

Chapter 12

A Systemic Approach to Online Sharing Motivations: A Cross-Disciplinary Synthesis of Rhetorical Analysis and Gift Research

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this conceptual chapter is to present and argue for a cross-disciplinary and systemic approach to the examination of motivations for sharing digital media objects via social mediating technologies. The theoretical foundation of this approach is built on two social theories from rhetorical analysis (Burke's pentad) and gift research (gift systems), respectively. A synthesis of these two theories provides an approach capable of producing more coherent and contextually grounded insights regarding online sharing motivations. The reason these two theories were identified as useful is that they acknowledge and incorporate social and contextual factors. This is important to overcome the assumption that motivations to share are detached from the specifics of actors, situations, and sociotechnical means. As such, this cross-disciplinary combination challenges the limited, but common approach of trying to identify generic motivations for contributing to virtual communities. Instead, this chapter argues for a consideration of situated and contextual motivations for contributing by highlighting the conceptual questions what, to whom, how, where, and finally, why. In conclusion, the chapter fills a gap in the literature on online motivations mainly because current models focus on motivations as self-containing. Instead, this chapter suggests to consider sociotechnical means, types of relationships, values of media objects, identity, or culture in cohort.

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INTRODUCTION

The question “why do people contribute to online communities?” has gained much attention from scholars interested in the incentive structures of Internet use. However, this generic question ignores the many contextual (social and technical) differences that the plethora of social network services of today enables. As such a systemic approach, that does not presuppose one specific incentive structure as more prevalent than others, seems viable in a context where media objects, social relations, technology, norms and markets co-exist. This paper proposes such a systemic approach.

Over the past decade we have seen an explosion in everyday, recreational social networking activities, applications, communities and services. Blogs, wikis, social networking, social bookmarking and media sharing are only some of the genres enveloped by the neologism social media. A central activity to all these genres of communication is, in a large sense, the sharing of various types of digital media objects (e.g. photos, movies, books, music files). By distributing artifacts, expertise, bandwidth and storage in connection to personal and social information these networks are bound together by the ties sharing creates. Thus, the emerging economy of sharing via social mediating technologies holds elements of both exchange and social bonding as well as self-centeredness and other-orientation. With the network effects of today it may well be that acts that are initially perceived as selfish may contribute to other-oriented benefits. As such, the notion of socially embedded (i.e. unspecified, other-oriented and focused on relationships) economies is gaining analytical traction, partly as a critique of pure transaction-centric markets (i.e. contractual, self-interest-maximizing and exchange-centered).

Few theorists adequately acknowledge social motives that transcend the gain imperative and instrumentalism, arising instead from social em-

beddedness in local communities, where individuals and groups are understood primarily as a part of social order. (Varman & Costa, 2008, p. 141)

As indicated by this quote much research on sharing motivations has been devoted to attempts at understanding sharing incentives in general, and somewhat counter-intuitively, by researching them as an isolated social phenomenon. The main drawback with such an approach is that it does not make the necessary connection between users, tools, relationships and environments. So, while many studies have been interested in understanding why people contribute to online communities in general, this chapter suggests that motivations are better understood through a systemic approach that can be applied to specific social mediating technologies. Consequently, the research question for this chapter is: how can we synthesize a model that approaches sharing motivations in a systemic way (i.e. that acknowledges social order and embeddedness)? Without foregoing the analysis, this paper will amalgamate a systemic conceptual framework by relating two partly overlapping, but mainly complementary theories on human motivation.

BACKGROUND

The technologies used to mediate human interaction are increasingly cheap, powerful, mobile and pervasive. As such, digital media objects are also becoming ubiquitous. Whether we use smartphones, netbooks, tablets or desktop computers to access the Internet, social networking sites, such as Facebook, are becoming hubs for sharing digital media objects. This paper focuses on social networking sites (SNS) because of their central position in everyday media use. SNS can be defined as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a

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