Balancing Intrinsic Motivation and Extrinsic Rewards: an Exploratory Investigation Into User Generated Content Production

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The production of user generated content (UGC) provides an outlet for autonomous self-expression, develops and affirms personally valued skills, and creates the basis for competitive, supportive, and antagonistic peer relationships online. A netnographic analysis of Amazon’s Top Reviewer Community, uncovers the countervailing forces that arise from automated feedback systems that extrinsically reward behavior that is intrinsically motivated. While recognition appears important to UGC production, consistency, predictability, and perceived fairness in the reward allocation scheme, appears more important. Cognitive Evaluation Theory (Deci and Ryan 1985) and theories of procedural and distributive justice frame propositions to guide future empirical research.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

User generated content (UGC) is fast becoming one of the most valuable and influential sources of information in the on-line world, supporting millions of consumers who have come to rely on product and service reviews to support the purchase process. UGC is uncompensated and voluntary, which suggests that the motivation driving this type of consumer behavior is sustained largely by the intrinsic pleasure derived from its production. The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the underlying intrinsic and extrinsic motives driving UGC production. The research question investigated in this study relates to how the intrinsically motivating character of UGC production is maintained while simultaneously recognizing contribution (Deci and Ryan 1985).

The context for this exploratory study is Amazon’s Top Reviewer Community and the automated reward system Amazon administers for that community. Amazon’s UGC is created by thousands of volunteers whose book and product reviews have become an influential decision aid for Amazon’s customer base and a differentiating advantage for Amazon itself. On October 23, 2008, Amazon announced changes to the algorithm that drives the reviewer automated feedback system used to calculate UGC contributor rank in that community.

Two theoretical perspectives—Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET; Deci and Ryan 1985) and theories of distributive and procedural justice (Rawls 1971; Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002)—frame the investigation of the impact of Amazon’s announced changes to its ranking system. CET offers a framework for interpreting the effect reward systems can have on eliciting or undermining intrinsically motivated behaviors. CET is augmented with insights drawn from the electronic word-of-mouth literature and from theories of justice related to reward distribution in organizations. This theoretical framework is combined with the results of a netnographic analysis to develop propositions to guide future research.

The Motivation to Create UGC

The production of UGC provides an outlet for the autonomous self-expression of opinions and expertise. It not only serves to develop and affirm personally valued skills, it establishes a basis for relationships among the community of contributors as well as the readers who follow a reviewer’s work when making purchase decisions. Readership feedback perceived to have no ulterior motive other than to express appreciation or acknowledge reviewer expertise, appears to produce a particularly strong motivation to produce UGC. This direct market feedback, however, appears to also threaten the perceived autonomy of some of the reviewers, particularly when reader feedback was experienced as an attempt to control or coerce rather than inform (Deci and Ryan 1985).

A reviewer’s relationship with peers engaged in UGC production, paints a picture of a community that is as supportive as it is antagonistic. Peer interactions reflect a competitive environment, paints a picture of a community that is as supportive as it is antagonistic. Peer interactions reflect a competitive environment, and antagonistic interactions that mirror traditional work relationships among the community of contributors as well as the readers who follow a reviewer’s work when making purchase decisions. Readership feedback perceived to have no ulterior motive other than to express appreciation or acknowledge reviewer expertise, appears to produce a particularly strong motivation to produce UGC. This direct market feedback, however, appears to also threaten the perceived autonomy of some of the reviewers, particularly when reader feedback was experienced as an attempt to control or coerce rather than inform (Deci and Ryan 1985).

The reviewer’s relationship with Amazon is centered around the automated reward system they administer. As important as recognition appears to be in motivating UGC production, consistency, and predictability in the allocation of rewards and the perceived fairness of the procedures used to administer the reward system is perhaps more important. Reward systems offer a reason to participate for some and are irrelevant or border on insulting to others. Consequently, the procedures underlying automated feedback must strike a balance between these competing interests in ways that deepen engagement rather than alienate.

Conclusion And Discussion

Amazon has engaged their community of volunteers to produce UGC by implementing a reviewer ranking system and by supporting the review experience with a full complement of interactive tools. The intrinsic pleasure of pursuing an ‘interesting hobby’, the freedom of self-expression, and the social connections created as reviewers develop a loyal readership and relationships with their peers contribute to the motivation to produce UGC. Community ranking operates as a powerful extrinsic influencer of UGC production and appears to be the primary motivator for a substantial portion of the contributing base. For reviewers who are intrinsically motivated to produce UGC, however, Amazon’s ranking system and the relationships built around the product review process, can undermine the fragile sense of autonomy so crucial to sustaining these voluntary contributions. The key to establishing stability in the reviewer community seems to be striking a balance between these countervailing forces.

From the perspective of a UGC producer, there are three relevant sources of feedback: the buyers who rely on UGC to support the buying process, fellow reviewers, and the community moderator who maintains the official ranking system. Feedback from buyers tends to offer some of the most important motivation supporting UGC production. For reviewers who attract a following, the social and reputational benefits they experienced appeared to mean more to them than the ranking system devised by Amazon. It appeared that the authenticity of readership comments trumped the economically-tainted feedback attributed to Amazon. Peer-to-peer relationships between reviewers also provides social benefits, however community rank appears to introduce a competitive element to the UGC experience that can be motivating for some while alienating to others.

Marketers interested in leveraging the expertise of their customer base will need to meet the challenge of balancing what are often incompatible forces, in order to encourage their users to contribute to UGC production. This view into the world of UGC production provides insight into the nature of that challenge.

References