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The Construction of Value in Attention Economies

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This paper investigates the process of constructing value in an attention economy, through a netnography of YouTube. We find that value is created through the amplification of user identities in interactions between several user created roles: fans and celebrities, consumers and producers. Previous research has assumed relatively stable identities in exchange networks such as consumer/fan or celebrity/producer, yet we find that several shifting “market selves” are constructed through the exchange process whereby participants come to view themselves as producers or consumers, fans or celebrities in transactions with members of the community. In addition, we document the evolution of these roles over time, as the exchange network develops and investigate the material and affective process by which an individual transitions from one role to another. These findings have several implications for consumer research. First, this framework can be used to understand transitions between so-called “active” and “passive” consumption, a topic of continual debate in consumer research. Secondly, the findings also illustrate the ways in which users conceptualize “production” activities versus “consumption” activities and use these two semantic concepts to orient their exchange activities.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper, we view YouTube through the lens of the “attention economy” and use it as a site to further develop our understanding of the hierarchical processes of attention consumption and the construction of value within attention economies. Originally developed by Herbert Simon, the concept of an attention economy comes from considering the many effects implied by an abundance of information. As Simon (1971) says, “[w]hat information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it” (p. 41). Although Simon perceptively notes that attention becomes a resource and therefore comes to have value, he does not elaborate the process by which attention becomes transformed into something valuable. More recently, popular management writers have built off of Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) idea of an “experience economy” to argue that this experience economy is underlain by an interest-driven “attention economy” (Davenport and Beck 2001). A number of authors take the attention economy principle to speculative lengths, predicting that, one day, “attention transactions” will replace financial transactions (Franck 1999; Goldhaber 1997). We take this speculation to pose several specific research questions. How do attention transactions occur on and through YouTube? How do the partners to an attention exchange form an idea of their role in this system of exchange? What roles are normatively available to them and how do they find a place within these roles? Further, how do these roles change over time?

Previous research has suggested that that people in an exchange network can vary in their roles as giver and receiver. However, when we consider attention economies we do not yet have a theory for how people assume an exchange role, how they conceive of these roles, or how these roles change over time, as the system evolves. Research on fan communities and fandom explores affective exchange both amongst fans and between fans and celebrities (Jenkins 1992; Kozinets 2001; O’Guinn 2000). On the one hand, fans actively interact with the objects of their admiration, contributing texts made from cultural materials (Lanier, Muñiz, and Schau 2006; Schau and Russell 2004) and forming social groups based on affiliation (Kozinets 2001). These characteristics of activity and involvement are particularly relevant to forming conceptions of an attention-based economy in an environment where interaction drives value and exchange. On the other hand, celebrities come to have value as a result of many of these fan activities and attentions. The precise nature of the relationship between fan feedback and celebrity value in attention economies, and particularly the fluidity of these concepts within electronically media, present a unique opportunity to develop a theory of the ways in which value is constructed through consumer/producer/fan/celebrity interaction, activity, and exchange.

To understand how people view themselves within attention exchange systems, we interviewed users of the YouTube network, an internet community where people exchange videos, post comments, and maintain personal profiles. Sixteen interviews were conducted in situ over the internet via private messages (Giesler 2006; Kozinets 2002). A netnography of site content, including analysis of videos produced by informants and those “favored” by informants, was also conducted (Kozinets 2002). In addition to self-

reports from interviews, several observations—the number of videos watched represented the level of consumption, and the number of videos posted to the site represented the level of production—were used to indicate the users’ status as a consumer, producer, fan, and/or celebrity.

From this data, we find that in the attention exchange system, several ideal typical roles emerge from the ways in which people talk about their place in YouTube network, consumer, producer, fan, and celebrity. Although these ideal-typical roles—consumer, producer, fan, or celebrity—are not often fully-realized empirically, they orient consumer’s conception of their place within the system. These dialectically-formed roles are often mutually exclusive within one exchange. That is, if one person discursively takes the producer role as the provider of value, the other person in the exchange takes the consumer role as the user of value.

We can then model the process of value creation through attention exchange as a four stage movement between these identities along two dimensions, the affective dimension and the market dimension. On the affective dimension, people exchange affect—words of encouragement, notes on the video’s content, related thoughts or jokes. In general, the affective dimension represents attention being given to the producer of a video. Most often, the receivers of these comments are heralded as ‘celebrities,’ and the givers of the comments think of themselves ‘fans.’ Celebrities also give affect in return by sending messages to their fans or responding to posted comments. The market dimension represents the dimension on which content is exchanged. The ideal-typical producer actually makes the substantive components of the video and the ideal-typical consumer actually receives the content. In the case of YouTube, the material exchange is either the video itself or the verbal statements that make up the comments. As a result of this exchange process, four market identities with specific orientations arise: the productive celebrity, the fan-as-consumer, the fan-as-producer, and the produced celebrity. Each identity in the system is dialectically constructed through the process of exchange, the interaction between two parties in a given stage.

From the study of YouTube as an attention exchange system, we learn several things about identities within an exchange system. First, people construct their role in relation to the other people in the exchange in systematic ways. These identities change systematically both temporally within the exchange itself and between exchanges in the system. Second, value is created through the interaction of affect and material exchange. When videos are produced, they do not immediately have value. Value is bestowed by fan response, not only toward the producer, but by the interaction of fans. Affect alone, however, does not produce value; this affect must be directed toward some product or some person that comes to represent value itself. Vital to this celebrity value are two elements—commonness and uniqueness—that fans work to collectively monitor and maintain these. Third, by studying this ‘sharing’ system, we gain insight into the factors that motivate people to share and to reciprocate. The exchange of comments, as “currency” repays sharers for their work and motivates them to produce again. User comments form a more reified indicator of value when they are used as metrics for measuring celebrity/producer value. In this sense, they truly are the capital on which this non-monetary exchange system functions.

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