“How Do I Tell My Advisor?”: Socio-Emotional Motivations for Information Sharing in Academia Stack Exchange

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ABSTRACT

Background: Users frequently share information online (Case & Given, 2016), with social and emotional support factors often important motivations (e.g. Ardichvili, 2008; McLure Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Worrall, 2015) including on social Q&A sites (e.g. Choi, Kitzie, & Shah, 2014; Worrall & Oh, 2013). Our knowledge of socio-emotional motivations that influence online information sharing is still limited.

Objective: To identify social and emotional factors that motivate users to ask questions, answer questions, and share information with other users on Academia Stack Exchange (Academia SE).

Methods: We content analyzed 100 randomly sampled questions and associated answers and comments from the Academia (http://academia.stackexchange.com) sub-site of Stack Exchange, one of the largest and most popular social Q&A sites. Our codebook contained common socio-emotional motivations seen in prior literature (Oh, 2010, 2012; Oh & Syn, 2015; Shah, Oh, & Oh, 2008; Gazan, 2011; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010): altruism, communality, empathy, enjoyment, gratitude, interaction and social engagement, norms, payment and personal gain, reciprocity, reputation and status, self-efficacy, and social cognition. Emergent motivations were captured through open coding, annotations, and memoing. Coding and analysis were discussed within the team throughout to ensure reliability, trustworthiness, and consistency (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results: A stronger role for norms, communality, and self-efficacy existed than in previous work, along with greater negativity and a concerning lack of empathy. Personal and social norms were the most common motivation; users sought how to behave in common academic situations, while answers established Academia SE and broader academic community norms through enforcement and suggested behaviours. Contributing to a sense of community and to common culture, and desiring greater acculturation into Academia SE and broader academic communities, was also a common motivation. Users’ competence and self-efficacy was based on their perceptions towards their own expertise potentially benefiting the Academia SE community; many but not all cases were ego-driven. Social cognition played a role when questioners wanted to learn more about social qualities displayed in academia and academic relationships. Reputation and status was acknowledged tacitly with interests in improving but not damaging one’s reputation in academia. Negative motivations in answers, coupled with a lack of empathy, emerged; some users were sarcastic, unhelpful, or provided unwanted advice based on circumstantial evidence. These answers often connected back to self-efficacy and ego. Academia SE users display a stronger focus on socio-informational components and learning more about academic communities’ norms, culture, social
perceptions, and reputation practices, similar to legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

**Future Work:** It remains unclear whether coherence in norms, values, and behaviours is established within the Academia SE community; there may also be implicit empathetic considerations guiding Academia SE users’ information sharing even as little explicit empathy is observed. We are conducting (a) a survey of users of Academia SE, providing direct input about their socio-emotional motivations, norms, values, and behaviours; and (b) semi-structured interviews with select survey participants to add further insight on motivations, coherence, and empathy.

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**References:**


