

# “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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