

Image, Word, Action: Interpersonal Dynamics in a Photo-Sharing Community

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Abstract

In online photo-sharing communities, the individual's expression of self and the relationships that evolve among members is determined by the kinds of images that are shared, by the words exchanged among members, and by interpersonal actions that do not specifically rely on images or text. This article examines the dynamics of personal expression via images in Flickr, including a proposed system for identifying the dimensions of imagistic communication and a discussion of the psychological meanings embedded in a sequence of images. It explores how photographers use text descriptors to supplement their images and how different types of comments on photographs influence interpersonal relationships. The "fav"—when members choose an image as one of their favorites—is examined as one type of action that can serve a variety of interpersonal functions. Although images play a powerful role in the expression of self, it is the integration of images, words, and actions that maximize the development of relationships.

Introduction

IN THE PAST, the primary method of online communication was typed text. In fact, typed text via e-mail, chat, instant messaging, discussion boards, social networks, and blogging has evolved into a highly sophisticated and unique form of dialogue.¹ However, with the increasing availability of high-speed Internet connections, visual images have become increasingly popular as a tool for self-expression. This shift provides a unique opportunity for the psychological study of online imagistic communication.

Psychological theory has long advocated a basic distinction between language and visualizations as two basic cognitive systems for managing memories, processing information, and self-expression. Whereas the verbal system tends to involve thinking that is more linear, conceptual, consciously controlled, and reality-based, the visual or mental imagery system tends to be more holistic, emotional, personal, imaginative, symbolic, and influenced by the unconscious.² This distinction between imagery and verbal functioning, as well as personal preferences and strengths in visual versus verbal thinking, can help explain why people choose online environments that emphasize visual communication and how people interact in these environments. In addition to image and text, a third type of online communication is *interpersonal action*: a person may perform a specific act as an expression of interpersonal meaning without relying on language or images.

The purpose of this research was to explore the interpersonal dynamics of image, word, and action in the popular photo-sharing community known as *Flickr*. Three methods were employed in gathering observations. In the tradition of participant-observation and ethnographic methodologies, I, as a member of Flickr for several years, immersed myself in the community, relying on an epistemological oscillation between an objective observation of social phenomena and my subjective experience of interpersonal dynamics—a methodology that I previously described in my research on the Palace multimedia chat community.³ I also conducted in-depth e-mail interviews with volunteers from Flickr, as well as facilitated group discussions among visitors. These discussions often took place in reaction to images that I used to illustrate ideas about photo-sharing. Because this research focused on imagistic communication, I felt it was important to use images to convey ideas and stimulate discussion rather than rely on verbal discussions alone. I organized these images into two collections, also called "sets": *The CyberPsychology of Flickr* and *Photographic Psychology*.^{4,5}

Establishing a Cyberpsychological Niche and Equilibrium

With millions of members, many millions of images, and thousands of groups devoted to various photography topics, Flickr confronts each member with an overwhelming ocean of visual stimulation and possibilities for interpersonal

encounters. Although members may find these limitless possibilities exciting, they must at some point develop specific strategies for establishing their presence and identity and for limiting and managing their interpersonal relationships. Members are challenged to establish a *cyberpsychological niche* in which they, both consciously and unconsciously, regulate and define themselves, as well as their relationships, with that niche and the corresponding self-definition being expressed in the members' behaviors regarding image, text, and action. That niche, in order to develop and thrive, must reach a stage of ongoing dynamic synergy between experimentation and restraint—a *cyberpsychological equilibrium* in which new opportunities for image, text, and action are tested, assimilated if successful, and discarded if not.

The niche one establishes is partly determined by the purpose the member assigns to his or her participation in Flickr. People who join the community as a way to share, with family and friends, their life experiences via photographs have a predetermined niche. They may not progress any further into the larger community. However, if they find themselves becoming interested in the art and science of photography, they may be drawn into the wider culture of members who are photography students, aficionados, and professionals, and so are challenged to define the artistic, technical, and social dimensions of their niche.

Some members experience a conflict between different views about the purpose of Flickr. Is it a place to express oneself via images, learn about photography, and/or socialize? Some members approach Flickr as a competitive game in which the popularity of an image is determined by how many times it is viewed, how many people indicate it as a "favorite" (fav), and its overall "interestingness" as determined by an undisclosed formula created by the designers of Flickr. A member's cyberpsychological niche and equilibrium—including how one manages images, text, and actions—is influenced by one's commitment to either the social, educational, artistic, or gaming activities of the community and by a sometimes difficult juggling of these various agendas.

The Image

On its own, without elaboration by text or action, the image can be a powerful vehicle for communication. Many members describe how the visual aspects of the world are important to them and how they try to capture it in their photography. The image is a way to store memories of what is important in one's life, shape personal meaning, and give expression to ideas, experiences, and emotions that may not be easily verbalized. Although everyone does not consciously experience it as such, the image is an extension of one's identity, reflecting aspects of one's personality, relationships, and lifestyle—which is why the theft of one's image, as sometimes happens, feels like a violation not only of ownership but of self. In some cases, the image gives expression to the unconscious dimensions of one's character. It can become a representation that a person builds of himself or herself—not necessarily the self as usually experienced but as an experiment that gives expression to some underlying anxiety, wish, or ideal. The person then establishes a relationship to that image as a means to establish a relationship to some emerging aspect of his or her identity.

For all of these reasons, a person's photostream—the sequence of images uploaded to Flickr—acquires a specific visual and thematic style, distinct from those of other members, whether the person consciously intends this or not.

The uploading of the image to Flickr is an act of "going public" with this visual shaping of the self. It is a process of making the intrapersonal interpersonal. Sharing one's photography may become a form of validation in which the person hopes others will find the personal meaning and facets of identity that the photographer created in the image. Knowing others can see the image gives it more emotional power. It feels more "real." As in art therapy, the process of creating an image can be a therapeutic process of self-insight, emotional catharsis, the working through of conflicts, and the affirmation of identity. Going public with the image may enhance that process. Flickr groups devoted to specific psychological problems—such as depression and bipolar disorders—exemplify these therapeutic qualities of image creation and sharing.

Due to the time restraints many people feel while visiting numerous photostreams, they quickly browse images to see which ones catch their attention. It is a state of perception reminiscent of "evenly hovering attention" as described by Freud.⁶ Members describe how some images instantaneously "grab" them. They may feel speechless, unable to verbalize why the image affects them. They immediately sense a connection to the photograph and, at least to some extent, to the photographer. The image draws them in, while other images in the photostream go barely noticed. A powerful image speaks for itself, although viewers also engage in a process of projecting their own personal meaning into it, so that it becomes a type of nonverbal transitional space⁷ between the viewer and the photographer, with its meaning created by both.

Visual styles vary greatly among members. An effective system for identifying them would need to consider the following factors: (a) the subject matters captured in the image; (b) shooting and postprocessing techniques; (c) the visual characteristics of the image resulting from such techniques, as interpreted psychologically, for example, by Exner's system for analyzing perceptual responses to the Rorschach inkblots;⁸ (d) the psychological and emotional issues portrayed in the image, as classified, for example, according to the seven basic emotions identified by Ekman.⁹

Image Sequence

Images occur in a sequence that reflects member's lives and changes in their perceptions, thoughts, and emotions over time. The sequence can resemble a stream of consciousness. It may change direction, pick up speed, slow down, run shallow or deep. But it is ongoing, with each image linked to those before and after it in psychological ways that may or may not be visible in the images themselves. The "spaces" between images are as important signifiers of psychological dynamics as are the images themselves, pointing to underlying cognitions and affects that stimulated the transition.

The human psyche consists of memories, ideas, sensations, and emotions, all linked to each other in complex chains of associations. A series of images in a photographer's collection is a glimpse into that intrapsychic world. The degree to

which people explore different subjects and imaging techniques in their photostream reflects the diversity, complexity, and points of focus in their intrapsychic world. Some people explicitly use their photostream as an ongoing visual journal to chronicle their lives, sometimes including many self-portraits or images of their environments and significant others, while other people present photographs of scenes that are visually pleasing to them without that explicit link to their lives. Nevertheless, in all cases, the sequence of images reflects the person's intrapsychic reality and how it changes over time.

Image Descriptors

Only rarely do people upload images to Flickr without any accompanying text. Usually, at the very least, people create a title for the image. They may also add a description of one or two sentences or, in some cases, several paragraphs, as well as "tags" that serve as keywords that help people locate the image using search engines.

An image title can be a creative component of the communication process. It adds a layer of meaning that is not immediately obvious in the photo. It may be playful, provocative, or contradict the qualities of the image. If people want to convey a particular idea, especially if they prefer one of a variety of possible interpretations of the image, they create a title that steers viewers in that direction. They might be attempting to prevent viewers from getting the "wrong" impression, even though the image could be interpreted that way. In some cases, the title elevates a technically poor or average photo to a higher level of psychological impact. It can be more powerful than the image itself, as when the photographer personalizes the image with emotional self-disclosures as titles. Titles containing questions—as in those that challenge viewers to solve some puzzle about the photo—are effective in drawing people into the image. Many Flickr members believe that a title "makes or breaks" an image.

For the photographer, creating a title can be a process of discovering new meanings in the image via an internalized dialogue with imagined viewers. "What do I want you, the viewer, to see in this image?" and "What does this image mean to me?" are questions that go hand in hand. When photographers know what they want to say and how they want others to react, a title may pop immediately into mind. In other cases, they may give careful thought to their titles. They know that they like a photo but are unsure why. Searching for a title might clarify this. It might help them uncover the subconscious feelings, memories, and fantasies that they associate with the image and how (or whether) they wish viewers to react to these things.

Descriptions accompanying an image, especially detailed and well-written ones, can be quite powerful by providing more in-depth information, often serving as a narrative about an event in one's life or an explanation of one's point of view on some subject, for which the image serves as an illustration. Tags, which are displayed in a rather inconspicuous sidebar on the photo page, are sometimes used not simply as keywords to categorize an image but as an opportunity for the photographer to present a kind of subvocal comment on the image—a parenthetical thought, whisper, aside, digression, or even a "mumbling to oneself" that

can provide additional insight, humor, emotion, and self-disclosure. Effective titles, descriptions, and tags entice the viewer into the image and in some cases might even upstage the image.

Although images, in and of themselves, can have a powerful impact, it is the combination of the image with text descriptors that launches the potential for a relationship between photographers and their visitors. Photographers become more present and "real" as people via the accompanying text they offer. For this reason, they feel a strong interpersonal disconnection from visitors who leave comments indicating that they obviously have paid no attention to text descriptors. The viewer's neglect in understanding neither the image nor the photographer might even seem callous or toxic when they offer comments indicating that they obviously overlooked the photographer's personal self-disclosures in the text descriptors.

Comments on Photos

In the discussion board below each image, visitors can comment on it as well as engage the photographer and each other in conversation. These dialogues form the basis for an immersion into a collective appreciation and understanding of the image and for the development of interpersonal relationships. People's skill and motivation for writing will shape their participation in these conversations. Because Flickr is a photo-sharing community, some people, especially those who are primarily visual in their cognitive style, may be more invested in the imagistic experience than in verbal dialogue. No doubt, the experience of Flickr is quite different for those who participate in the exchange of comments as compared to those who do not, especially because text communication plays such an important role in the development of relationships.

In developing their cyberpsychological equilibrium, members face the challenge of managing the amount of time spent in commenting on others' photos. Comments longer than a few sentences often indicate a strong personal reaction to the photo, an ongoing relationship between the viewer and the photographer, or motivation to establish a relationship. People appreciate the time and effort others put into a detailed, thoughtful, or insightful comment. In fact, such comments are regarded as a precious commodity. They are reserved for friends, family, and other important contacts; or they can become a form of social barter in which a person leaves one with the hope or expectation of getting one. Some members lament this "tit for tat" system of exchange, although many people do not continue commenting on someone's photos if that person does not reciprocate.

Like the sequence of images that a person uploads to Flickr, the series of comments from visitors helps shape the unique atmosphere of one's photostream. When a photostream thrives as a social entity—which does not happen in all cases because some photographers receive few comments—stability is attained in the people who visit and the kinds of comments they leave. By selectively responding to and therefore reinforcing certain types of comments and, in some cases, by deleting comments that seem inappropriate, the photographer contributes to this molding of the distinctive character of his or her photostream. Comments tend to fall into these categories:

Terse praise

A very large number of comments are brief compliments, such as “great capture” and “beautiful colors.” While photographers appreciate any type of comment, these brief remarks tend to be generic and in some ways unsatisfying. Visitors may offer terse praise because they feel unable to verbalize how an image affected them. Usually, the preponderance of brief comments is the result of people feeling that they do not have the time to say more as they make their rounds in visiting many photostreams. Therefore, short, positive comments tend to be the norm. Social status and the “interestingness” ratings for images revolve around how many comments one receives, so brief compliments become a form of social currency. In the bartering system, one gives a terse compliment when one receives one. The large number of complimentary comments creates an overall positive atmosphere within the community, which might reflect a tacit agreement among members that self-disclosure via photo-sharing should be respected as an activity that places people in a socially and artistically vulnerable position.

Critiques and technical remarks

Members seeking to improve their photography may welcome constructive criticism about the technical aspects of their shooting, postprocessing, and composition. Receiving technical comments and critiques, even those that seem inappropriate, can help the photographer better understand his or her cyberpsychological niche in the community. People from different niches may not understand or appreciate each other’s work. Other members, particularly those who are not necessarily interested in improving their photography or who simply wish to share photos with friends, may not appreciate critiques or advice from their visitors. The self-disclosures that occur in images and text, as well as the occasional inappropriately hostile comments, are evidence supporting the well-known online disinhibition effect;⁹ however, the distinctly pleasant atmosphere in Flickr created by positive comments is a notable exception to the negative aspects of that disinhibition effect.

Personal reactions

Viewers often comment on what they personally like about an image, such as the colors, shapes, and textures; the people or subjects in the shot; and the idea, feeling, or sensation that the image creates. They engage in a process of free association by describing what the image reminds them of, including events and people from their own lives. They may personalize the photo and project their own meaning into it by describing how it relates to themselves or what it means to them on an emotional, social, or philosophical level. Rather than intended as an objective evaluation of the photograph, such comments serve more as an interpersonal bridge between the viewer and the photographer. If the image expresses unconscious meanings for the photographer, then the viewers’ spontaneous expressions of how the image affects them may reflect their own unconscious connection to those meanings, which can lead to empathic attachment between the photographer and the viewer.

Interpretations of the photographer

Some viewers use the image as a vehicle for commenting on the mood, personality, or life of the photographer. The more the photographer deliberately creates and presents the image as an expression of self—most notably in self-portraits—the more likely visitors will make such comments. When self-disclosures embedded in the image are intended, photographers usually will appreciate accurate interpretations, while feeling misunderstood when the interpretations seem wrong. Viewers sometimes interpret the image in ways the photographer did not consciously intend when creating it. Depending on the accuracy and intent of the interpretation, photographers might feel misunderstood, attacked, or delighted to discover something new about the image and themselves. People who design their photostream for the specific purpose of self-disclosing about their personality and life will typically appreciate, or at least take interest in, almost all of their visitors’ interpretations because their photography serves the purpose of a “looking-glass self” in which the process of self-discovery relies on feedback from others.¹⁰ For some of these photographers, images become an ongoing stream of idealized, desired, feared, or realistic portrayals of their identity. To experiment with and develop their identity, they establish a relationship to these images as transformational objects that are partly self, not self, and potential self.¹¹ Comments from their visitors assist them in this process of discovering what they are, what they are not, what they wish to be.

Topical comments

Images can stimulate comments about a wide range of political, philosophical, and intellectual topics. The conversations that emerge resemble the group dynamics of blogs and traditional discussion boards, with the image serving as a centerpiece or stabilizing reference point for the dialogue. When these conversations among visitors and the photographer become lengthy, especially when flame wars fuel and prolong the debates, the image may become incidental to the discussion that takes on a life of its own.

Questions

Rather than offering a statement about an image, viewers might instead ask a question about it, which invites a dialogue and possibly a relationship between the viewer and the photographer. Many photographers, especially those who receive a limited number of visitors, appreciate the interest implied by asking a question as well as the opportunity to discuss themselves and their photos.

Although members report that the combination of words and images can be especially powerful in the formation of relationships, they note that it is difficult to imagine a relationship developing without comments. Personally and in their photography, people may be significantly influenced by another person’s images, and that influence may in some cases be reciprocal, yet without text communication, their relationship exists in a purely preverbal, experiential realm that each of them may find difficult or ambiguous to confirm as a “relationship.” Instead, in most cases, images serve as the starting point for the relationship, which then evolves via exchanged comments on photos and later perhaps via e-mail, phone, and face-to-face

contact. For some people, the socializing and social networking aspect of Flickr is as important as, if not more important than, photo-sharing. Images serve as conversation pieces, as convenient vehicles for people to talk to each other about themselves and their lives.

Action: the Fav

Behaviors that involve little if any text or imagistic communication also play an important role in interpersonal dynamics. Any given online environment might provide a variety of such actions that members use to develop their identity and participation in the community. In Flickr, one such behavior is the fav—a button beneath a photo that visitors can click to indicate that they consider it one of their favorite images. A catalog of the images that a person “fav’ed” is available in his or her home area within Flickr and can be viewed by visitors. Even though the fav seems to be a relatively simple type of action, it has acquired a variety of psychological and social functions:

Personal impact

People may fav an image when it has a strong emotional impact on them. Members describe such favs in terms of their immediate reaction to the image, its “wow” factor, how beautiful and inspiring it is, how it made them laugh, its fascinating perplexities, how it speaks to them, resonates with them, or touches them on a deep level. These types of favs may help visitors express their appreciation of the photo when they feel its impact but are not sure why or cannot adequately verbalize why.

Technical or artistic merit

Viewers may offer a fav as an acknowledgment of the technical or artistic skill demonstrated in the photo. They might fav images that demonstrate excellent examples of their own style of photography, reveal technical and artistic ideas that are new to them, or illustrate admirable skills even though the image itself does not match the visitor’s preferred tastes. When visitors wish to offer helpful feedback, the fav may not indicate that the photo is actually a favorite for them but rather that in the eyes of the visitor, this particular image is the photographer’s best effort.

Social support

A visitor might offer a fav to support and encourage other members when they are new at doing photography, attempting something different in their work, or taking a risk of some kind. As a form of nonverbal behavior, this type of fav serves as an acknowledging smile, a nod of the head, a pat on the back, or applause. While people who fav as an indication of personal impact and technical/artistic merit tend to do so selectively, those who offer favs for social support tend to be more liberal. Some members who start out in Flickr being very “stingy” about favs eventually use them more freely, most likely in the spirit of encouraging social support.

Friendship

The fav can be a gesture of friendship. People give them to friends or in hopes of establishing an amiable relationship. As a type of social grooming, offering a fav shows enthusi-

asm about a friend’s performance, mostly because it is the friendship that is important and not necessarily the image. Some members feel more inclined to fav the photos of friends than those of acquaintances and strangers, probably because they think of the fav as a sign of intimacy and camaraderie.

Social barter

Favs can serve as an item for bartering. When one receives a fav from a visitor, one gives a fav in return; or one may give a fav with the hope or expectation that the other member will reciprocate. The value of the fav rests not only in its being a sign of appreciation but also in the fact that the number of favs for an image boosts its “interestingness” rating and hence the status of the member in the community.

Efficient communication

The fav may serve as a substitute for leaving a comment when people can’t find the words to describe why they liked an image, when they don’t have time to leave a comment, or when they lack facility in the photographer’s language. It is a nonverbal way to indicate one’s presence in the person’s photostream and an appreciation of an image. In some cases, people consider it rude when visitors leave a fav without an accompanying comment, especially when that visitor is regarded as a friend. However, other members are more apt to fav rather than comment if they view photography in terms of experiential or “gut” reactions rather than verbal analysis.

Remembrances

Although some members rarely look at the images that are stored in their fav collection, others do return to these photos. Using these favs as reminders of the types of images they enjoyed, they may discover patterns in their visual preferences. They may wish to recapture some mood, idea, or inspiration that the image initially triggered. As components of one’s social network, stored favs also include links to the photostreams of those photographers, thereby serving not just as souvenirs or reminders of those people but also as implicit interpersonal connections to them. In large online communities, tools for remembering and reconnecting with other people are important.

Conclusions

Despite the rich psychological meanings embedded in images and the compelling impact they have on other people, interpersonal relationships rarely form and develop by images alone. In photo-sharing communities, a member presents the image to everyone in the community, or to a group of people, as an expression of self. Only rarely is the image intended for someone in particular. Instead, it is exchange of words between members that establishes their mutually recognized presence to each other. It is the exchange of words that is critical in launching their relationship and in the joint understanding of shared meanings that advances the relationship. Images provide an undercurrent of emotion and ideas that enrich interpersonal dynamics, often on a level that is not fully conscious or capable of being verbalized; but text communication between people provide the more deliberate social efforts to advance that particular relationship. Actions that do not rely on

detailed text communication or images add a supplemental level of complexity to this interpersonal behavior. The success of many contemporary online communities often rests on whether the design of the environment includes image, words, and actions, how well members can control them, and the degree to which these dimensions of interpersonal behavior are integrated with each other.

Disclosure Statement

The author has no conflict of interest.

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