of Bath, School of Management. Joinson's interests extend to privacy and trust as they relate to the Internet and online environments, as well as the use of technology for communication, relationships and social interactions. boyd, working with both Microsoft Research New England, and the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, is providing thoughtful research on SNS, that emphasizes teenage social activity in networked public spaces. While Deci and Ryan have contributed significantly to motivation with their self-determination theory, their work also extends to online environments where they have collaborated with Rigby and Przybylski in the area of motivation and online gaming. Yee, with the Palo Alto Research Center, is providing scholarship on online games and immersive environments. Ball-Rokeach, Jenkins and colleagues at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism provide insight into motivations for online communications. The non-partisan Pew Internet & American Life Project directed by Lee Rainie, conducts ongoing analysis of trends in Internet use, technology use in America.

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