Promoting Oneself on Flickr: Users’ Strategies and Attitudes

Linda H. Hwang, Pallavi Damara, Linda Brooking, and Charlotte P. Lee

Department of Human Centered Design and Engineering
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195
+1 (206) 543-2567
{hwang176, pallavid, brookl, cplee} @uw.edu

BACKGROUND

Flickr, a photo-sharing social networking site, boasts of hosting over 4 billion photos [1]. Photo-sharing sites allow people to share their photos with a wide network of friends, family, and the entire Internet. Users upload their photos to these sites and control how they are displayed.

Researchers have conducted quantitative studies on the structure of the Flickr user network, but few have addressed the reasons or thought processes behind its users’ behavior. Previous studies of Flickr and other social networks focus on the nature of the links between users, as well as tallies of their activities [2, 3, 4]. Mislove et al., for example, shows that users who create many links with other users are in turn linked to by others [4].

Other quantitative research examines the phenomenon known as reciprocity, which occurs through commenting, tags, views, and favoriting behaviors [5]. Reciprocation of these actions increases the chances that a user’s photos will be favored by others, as well as facilitating learning [5, 6]. Lerman and Jones, along with Zwol, demonstrate correlations between the quantity of contacts and the number of views of one’s photos [7, 8]. Reciprocation even overshadows expertise: Stewart’s social network study of an open-source development community shows that reputation is heavily dependent on relationships between community members, rather than on factors such as their skill [9].

To contribute a qualitative perspective of Flickr’s network that is missing from the literature, our study examined the strategies users employ to advance self-promotion of their photos on the site—why they do it, and what they think about it.

1. RESEARCH SITE AND DESIGN

Flickr’s interactive features allow people to leave comments on others’ photos, join interest groups made up of other users sharing common interests, add other users to a contact list, and select others’ photos as favorites. These functionalities are ways for users to socially interact with one another on the site.

Flickr also tracks the occurrences of these activities and makes these statistics available to users. These numbers are used as metrics by users who choose to monitor them. Statistics, such as the number of comments left by other Flickr users or the number of times other users select a photo as their favorite (“favoriting”), are tangible measurements of others’ actions. Some Flickr users actively manage the site features to attract more visitors to their photos, gauging their success through their metrics. We set out to qualitatively investigate the types of social interactions and how they are interwoven on Flickr, by interviewing Flickr users. The focus of our research question was, “How do Flickr users care about and conduct self-promotion?”

We recruited ten participants, of which two were Flickr contacts, and eight belonged to Seattle-area Flickr groups. Six of the participants were female and four male, ranging in age from 27 to 55 years old. All participants considered themselves serious photography hobbyists and used Flickr for 1.5 to 6 years.

Our interview protocol consisted of 11 open-ended questions that probed how users were introduced to Flickr, and how they use it for self-promotion. The semi-structured interviews ranged in length from 25 to 60 minutes and were conducted in person and over the phone. Roughly 6.5 hours of interviews were transcribed into 103 pages of documents. For our data analysis, we identified common themes within the responses, with self-promotion as the underpinning element. Two key components of self-promotion, strategies and attitudes, are the focus of this paper.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Strategies for self-promotion

A primary self-promotion strategy employed by the users we interviewed was reciprocity, or the practice of initiating a contact with the expectation that the recipient will feel obligated to respond in return. On Flickr, reciprocity occurred with the exchange of comments, adding others to one’s contact list, or viewing the photos of visitors to one’s page; these actions developed rapport between users. When a visitor to a user’s page leaves a comment for a photo, the user often feels compelled to return the favor, by going to the visitor’s page (Flickr automatically identifies the authors of comments with a link back to their pages) and at least viewing the photos. Often the user goes one step further and will leave a reciprocal comment on one of the visitor’s photos. Homer’ had a philosophical view of this give-and-take, expressing it as an application of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Users can also exploit this reciprocal behavior as a strategy for promoting themselves, as Dana did: “Some [of my comments are] to show my appreciation for [the photo]—that’s very minimal...I hope those people aren’t hearing this [embarrassed...I hope those people aren’t hearing this [embarrassed...

The names of all participants used in this paper are pseudonyms.
laughter] right now...my comment on them exposes me” (emphasis added). Dana recognized that the act of leaving comments not only established or cultivated contact with other users, it also boosted her presence on the Flickr network by leaving visible traces to be seen by others, as well as compelling other users to reciprocate by visiting her page, thus adding further exposure to her work. Dana’s stated awareness of how her comments affected her overall exposure on the site reveals the true intent for her behavior—to use Flickr’s commenting as an effective self-promotion strategy while also bonding with others.

Six of the ten Flickr users we interviewed employed another tactic for increasing the exposure of their work and their number of contacts: joining interest groups. By posting photos to these groups, users knew they could increase the number of views and comments for their work without the amount of effort required for one-on-one contacts. Patty’s approach was to post to multiple groups: “...if I really want the photo to be looked at, I will post it to groups I know—I will post it to a lot of groups so that it gets some exposure.” Groups on Flickr provided a way for members with common interests to congregate, as well as a large captive audience for viewing members’ photos. Many of the users in our study were well aware of how groups could increase their exposure on Flickr, and took advantage of them for self-promotion purposes.

These strategies, as revealed in our interviews, illustrate how people find divergent ways to successfully draw attention to their photos while also accomplishing social goals of interacting with others.

2.2 Attitudes toward self-promotion

Our data showed that users’ attitudes toward self-promotion and its results changed over time. Several participants said their initial reason for using Flickr was to share their work with the world; they started out by spending a lot of time and effort trying to draw visitors to their photographs. According to Selma, “When I first started on Flickr, it was like, ‘Oh my gosh, you looked at my photo?!’ And now you get very used to that.” After the excitement of having people view their photos diminished over time, some Flickr members looked for more intimate relationships with their contacts within the network, rather than continuing to amass a large, mostly anonymous following. Patty stated, “You get...50 people to comment on your photo and give you little prizes. And it’s kind of like, ‘That’s not why I’m doing this. I don’t want this....’” Thus some Flickr users in our study came to prefer insightful comments left on their photos from people they respected over awards or compliments from strangers over time.

3. CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to examine how Flickr users care about and conduct self-promotion on the site. We found that users’ attitudes toward self-promotion, as well as their self-promotion strategies, changed over the course of their tenure on Flickr. Users grew to value their social interactions on Flickr over gaining exposure for their photos—they mentioned learning techniques from professionals or best locations for scenic shots in unfamiliar areas, and making friends with Flickr users from foreign countries. Jon stated: “I mean, if it were just sharing photos, I could just use my own website or any other number of photo-sharing services. But it’s that community aspect on Flickr that’s made it my choice.” Those who initially looked to promote their photos on Flickr found that their relationships with other Flickr members were the site’s greatest benefit.

4. Acknowledgments

Thanks to Paul Riggins and Heidi Sales for their contributions during the interviewing, transcribing, and analysis stages, as well as Dr. Charlotte Lee’s Summer Working Group for their suggestions. Finally, thanks to the participants for sharing their insights.

5. REFERENCES


