The Role of Status Seeking in Online Communities: Giving the Gift of Experience

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This article examines online gift giving in the form of opinion, information, and advice that individuals post on websites. Research has highlighted altruism and reciprocity as the key motives behind such gift giving. We argue that informational gift giving is also strongly driven by status and status seeking, and that status sentiments are more likely to sustain virtual communities. Using theories of status seeking and self-presentation, we investigate the ways in which consumers construct status in online consumer communities. The data reveal insights into the strategies behind constructing a digital status and the rise of online systems to promote celebrity status within online communities.

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Introduction

He who brings me news of a great thought before unknown presents me with what is always an acceptable gift.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

The rise of the Internet has gone hand-in-hand with the prominence of the concept of “virtual community.” From the outset, the concept of virtual community gained wide currency in part because of its utopian resonance. Many observers were struck by the voluntary and democratic nature of virtual communities. The online practice of strangers helping other strangers with advice and information spoke forcefully to long-standing images of idealized community life of generous mutual aid. At the practical level, as well, the evidence that purchase decisions are influenced by online opinion and information suggest that trust—an important attribute of offline communities—can also emerge in virtual communities despite the relative anonymity of online interaction (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2003; Dellarocas, 2004; Senecal & Nantel, 2003).

Not surprisingly, a fascination with the utopian aspects of virtual communities has strongly influenced research in this area. Thus, when exploring the contrast...
between online communities and their real-world counterpart researchers tend to be
highly attuned to features of virtual communities that highlight egalitarian and
altruistic motivation. Less attention is paid to social motivations such as a search
for status and prestige that are at odds with these motives. The practice of online gift
giving in the form of advice and opinion illustrates this bias, precisely because at first
sight it fits so well explanations of virtual communities that emphasise egalitarian
and altruistic motivation (Avery, Resnick, & Zeckhauser, 1999). Explanations of gifts
giving look to rational calculation—individuals may expect reciprocity in the not-
too-distant future—or to deeply held values—individuals wish to contribute to the
general welfare, or they wish to repay past generosity (Curien, Fauchart, Laffond, &
Moreau, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). Regardless of which motive predominates, the
process is meant to reinforce the egalitarian character of virtual communities as
a way of reinforcing their long-term viability.

This article, by contrast, is an exploration of social interaction in virtual con-
sumer communities that is motivated by status seeking. Our work builds on recent
research by scholars exploring the motivational aspects of contribution in online
communities (e.g., Bolton, Katok, & Ockenfels, 2004; Giesler, 2006; Schau & Gilley,
2003; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). With the exception of Wiertz and De Ruyter (2007),
Wasko and Faraj (2005) and Kankanahalli, Tan, and Kwok-Kee (2005), who cite
professional reputation as a driver in occupation-driven virtual organisation com-

munities, the majority of these scholars have focused primarily on motivations such
as altruism and reciprocity to explain the processes that sustain social interaction in
virtual communities. While these motivations undoubtedly play a role in encourag-
ing the free provision of advice and information, they leave open the question of why
some individuals who do not know each other, and in most instances do not even
reveal their true identity, post a disproportionate amount of advice and information
relative to the rest of the participants in online consumer communities.

Why do some individuals invest so much time and effort in posting free advice
and information online, while others do so rarely, if at all? Research suggests that
a powerful motivation for disproportionate gift giving in offline communities can be
traced to status seeking (Harbaugh, 1998). In this article, we argue that status seeking
is likewise an important factor in the provision of free advice and information in
virtual consumer communities, and that this motivation deserves more attention
from researchers who study the rise and evolution of virtual communities.

Our main argument is two-fold: First, we view status seeking as a social passion
that drives participants to invest time and effort in giving the gift of their experience
to others without direct benefit to themselves; and second, this social passion is
a reliable source of continuing participation, making it more likely that virtual
communities will survive and grow. In developing our argument, we draw heavily
on research on offline communities that shows that gift giving is closely linked
to status seeking (Sherry, 1983). In effect, contrary to early research on virtual
communities, we maintain that there is no fundamental break when it comes to
basic human motivation between “real” and virtual communities. The manifestation
of the same motivation, however, will take a different shape in online communities because it is articulated under different conditions than those of offline communities. Thus status seeking operates in both virtual and offline communities. But whereas in real communities status seeking is associated with professional standing or conspicuous consumption, status seeking in online communities at present works primarily through the written word.

Most research on virtual consumer communities to date has tended to focus on what may be called “conversational communities:” communities in which exchange of information and advice tends to occur within or as part of a more general conversation. In this article we chose to focus on written online communications in situations where advice and opinions are not solicited directly or indirectly by the recipients. The choice is motivated by the wish to come as close as possible to the giving of pure informational gifts. Our view is that an online consumer community is a social space that meets two minimal conditions: First, individual actions are transparent to all that enter, e.g., one reviewer could easily read other reviewers’ review. Second, individuals abide by certain shared rules, e.g., reviewers post their reviews in a specific manner, and their reviews are evaluated in a given manner. We focus exclusively on views, opinions, and advice associated with the consumption of so-called “experience” goods: goods where ex ante properties of the product are not sufficient to gauge quality without consumption (von Ungern-Sternberg & von Weizsacker, 1985).

Reviews of such products are now a prominent feature of websites such as Amazon.com, IMDB.com, and Tripadvisor. Such reviews represent a classic case of the dilemma of public goods (Kollock, 1999). While everyone potentially benefits from information that is freely provided, there is corresponding incentive to free-ride on the labor of those who take the time and trouble to enrich the public domain. The proclivity for free riding can undermine the sustainability of a community by gradually reducing the incentives of those who voluntarily provide free goods. From the point of view of websites like Amazon, IMDB.com, and Tripadvisor, sustainability of virtual communities is crucial.

We begin this article with a discussion of status and status seeking in offline communities, and contrast this with the way in which status seeking operates in virtual communities, with specific reference to input to reputation systems that rate the quality of online gift giving (Dellacrocas, 2003). We then move to an overview of the literature on gift giving and status seeking in offline communities and examine the applicability of these findings to virtual communities. This is followed with an analysis of product and service reviews in selected websites. We suggest that individuals pursue different status-seeking strategies, and that the way in which consumption experience is narrated will depend on the nature of the product in two ways. First, the products themselves have characteristics which provide a “vocabulary” for narration. Second, the products create the possibility for status identity creation. Thus, for example, films allow consumers both to narrate their own emotional being and to link those narrations to signaling of preferences. Following this analysis, we examine how the evolution of websites is giving rise to the emergence of status hierarchies.
We conclude by considering the possibility that these status hierarchies may ultimately undermine the dynamics of gift giving in online consumer communities.

**Conceptual Framework**

**Defining Status Seeking in Virtual Communities**

Sociologists define status as an actor’s relative standing in a group when this standing is based on prestige, honor, or deference (Berger, Cohen, & Zeldich, 1972; Thye, 2000). By extension, status seeking consists of activities designed to improve an actor’s standing in a group, and is therefore judged by the degree to which associated activities result in increasing prestige, honor, or deference. The aim of status seeking can be external and internal. Actors may seek status for purely economic and social advantage, but they may also seek status for psychological and emotional reasons. Although the two drivers are not mutually exclusive, their preponderance depends on the nature of the group involved (Perretti & Negro, 2006).

Status seeking that is externally oriented sees status as a mediating strategic step in a cycle of social and economic resource acquisition. Lin’s (2001) discussion of how individuals go about improving their status represents this perspective. He defines striving for higher status as “the process by which individuals mobilize and invest resources for returns in socioeconomic standing” (p. 78). Individuals therefore pursue status because it gives them access to greater economic and social resources, and they use economic and social resources to improve their status. For example, studies show that improving one’s rank in the social hierarchy has direct impact on social influence, which in turn puts an individual in a better position to pursue activities that are more directly lucrative (Ridgeway & Walker, 1995). Studies by Ball and Eckel (1996) and Ball, Eckel, Grossman, and Zame (2001) suggest that individuals with higher status tend to obtain better terms in negotiations than individuals with lower status. Similarly, studies by Ensel (1979) and Marsden and Hurlbert (1988) have shown that during job transition status plays a crucial role in obtaining more highly regarded and better paying jobs.

By contrast to this external perspective on status seeking, an alternate perspective has emerged which argues that status seeking is often pursued as an “ego reward:” a valuable emotional good that individuals accumulate as a result of acquired status (Emerson, 1962). The source of status as an emotional good tends to vary. It may be rooted in the psychological need of individuals to generate better sentiments among peers (e.g., admiration), it may be due to socialization that equates status with living up to a certain normative ideal, or it may be simply that status generates more gratifying social contact (Homans, 1950). Once established, however, status can become a psychological asset for its holders (Fombrun, 2001). For example, research suggests that individuals with higher status are better at handling stress and are less prone to negative cognition. High-status individuals are also more inclined to display positive emotions such as satisfaction, happiness, or love in social settings than are low-status individuals (Kemper, 1991). This proclivity tends to increase
sociability and cooperation (Isen, 1987), thus strengthening affective ties in social collectivities (Lawler, 1992). There is also evidence that high status individuals are often given more credit than are low status individuals in return for the same amount of effort (Merton, 1968).

Because status seeking is part of a generalized competition for prestige and recognition, it is closely related to reputation seeking (Washington & Zajac, 2005). To understand the relationship, we must distinguish between status as a formal property of social, economic, and professional systems and reputation as an informal process that is based on interpretation and attribution. Status seeking as a formal process usually takes place in relationship to a social, economic, or professional system where ranking of individuals is based on criteria that are intrinsic to these systems: For example, election to town council elevates some citizens to a higher status; appearing on the Forbes richest list divides the super rich from those who are just rich; and winning awards for professional achievement is a distinction that divides exceptional talent from solid performers. Put differently, status seeking in these instances is based not only on trying to improve one’s own position in absolute terms, but also on the relative position of others.

Reputation seeking, on the other hand, has no clear rank ordering. It is informal in the sense that it relies on evaluative activities that are not closely tied to the actor’s economic, social, or professional position. For example, many film and sports stars build a reputation for social activism that is distantly related to their work in their chosen field of endeavor. The relevant point for the present discussion is that this reputation may under certain circumstances enhance their overall status.

A good example of how status and reputation differ and how the two can nonetheless work together is philanthropy. The wealthy often use philanthropy to enhance their reputation as generous or discerning persons. It is for this reason that while philanthropists seek status through the size of their donations relative to the giving of other rich philanthropists (Murray, 2006), they are aware that the reputation of their endowments may depend on the quality of their giving.

The close relationship between status and reputation in offline communities is based on the ability to recycle one into the other. Status is a base for creating reputation, and reputation is used to enhance status. Thus, large firms use reputation to charge higher prices, the profits from which are then used to invest in activities (e.g., better service and advertising) that create greater reputation. Likewise, individuals acquire greater status by forming alliances with socially powerful actors, but then take care to show that they are loyal and trustworthy—thereby generating a reputation for being a reliable ally that is likely to stand them in good stead when it comes to acquiring more allies.

In virtual communities, however, the connection between formal social, economic, and professional status and status that derives from reputation is much weaker. Individuals cannot easily use their formal status position to generate reputation, and likewise they may find it difficult to convert their reputation into formal status. The status/reputation relationship therefore operates differently. Specifically,
research suggests that in online communities the relationship between reputation and status operates mostly in one direction, with reputation used as input for higher online status. For example, Rheingold (1993) and Kollock (1999), who have studied motivations of online information gift giving, point towards reputation as an important resource for attaining greater prestige. Kollock (1999) puts it this way: “A … possible motivation [for online gift giving] is the effect of contributions on one’s reputation. High quality information, impressive technical details in one’s answers, a willingness to help others, and elegant writing can all work to increase one’s prestige in the community” (p. 228).

In offline communities, reputation is only one of a variety of resources, such as income and possessions, which individuals have at their disposal when seeking to improve their standing in the community. In online communities, by contrast, reputation is often the main resource that can be generated and used to achieve the same end. This is especially the case in online communities that are supported by what Dellacrocas (2003) terms “reputation systems”: mechanisms that allow community participants to rate the activities and contributions of others in the community. Under these circumstances, reputation, as measured by these ratings, becomes an important input into the self-assessment of gift givers. Such self-assessment is an intrinsic part of an individual’s sense of establishing and maintaining status, and thus is an important impetus to status seeking more generally (Huberman, Loch, & Onculer, 2004).

Gift Giving and the Attainment of Status

The relationship between gift giving and status has been extensively studied in anthropology and sociology (Malinowski, 1967; Maus, 1970; Osteen, 2002). In offline communities, especially those that are circumscribed and have clear boundaries, gift giving is part of a cycle of resource conversion described earlier: Gifts promote status, and status is used to further other objectives such as commerce. Gift giving in online communities, on the other hand, is often in the form of opinions and information which, as Avery, Resnick, and Zeckhauser (1999) point out, is in short supply by virtue of being a public good: Once freely posted online it benefits recipients but generates no obvious reward to the providers of the information, beyond the intrinsic satisfaction that comes with contributing to the common good. As a consequence, there is in principle an imbalance between demand and supply, between the number of individuals who are looking for useful advice and the number of people willing to take the time and trouble to provide that information.

This imbalance points to a potential weakness that constitutes a threat to the long-term sustainability of virtual communities. Virtual communities are no different from offline communities in requiring a minimum level of ongoing participation to remain viable. Maintaining this minimum level of participation in open virtual communities (e.g., those that do not charge a subscription fee) depends on generating a participation cycle: Individuals log on to these virtual communities in anticipation that they will benefit from the views, advice, and opinions of others who not only log on with similar expectations, but are also willing to invest in
contributing information. In a recent research setting, Schlosser (2005) differentiates these individuals into two categories: lurkers, who expect to read others’ postings while contributing little, and posters—those who not only contribute by posting reviews, but do so in the context of ongoing interaction within the online community. The latter are always in the minority compared to the former, and they do not frame their contributions as a “gift.” Nevertheless, we would argue that this is precisely what they are doing: giving the gift of information to others in the anticipation that this gift will be useful.

Bearing in mind the anonymity of virtual communities, the question that inevitably arises is what motivates individuals to give the gift of information freely to other individuals under these conditions. Research on offline communities points to altruism and social exchange governed by norms of reciprocity as key to sustaining gift giving (Bèlk & Coon, 1993). Both altruism and norms of reciprocity may operate in virtual communities, but have limitations that can undermine sustainability. Altruism is non-calculative generosity that is often used to explain behavior when self-interest as a motivating factor is not in evidence. However, although altruism is a recognizable phenomenon (e.g., in blood donations, as observed by Titmuss, 1971), it is a reliable motivator in relatively few people, and hence is unlikely to sustain the minimum level of participation necessary for sustainability. Reciprocity, by contrast, is a much stronger and more reliable motivating force. However, in online systems that are impersonal and thus do not allow for establishing direct personal relationships, reciprocity is subject to prisoner dilemma limitations (Axelrod, 2006). Individuals are not likely to contribute unless they clearly see the direct benefit that will accrue from such contribution, but such benefits will only happen if enough individuals are willing to step forward and participate regularly without advanced confirmation of return on their efforts.

Sustainability cannot therefore depend on altruism that is sporadic and is confined to a small number of individuals, nor can it depend on complex rational calculations such as norms of reciprocity that tend to fail in virtual environments. To our mind, sustainability must recruit social passions that are widely shared and strongly motivate participation. When it comes to gift giving, research on offline communities suggests that status seeking is a reliable social passion that strongly motivates individuals while at the same time contributing to the common good (Podolny, 2005).

Use of Self-Presentation and Status in Gift Giving
Status is a social property that combines an individual’s sense of who he or she is and how he or she would like to be seen. Status, in other words, can be created through self-presentation to others without necessarily depending on a specific bilateral relationship (Goffman, 1959). This “broadcast” model of status through self-presentation has been extensively explored by Veblen (1994), Goffman (1959), by symbolic interactionists such as Mead (1934), and more recently, by organizational sociologists such as Podolny (2005). In their work, however, status depends primarily on display of wealth, professional prestige, and formal position. In virtual
communities, status depends primarily on what strangers tell other strangers. It is in the “telling,” so to speak, that status is embedded, and it is through the intentional or unintentional manipulation of this telling to establish a particular identity that individuals make a bid for status.

Since the early 1990s, researchers drawing theoretical insights from the scholarly contributions of Erikson (1974) and Goffman (1959) have pointed out that participants in virtual communities create multiple identities through digital appropriation and manipulation of text, images, icons, and hyperlinks to other websites (Nguyen & Alexander, 1996; Turkle, 1995). In virtual spaces, self-presentation is often a prerequisite to status seeking. In a recent study of online gaming community sites, Liu, Geng, and Whinston (2004) note that gamers first adopt a virtual identity, and then form into clubs that socialize, collaborate, and compete for status, often in the form of halls-of-fame or higher rankings as an objective.

Historians have explored the close relationship between modern identities and the rise of consumer society (McKendrick, Brewer, & Plumb, 1982; Zukin & Maguire, 2004). Their conclusions suggest that in economically dynamic societies in which class distinctions are increasingly blurred, consumption is often employed to signal status. Consumers will often choose products and brands that are idealized and communicate a desired self (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). In offline communities, individuals can thus use visible ties of ownership to prestige properties and overt consumption of luxuries to promote their status and hence legitimise identity. In virtual space, the direct dramaturgical aspects of consumption that are so crucial to establishing status in offline communities cannot be established through display. Individuals who wish to convey status through consumption must do so indirectly through textual communication that seeks to convey the experience of consumption and ownership (Schau & Gilly, 2003). The content of such communications plays on both objective properties of the goods and services and on the emotional aspects of the consumption experience. This dual nature of the communication has been observed in a recent study by Baralou and McInnes (2005). They examined the dynamics of interaction in virtual teams and concluded that text-based computer mediated interactions operate at two levels. On the one hand, the communication is focused on ostensibly objective content, but on the other hand, individuals “emote” their experience as a way of establishing their own unique virtual identity.

More generally, in online forums participants textually converse with each other “as if” they are actually present in a specific place (Burnett, Dickey, Kazmer, & Chudoba, 2003). As contributors narrate their consumption experiences, others form a picture of contributors’ virtual self. This picture, however, is composed of both the objective content of the narratives, and the subjective sympathy associating with the emoting that is embedded in the narration. If in modern society consumption is strongly linked to self-actualization (if not self promotion), then the recounting of consumption experience is a key vehicle whereby individuals attempt to convey persuasively to others where they stand socially. In online communication, this recounting uses textual communication that is often embellished with symbols.
that are popularly referred to as “emoticons.” These act as communicative gestures that substitute for body language and other emotional gestures in real-world settings. Through them individuals are able to simulate social presence in a virtual context (Gudergan, Josserand, & Pitsis, 2005).

Thus, to summarize, in online communities the recounting of consumption experience is often part and parcel of virtual identity formation. Given the social dynamics of modern society, this identity formation is often shaped by status seeking. Within the relative safety of online experience (compared to real settings), individuals can project identities that are closer to their ideal self. Inevitably this process elicits powerful emotions on the part of those who engage in the process. These emotions are central to the motivation that sustains online participation in conditions where freely-given information does not necessarily result in tangible benefits to those who labor to provide them.

Methodology

This study is based on data from three sources: a student Web discussion group, a quantitative survey, and three online community websites. The first step involved creating a Web discussion group to ascertain to what extent status seeking is a motivating factor in posting online reviews. The Web discussion group consisted of 27 undergraduate students taking a new marketing technologies class in the United Kingdom. We followed Kollock’s (1999) list of three possible motives: encouraging reciprocity in others, creating reputation with a view to increasing one’s own prestige, and creating a self-image as an efficacious person. As part of the coursework, students were required to go to the online Web discussion group, access Kollock’s list of motives that we had placed there, post their responses and engage in discussion as to which online communities they actively visited and participated in, and finally list what motivated them to contribute content to those communities. Twenty-five students were active members of three or more online communities and spent an average of 4-6 hours each week either contributing or “lurking” in those communities. In addition to Kollock’s three motives, active community participation was motivated by factors such as affiliation or a feeling of belonging, creating temporal online identity in the community, and a sense of status when demonstrating competence by helping others.

We then combined the list generated from the students’ comments with the list of possible motives assembled from the literature that may influence an individual’s online contribution to construct a questionnaire (see Appendix). Our objective was to understand to what extent status seeking is a significant motivation for participants who contribute in online environments. The items in the questionnaire expressed the assumption that individual motivation to contribute information as online gifts is shaped primarily by factors such as altruism, norms of reciprocity, the building of positive self-image, seeking status through reputation enhancement, and an interest in promoting certain products.
To solicit respondents for the questionnaire study, we selected the Internet Movies Database (IMDB.com), a website where users can post reviews. We selected three animation films made by Pixar Studios—*Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*, and *Monsters Inc.*—from the animation motion picture category, and created a spreadsheet which categorized users in ascending order by number of reviews that they had contributed to the IMDB repository. As our objective was to understand motivations for active contribution in online communities, we only selected users who had posted at least 10 reviews. This exercise identified 55 unique users, whom we then contacted and requested to fill out the online questionnaire. We received 32 completed questionnaires.

Finally, using a methodology similar to, but less participative than, “netnography” (Kozinets, 2002), our next step was to identify consumer websites that maintained extensive review repositories. Our objective was to carry out interpretive analysis of text to observe use of status-seeking strategies within repositories maintained by online communities. After examining many such websites, we restricted our study to three websites: Tripadvisor.com, Amazon.com, and IMDB.com. All three sites recognize participant contribution in the form of reviews as a core component of their online presence. We gathered data on 105 reviewers from the three websites. Of these, 35 reviewers were from Tripadvisor.com and had posted reviews in the category “European cities;” 40 were from IMDB.com and had posted reviews for three movies in the films category, *The Incredibles*, *Million Dollar Baby*, and *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Galaxy*; and 30 were from Amazon.com and had posted reviews of Jim Collins’ recent bestselling book, *Good to Great*, in the business and management books category, and had been voted as most useful by visitors to the site. In the case of Amazon.com, we also gained insights from a list of those who had been voted the top 50 reviewers. Following Kozinets (2002), we observed the contributions of these reviewers as well as the activity of reviewers awarded the local expert badge on Tripadvisor.com over a period of three months. We constructed a spreadsheet containing a description of each reviewer’s name and pseudonym, name of website, category, and the reviews posted.

Our analysis adopted a two-pronged approach. A systematic content analysis was initially performed to document the frequency of key words and terms, the types of specialization promoted in the review, and the words used to establish online identity, status, or communication reference with others. This was followed by a semiotic analysis of reviews posted by individual reviewers, in order to provide a richer texture. The authors had a series of meetings, using the spreadsheet as a basis to facilitate interpretation of the reviewers’ motivations, and to agree on examples that illustrated status seeking as a significant motivational force. We proceeded with this semiotic analysis on the assumption that, as Culler (1981) put it, “one is caught up in a signifying process that one cannot fully control—a process at work even at the moments when one produces one’s best formulation, one’s most productive insight” (p. 12). By combining data sources and analytical methods, we sought to interpret the status-seeking strategies in Web communities more fully.
Findings and Discussion

Spearman Rank Order correlations (\(r\)) on the data from the Web survey indicate that motivation to contribute content online, as measured by the number of online reviews, is strongly associated with building online identity (\(r: 0.56\)) and online status seeking (\(r: 0.74\)) (see Table 1). Both these variables are, by definition, themselves highly correlated (\(r: 0.72\)). Reciprocity is also significantly correlated with both identity and status seeking.

A linear regression analysis (see Table 2) showed that the explanatory variable ‘online status seeking’ (x5) captured most of the variance in the explained variable of motivation to contribute in online repositories (\(R^2: 0.56, F: 38.23, p < 0.0001\)). Other explanatory variables did not form part of the best fit model. Notwithstanding the small sample, these results suggest that top contributors are motivated by status seeking. In effect, the Web survey suggests that in situations where gift giving is not solicited by inquiry or communicative prompting (as tends to be the case in “conversational communities”), factors that are directly linked to status are much stronger than what the literature suggests. Seeking reputation enhancement to raise one’s status is important. This points to deeper questions of how status manifests itself, what modes of communication (or disguise) it adopts, and how it affects the evolution of virtual communities. These questions are addressed in the following section.

Most of the reviewers contributing to the three websites we studied spent considerable time writing reviews. On average each reviewer had written 761 words in the movies category, 155 words in the travel category (as answers to member queries

Table 1 Rank order correlation results for motivations to contribute

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<tr>
<th>Groups based on extent of contribution</th>
<th>Altruism</th>
<th>Sharing experiences</th>
<th>Reciprocity</th>
<th>Building online identity</th>
<th>Online status seeking</th>
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<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing experiences</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building online identity</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online status seeking</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.72</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Correlations of 0.39 or higher are significant at the 0.05 level.
on specific topics), and 352 words in the books category. Most of the reviews were from reviewers in North America and Britain. The status-seeking literature discussed in the sections above helps to answer the research question on what motivates individuals to contribute content to these online communities. However, it does not explain how the route to status seeking might be dependent on the nature of online communities.

Status Seeking Strategies: Focused vs. Diverse Display of Authority

Posting an account of a consumption experience of a movie, travel, or book online can be seen as both a reflection of identity and an attempt to project identity. Just as individual identities tend to vary, the methods employed to project identity, and through this projection to establish status, will also vary. Our data reveal that in general individuals attempt to establish status by building their expertise in the specific area they are reviewing, or by pursuing a more general strategy of demonstrating knowledge of multiple areas that are external to what they are reviewing.

The degree to which an individual contribution can be measured as highly focused or diverse depends on the quality of information, level of detail, and writing style. Consider first the review by an individual who has adapted the screen identity Spooky, and which received the highest rankings from readers. Through his review of the animation movie, *The Incredibles*, Spooky projects the status of a specialist in reviewing animation (our comments are inserted in italics):

I hope that this movie does really well because this has to be one of the best animated movies I have ever seen [frequent viewing of animated movies as basis for expertise]… The movie has an undeniably cool retro feel to it and it shows not only in the design of the picture but also in the music, which definitely sounds like something out of a 60’s 007 flick. [displays ability to identify subtle similarities with a completely different genre and to movies that

<table>
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<th>Table 2 Regression analysis</th>
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<td>Dependent Variable: Groups based on extent of contribution</td>
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<td>Independent Variables</td>
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<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
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<td>Sharing experience</td>
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<td>Reciprocity</td>
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<td>Building online identity</td>
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<td>Online status seeking</td>
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<td>R²</td>
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<td>Adjusted R²</td>
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<td>Model F</td>
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<td>Intercept</td>
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Notes: N = 32; p < 0.05*, p < 0.01**, p < 0.0001***.
are 40 years old] … Even though you are watching a film that is populated by CGI characters, the emotions they convey in what they say and do come across as purely believable. … The computer graphics in general were absolutely amazing and the voice acting is excellent across the board, so good in fact, that I really can’t pick a favourite from the entire cast [use of specialized terms such as ‘voice acting’ to indicate in-depth familiarity with animation production]… In fact, this movie reminds me of why I like Finding Nemo over Monsters, Inc. In Finding Nemo, not only are the main characters great but every other character they run into makes some kind of impression on you. Remember all the characters that Marlin and Dory ran into on their adventures together? Of course you do [in paying the reader this compliment, Spooky also implies his own ability to notice and remember movie characters]…. I left very satisfied and felt no need to compare this to the rest of Pixar’s movies. This one is just as good if not better than any other animated movie released this year and rightfully deserves its place among the best animated movies of all time.

Spooky describes his positive personal experience of watching the movie in an attempt to relate the experience to the reader. He does this by establishing links with other movies and animated characters in the same category. He finally rates the movie as among the best animated movies of all time.

Unlike Spooky, who adopts the terminology and emulates the stance of professional film criticism, Eddie, in his review of the movie The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Galaxy, ingeniously uses authenticity to negate the traditional authority of professional film reviewers. By distancing himself from movie critics, and at the same time linking himself to other film goers, Eddie suggests that true status does not come from knowledge amassed from in-depth study and criticism, but from emotional empathy with the movie experience—an empathy that is not estranged or distorted by the conventions that professional reviewers normally follow:

Well, I’m not a film reviewer. I’m not really a fan of film reviewers as their job involves pretending that there is an objective standard that governs how much everyone will enjoy a film (well, some of them are smart enough not to dress their opinion as anything else). Everyone enjoys films in different ways and I like to use my own judgment to decide if a film is worth my time or not (well, that and the opinions of a few trusted individuals whose taste in films is very similar to my own)…. So this isn’t a review, it’s just my honest reaction to the film and you may judge for yourselves if my opinion is likely to be similar to your own… I loved it. There were a couple of small points that I wasn’t happy with but there was so much that I really enjoyed that I left the cinema very happy indeed. It has a very frantic pace, especially when compared to the glacial pace of the TV series. But, in my opinion, it works. …The huge applause after the film showed I wasn’t alone in having a good time.
By contrast to reviewers who focus on their expertise or special empathy with films, Kelly, a reviewer who has been elected as a local expert on a major European city on the Tripadvisor community website, is fairly typical of reviewers who draw upon diverse sets of experiences to establish their status. In posting her response to a question about do’s and don’ts in Paris, Kelly comments:

I used to have a friend who was a city planner [expertise by association with a relevant professional field]—having remained in Europe for many years after WWII to rebuild much of what he and others destroyed and continued to travel the world until his death, for both professional and personal reasons. His description of Paris has always remained with me, “...Paris is the city that every other city in the world tries to be....but can’t ..”. Yes....Paris is different.

Likewise, Arun, a member of the Tripadvisor community forum, in posting his response to a question posted by a user, mixes comments about how to budget and plan a trip to London with numerous comments about his own discerning tastes in music and fashion, not to mention his presumably extensive financial resources that allow him to disregard constraints of schedule and budget:

Ann, I’m planning a trip to the UK this August too, and you’ll find the likes of Adam and Hickney, Vix, Colorado-Anglophile, etc all very helpful! I found this book at B&N - “Eyewitness Top 10 Travel Guide to London” that has all your answers to the questions you have. I love UK so much that when I start planning a trip (this current trip of mine was intended to be a 7 day trip of Scotland ONLY!) I end up extending it and adding on. It eventually became a 3 week trip of Scotland, Ireland, and England, and now I’m looking at spending a 4th week just for London! I am foodie (and a vegetarian), and there are plenty of places to eat. For me the saddest part is, being a music fan and a UK fashion fan, more than the landmarks, I seem to be shopping more. When I was in Glasgow 2 yrs ago, forget the beautiful city, I ended up spending most of my time at the local Topman, River Island, and French Connection! And I went to both HMV and Virgin Mega so much, the guy @ the counter commented on the last day - “well you sure have treated yourself a lot this week, haven’t you”!

What is notable about Arun’s posting is the way that he acts as a poster (Schlosser, 2005) by connecting his socially positive self-representative identity to other community members, spreading his status beliefs not only to those who are directly part of the community but also to the readers who are visiting the forum. Arun’s endorsement of other community members fits Podolny’s (2005) assertion that status also flows through deference relations. When a high-status individual exhibits deference to another—for example, telling the participants and readers that they should listen or read to the words of another (e.g., Adam, Vix) —that other
experiences a gain in status. The other (Adam, Vix, etc.) is also likely to reciprocate the deference to the individual (Arun) in near future.

**Online Rating Systems and the Rise of Celebrity Reviewers**

Multiple reviewing is often a spontaneous attempt by individuals to gain added status through greater exposure (Rheingold, 1993). The tendency is increasingly reinforced by the recent proliferation of online systems that allow recipients of information gifts to rate the value of the contributions. For instance, Amazon has a system whereby users can earn badges by creating good content on Amazon.com. Whereas anyone can earn a Real Name badge by choosing to create content on Amazon.com with his or her Real Name, some badges, like Top 10 Reviewer, are based on voting and a claim to star status. A dedicated section on the Amazon web site reinforces this celebrity status:

The votes have been counted. Let’s hear it for our Top Reviewers—selected by Amazon.com customers like you. These clear-minded critics voiced their opinions about Amazon.com items. In turn, they supplied their fellow shoppers with helpful, honest, tell-it-like-it-is product information. Please join us as we salute this top notch group of review writers.

(http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/top-reviewers.html/)

Like other celebrity reviewers, Donald Mitchell, a Top 10 Amazon.com book reviewer, has used his online profile to demonstrate his eminence—in this case, as a writer, reader, academic, and consultant. His digital identity as an Amazon reviewer directly serves his real-life goals. Donald’s profile states:

My new book is tentatively titled, Live Better than a Billionaire on Five Dollars Extra a Day. You are invited to read my blogs about the book at http://livebetterthanabillionaireon5dollars.blogspot.com/. Write to me with your questions and suggestions for the book and television show I am developing…My course on starting a new business begins on May 31 at Brookline (MA) Adult and Community Education…Many thanks to the 134 reviewers who have praised The Ultimate Competitive Advantage (ISBN: 1576751678) an average of five stars since its March 2003 publication. No other management book has ever been so highly honoured in its first year… How can I help you get more benefit from your reading? I read 2-3 hours a day. On an average book, my speed is around 2000 words per minute. I learned how to read quickly and with good comprehension in my English class during sophomore year of high school…I am a strategy consultant and co-author business books exemplifying fastforward400…If you would like to take an on-line business course with me, go to http://www.rushmore.edu/exec-ed.htm

Because online rating systems depend on voting according to usefulness, a high number of reviews does not automatically translate to a high position in the ranking. For example, in the case of Amazon, Joanna, voted as the number seven reviewer and
recipient of a Top 10 reviewer badge, has written 1,797 reviews, as compared to Harris who is ranked number 24, has contributed 3,188 reviews, and has a Top 50 reviewer badge. Joanna is ranked higher because she has received a significantly higher number of votes of “helpful” (22,734) as compared to Harris, who has received 9,840 helpful votes. This suggests that individuals are not likely to adopt a quantity-over-quality strategy when writing reviews, since the Amazon online mechanism is based on reviews that have been voted the most useful, rather than on reviewers who have been the most prolific. The system has introduced competitive behavior, however, to the extent that consumers continue to post reviews in the hope of getting a Top 50 or Top 100 badge.

We observed a similar online system in the case of TripAdvisor, where users were awarded a local expert badge on the basis of their contributions. The average contributor in the European city forums with the local expert badge had contributed more than 2,000 posts. Some individuals had attained the status of being a “local expert” within six months of joining. For instance, Frank joined the TripAdvisor forum in November 2004, and within four months, he had contributed over 2,000 postings on inquiries made by members in the London category. By virtue of his level of contribution, Frank was selected as a local expert by the community administrator, and now has a digital logo displaying his local expert status.

In the case of IMDB, although reviewers are not ranked, contributions are rated. However, the number of reviews written by each reviewer is significantly less. For instance, Spooky has been registered on IMDB since 1999 and on average posts one review per month. To date, he has written only 187 reviews. In contrast, Eddie, who made much of the fact that he was not a film reviewer in the review quoted above of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, has been a regular contributor to the IMDB website since 2000, posting 73 reviews in 2005 alone. He also has a personal webpage link on his profile for those who wish to find out more about him.

The advent of online ratings has thus served to reinforce status seeking through informational gift giving. The power of online ratings to elicit multiple contributions provides further evidence of the central role played by status in encouraging voluntary contribution. Neither altruism nor norms of reciprocity are particularly sensitive to this type of reward. Status, by contrast, is by definition a scarce social resource that is intimately linked to competition for attention and approval. An online system that formalizes status will provide a powerful impetus to status seeking by transforming diffused aspirations to status into a competitive process in which individuals can monitor their position on a daily basis.

**Conclusions**

Research on virtual consumer communities has singled out information and advice that members of virtual communities freely provide to each other as an important factor in creating and sustaining these virtual communities (Giesler, 2006; Kollok, 1999; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Explanations of such gift giving have tended to focus on altruism, reciprocity, and reputation-seeking as key motivating factors. To some
extent, preference for what may be considered more positive explanations of motives in online communities is the product of enthusiasm about the voluntary and cooperative aspects of such communities. At a deeper level, resorting to these explanatory factors is an attempt to deal with a paradox that one does not encounter in traditional communities: Online communities are for all intents and purpose communities made up of strangers who remain strangers. Since a virtual community must recruit and maintain a minimum level of participation to remain viable, the question that inevitably arises is what could motivate strangers to give gifts to other strangers?

In this study, we argue that status and status seeking sustain gift giving in virtual consumer communities. However, because status seeking online cannot be done by display or by asserting rank, it takes a different form of identity enactment: The gift comes with a message about the gift giver, a message that contains the identity that the giver wants to establish as a way of communicating status. The power of this process and the reason that it can sustain gift giving resides in the fact that the persuasiveness of the message as a way of seeking status does not depend on direct interaction with the receiver of this information. The dual investment that gift givers make—in the gift and in the accompanying message—is in principle enough to sustain further gift giving. As in traditional communities, however, this form of purely reflexive status seeking can trigger reinforcing forces that make status seeking through gift giving more pervasive.

This article is an exploratory study of the proposition that status and status seeking play an important role in creating and sustaining virtual consumer communities. The study has two main limitations. First, we rely primarily on a small survey and content analysis to establish this premise. Second, the research is focused on three types of products, all of which happen to be experience products. It is possible that the characteristics of this sample limit the generalizability of the results to other settings. Further studies using larger samples, involving a broader range of products, and applying text analysis to uncover patterns of status seeking are needed to address these limitations.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the results have useful implications. First, our analysis suggests that an obvious reinforcer of status seeking through gift giving is imitation. Reviewers of products and services who are also frequent providers of information stand out in what is ostensibly a community of equals. Their behavior and their style are likely to be imitated by others who may likewise be motivated to seek status. This group may be small in number but great in terms of impact as far as the evolution of the online community is concerned. Imitation is an informal process by which status seeking can spread.

A more formal, and potentially more powerful, force is the increasing use of so-called “reputation systems” that allow recipient of information gifts to register their approval (Dellarocas, 2003). Amazon.com was one of the first to use such a system. The initial impact of this mechanism is to provide gift givers with direct feedback about their status seeking. Amazon, however, has moved beyond this initial step by
creating a mechanism that aggregates the views of information recipients. Gift givers now know not only the degree to which others value their gifts, but also how they measure up against other gift givers. Status seeking in this system has become competitive.

Future research studies could investigate the likely impact of the introduction of systems for rating the value of online gift giving on the evolution of virtual consumer communities. While status competition that results from such systems can increase participation by providing more tangible ego incentives, the same systems can also discourage gift giving by many who thus far have enjoyed the casual informality of online interaction.

Making predictions about the evolution of online consumer communities is risky—technology, to say nothing of human behavior, is unpredictable. What is probable, however, is that the impact of introducing competitive status seeking will depend on the nature of the product and the type of community. Competitive status seeking is easier to sustain when the products are closely associated with status in offline communities. Cultural goods such as books, music, and film lend themselves to competitive status seeking, travel and software less so. Competitive status seeking is also harder to sustain in online communities that have open admission policies. Recent moves by some online communities to restrict admission raise the possibility of online consumer communities using exclusivity as a way to attract participants (Saranow, 2005). A community that uses prestige to attract participation is also likely to reinforce status-seeking behavior by its members. It may be sad to admit, but the utopian expectations of many who championed the early online communities may ultimately be disappointed as many online communities take on the characteristics of exclusive golf clubs rather than open, democratic forums.

References


Appendix

Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in our survey. Please fill out the form below

How many hours do you spend contributing content (e.g., advice, information, opinion about products and experiences) in an online community?

Please indicate how long you have been contributing content as a member of the community (in months)?

Are you member of more than one community? If yes, please indicate how many community sites do you contribute to?

Do you consider yourself as an expert on the content you contribute? Yes/No

On a scale of 1-5 please evaluate each of the following reasons for your contribution of content to the …… Community.

• I contribute content to the online community because I think it may be useful to others.
• I contribute content to the online community because I have benefitted from content posted by other members
• I contribute content to the online community because I feel that in a community everybody should share their knowledge and experience with everybody else.
• I contribute content to the online community because I feel that my contributions are more highly regarded than the content posted by others.
• I contribute to the online community because this is an essential part of what it means to create an online identity.
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