
Leveraging Focus Theory of Normative Conduct to Shape User Behavior

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Abstract

This paper argues that designers and community managers can leverage Focus Theory of Normative Conduct to motivate constructive user behaviors in online communities as well as shape positive perceptions of community moderation among their users. I provide evidence from my prior research to show how opportunities exist in modifying design elements and moderation procedures to emphasize community norms that may encourage productive outcomes.

Author Keywords

social norms, Reddit, content moderation

ACM Classification Keywords

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There are often differences in individuals' basic views on what types of speech are appropriate [7, 8]. Everyone agrees that you can't yell "fire" in a crowded theater. But beyond concrete and immediate harm, where do we draw the line? Feminists and critical race theorists argue that words have power, and we are responsible for the emotional harm our words may cause others [5, 10]. Strong civil libertarians argue that censorship is a slippery slope, and freedom of speech includes the right to offend [1].

With such fundamental disagreements on what sort of

speech is appropriate, it's a wonder that people ever succeed in civil communication. Fortunately, this problem is normally solved by social norms. Members of different online communities develop a sense of local social norms for appropriate communication. Each Reddit community, for example, evolves its own norms—what you may say on r/funny is quite different than what you can say on r/politics or any of the other thousands of subreddits. This raises the questions: Can we leverage social norms to facilitate successful communications online? Can design elements and moderation practices in online communities shape social norms to help users learn how to become productive contributors?

Drawing on the Focus Theory of Normative Conduct [3], I contend that learning among online community members can be influenced by both *injunctive* norms—norms that set behavioral expectations by prescribing acceptable practices, as well as *descriptive* norms—norms that support experiential social learning through observations of how other community members behave. In line with this theory, I argue that community managers can adopt a holistic approach towards teaching social norms, and provide learning resources to their members—both by prescribing acceptable behaviors as well as emphasizing how other successful members operate in online spaces.

In my own work [9], I have used this lens to describe how different design elements and moderation practices within online communities help influence user behaviors. For example, consider the case of a popular Reddit community called Change My View¹ (CMV). This subreddit describes itself as “a place to post an opinion you accept may be flawed, in an effort to understand other perspectives on the issue” [4]. Once users submit a post in which they describe

an opinion that they are open to changing, other members comment on that post and argue for the other side. The subreddit is “dedicated to the civil discourse of opinions, and is built around the idea that in order to resolve our differences, we must first understand them” [4].

An intriguing feature of this community is that it gamifies the process of changing the view of post submitters by implementing an award mechanism called the delta system. Submitters are expected to award “delta,” a digital award, to commenters who successfully change their view. This convention serves as a way to acknowledge as well as programmatically track change in views, and the people that change them.

I conducted interviews with 15 active users of this subreddit, including the CMV creator and 3 CMV moderators, in order to understand the factors that shape the normative practices of CMV members. My analysis of these interview data shows that the injunctive norms of the community underscored via strict enforcement of rules by CMV moderators as well as prominent highlighting of these rules plays a key role in keeping discussions civil. Moderation keeps out trolls and discourages posts by users who are not interested in hearing others' point of view.

I also found that descriptive norms articulated through observations of posters earning deltas play a role in helping members understand which types of conversations are desirable on the community. Comments that earn deltas are typically civil, constructive and concede to the validity of arguments of the original posters. Seeing positive responses to such comments helps encourage users to be civil in their discussions with opposing members even on topics that usually invite vitriolic discussions on other communities. Thus, the descriptive norms of what successful posts look like are perhaps as relevant as injunctive norms

¹<https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview>

on expected posting behaviors that communities prescribe in their posting guidelines and in their communications to users.

My work on other projects have added further evidence to the importance of descriptive and injunctive norms in shaping user behavior. For example, on a recent project², through a survey of 907 Reddit users whose postings were removed across different Reddit communities, I found that users who noticed the subreddit rules were more likely to consider their removal as fair and continue to participate in the community in the future. Moreover, the level of clarity in community guidelines accounted for additional variance in perceptions of increased fairness in moderation.

Thus, injunctive norms play an important role in shaping user behavior. However, research indicates that there are gaps in practices that shape user behavior through such norms. For example, Fiesler et al. recently estimated that only about half of all Reddit communities have subreddit rules. Since having a list of posting rules is largely a one-time task, site managers should encourage voluntary moderators to establish rules in their communities. Recent research suggests that community norms and rules often overlap among different communities [2, 6]. Moderators of new communities may benefit by having tools that can suggest them which rules they should create, based on the similarity of their community with existing communities containing rules.

Further, I recommend that an important opportunity to highlight descriptive norms is to provide explanations for post removals publicly, for example, as a comment to the removed posts. On Reddit, although submissions that are removed stop appearing on the front page of the subreddit,

they are still accessible to the users who have already engaged with them, for example, through replying via a comment to those submissions. Therefore, many users can still see the removal explanations provided by the moderators. Observing the removal of the post and a reasoned explanation for that removal can inform these bystanders why certain types of posts are unacceptable on the community. Such interactions can help these bystanders become better content submitters themselves in the future.

Building on the evidence and examples listed above, I propose that applications of Focus Theory of Normative Conduct can prove to be a generative space for content moderation systems to develop and establish ways for motivating users to engage in productive activities.

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²Citation is omitted because this project is currently under review.

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