

## Part Two: Reciprocity and Its Discontents

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Mary Douglas, a key figure in the field of anthropology, once famously asserted that in small-scale societies, “the cycling gift system is the society” (Douglas 1990). She was speaking about cultural groups that depended on elaborate systems of reciprocity—or mutual exchange of things—to support relationships and societal institutions. We may well ask, just how important is reciprocity in contemporary, commercialized, digital milieus? When are cycles of reciprocity important to take part in, and when should reciprocity be strategically withheld? Whereas my previous post discussed the existence and benefits of contemporary forms of reciprocity among social YouTubers, this post focuses on specific aspects of reciprocity that YouTubers deliberately withheld in order to maintain a more positive atmosphere of sociality and creative connection. This post argues that although many forms of warm reciprocity were observed among social YouTubers, at the same time not all forms of reciprocity are beneficial. Reciprocity in and of itself is hardly a panacea for achieving a strong community of creative participants in digital groups. In specific exchanges, participants had to choose whether or not to reciprocate a particular bid for attention, and their decision was often based on whether an offer of reciprocal engagement with each other’s work signaled future, meaningful sociality.

In my prior post, I discussed how the death of reciprocity online has been greatly exaggerated. Fears of a narcissistic epidemic grounded in lack of reciprocity ignore many forms of observable, interactional reciprocity online. I examined data from my new book, *Thanks for Watching: Anthropological Study of Video Sharing on YouTube*, to argue that contra observers’ fears, many forms of reciprocity are present among video makers who wish to create online environments that are both socially-motivated and creatively-inspired (Lange 2019). In an environment that may be characterized in part as an “attention economy,” (Goldhaber 1997) exchanging forms of human attention included watching each other’s videos or responding to meaningful text comments. Given our extremely limited time-life spans, bestowing such reciprocity becomes an important aspect of interactive exchange that YouTubers felt supported a sense of community.

Yet fears about “losing reciprocity” also smuggle in the assumption that reciprocity is always inherently warm, mutual, and positive for sustaining relationships. This limited view of reciprocity is grounded in a very narrow formulation. Reciprocity can be quite instrumental, operating far closer to economic exchange than is often assumed. In an instrumental form of reciprocity, giving a gift is done with the mutual expectation that something will be gained from the interaction (Yan 1996). The exchanged items function more as “quasi-commodities.” Whereas “expressive gifts” operate within a continuing cycle of reciprocal giving, “instrumental” gifts aim to achieve immediate

“utilitarian” ends—in a way that does not necessarily preclude sociality (Yan 1996).

In the commercialized and attention economy-driven environment of YouTube, participants whom I interviewed who sought sociality through video sharing tolerated some amount of instrumental reciprocity. At the time of my interviews, some creators were contemplating a career change in media and they understood the value of using sociality to gain more attention for their work. Although not necessarily a hard and fast “law of reciprocity” as some social media pundits portray it, certainly mutual engagement was seen as a key to driving attention and traffic to one’s work.

At the same time, YouTubers whom I interviewed exhibited limits. Rather than feel a need to automatically reciprocate when someone commented on their videos or subscribed to them, they often used these gestures as prompts to check out the other person’s work. Participating online became a way of offering potential “encounters” in which people might reciprocate attention (Pelaprat and Brown 2012). If someone subscribed to one’s YouTube channel, creators saw it as an invitation for future engagement. Although YouTube now offers commercial subscription packages, the discussion here focuses on free subscriptions that are still available on individual YouTube channels. To subscribe to someone’s channel one simply pressed a “Subscribe” button on a video or a YouTube participant’s channel page. After subscribing, one might be alerted to new content uploaded from that channel on YouTube.

However, some video makers engaged in behavior that interviewees characterized as subscription “begging.” In a practice known as “sub for sub” or “subscription for subscription,” person *a* asks person *b* to subscribe to them. If person *b* does so, person *a* promises in return to reciprocally subscribe “back” to person *b*. Such behaviors also appear on other social media, including Instagram, in the form of bids to exchange a “like for like” on photographs posted to that site. Similarly, “like hunters” are often judged poorly and are often blocked by other Instagram users.

While a few interviews saw “sub for sub” as acceptable because it garnered attention and supported sociality, most of the people whom I interviewed saw this as a meaningless, or even an insulting, practice. Parody videos appeared that ridiculed sub for sub’s vacuous connotations (Lange 2010). YouTubers interested in sociality said that this behavior revealed that a creator cared more about achieving viewing metrics than creating friendships. YouTube reportedly focuses most economic attention on total watch time on a channel’s videos, rather than on engagement metrics.

Clearly these forms of reciprocity were not welcome for the YouTubers whom I interviewed. Marshall Sahlins, another important figure in anthropology, observed behaviors he characterized as “negative” reciprocity in which people attempted to brazenly gain something for nothing during an exchange (Sahlins 1972). A version of negative reciprocity appeared on YouTube in which some people asked for a subscription, received a pledge from the other person to subscribe, but then quietly backed out of their agreement to subscribe back. Effectively, this helped the asking party to asymmetrically receive an incremental new subscription, but did not help the other person also

raise their visibility through the receipt of a new subscriber.

Youtubers often eschewed even the honest version of sub for sub when both parties honored the reciprocal bargain. Interviewees feared it would degrade the creative community of YouTube (Lange 2019). Socially-motivated Youtubers told me that many people asking for sub for sub were usually desperate or uncreative. Encouraging them meant promoting bad videos or forming links with people who were insincere. Interviewees felt it important to withhold their reciprocity in these cases, in order to preserve a more social and robustly creative atmosphere.

Anthropologists have long known that withholding reciprocity may be important for supporting particular values and sustaining a community. Annette Weiner (1992) focused on the important relationship between persons and things. She used the word “inalienable” to describe things that functioned less as economic tokens and more as symbols of the people or sacred entities who possessed them. She stated that when certain possessions became connected to specific people, they might be difficult to give away easily. When possessions connect to ideas of being sacred or exhibiting particular status, they take on a different character and become more significant than other things of similar surface value.

In the YouTube case, a “thing” such as a *subscription* or *like* originates from specific, human people. A mutual subscription from a high status person may take on a different value and meaning than would a reciprocal subscription from a low status participant. Although likes and subscriptions do not have the same historical genealogy or lineage of ownership as do the kinds of material gifts that Weiner studied, it is arguably the case that digital tokens of attention exhibit inalienable properties that are strongly associated with specific people. Indexes of attention exhibit the kind of inalienability—or special, sacred quality associated with its owner—that Weiner characterized as exhibiting a “unique, subjective identity” that locates them “above the exchangeability of one thing for another.” A high status person may be reluctant to bestow attention on something that is not worthy of recognition, lest their discerning reputation become degraded, or a video becomes promoted through views beyond its merit or value to the community. In these cases it is better to withhold mutual attention and reduce the chance that poor quality videos or insincere video makers would achieve unearned visibility. By strategically withholding reciprocity, the creative and social aura of the site may be better supported and preserved.

Social media experts refer to the human “law” of reciprocity as foundational for promoting one’s work. Paradoxically, scholars and pundits fear a “loss” of reciprocity as a sign that narcissism is too rampant to form meaningful relationships through digital interaction. Yet, reciprocities do occur, as has been observed among socially-oriented Youtubers. But neither is reciprocity a single, one-dimensional form. People take part in reciprocal exchanges for a variety of reasons. The YouTube case showed that sociality often emerged when reciprocal attention was not viewed as a metric, but rather was perceived as an opening volley to a potentially ongoing cycle of mutual attention and

engaged interaction in a video milieu.

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