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### Reddit and the Meaning of “Meaningful” Intimacy

Online social media have allowed us to explore intimate relationships in a way we never have before. By connecting the globe, the Internet has introduced a general sense of geographical independence in exploring relationships and ideas, and meeting people outside of our immediate vicinity. Furthermore, social media have allowed for the organization of discussion in a way which has made finding similarly minded people far easier. Among these social media platforms, Reddit is a role model in fostering intimate discourse.

Claims that understanding of identity, physical co-presence, and mutuality are essential tenets of intimate interaction are popular in the academic community. As a counterargument to these claims, the case for abstracting “meaningful” intimacy to characteristics of subjective experience will be made in this paper. Until then, the definition of meaningful intimacy in interaction will closely follow Prager’s three “necessary and sufficient conditions” in the Encyclopedia of Human Relationships--namely, those of “self-revealing behavior, positive involvement with the other, and shared understandings” (Prager).

Reddit enables meaningful intimacy through its support of users sharing deeply personal stories and opinions. It creates close-knit communities through its structure of subreddits, which bring together and encourage the self-expression of people who are interested in a variety of general or niche topics. Its maintenance of discourse through guidelines, bots, and moderators

ensures civil and topical conversation, opening the doors to deeply intimate interaction. While many of Reddit's features indirectly foster intimacy (such as private messaging), this paper focuses on how karma and gifting establish a paradigm of use which surrounds civility and compassion. This makes the Reddit community among the most welcoming and understanding on the Internet. As a result, the platform is far more conducive to intimate interaction.

Reddit is defined by its subreddits. Subreddits are essentially forums dedicated to specific topics. When a user first creates their account, they are automatically subscribed to a number of popular subreddits. A few among these defaults are r/news, r/science, r/AskReddit, and r/ExplainLikeImFive (the "r/" is commonly added to indicate reference to a subreddit). The names are generally self-explanatory: r/news and r/science are dedicated news forums for global events and scientific research, respectively, whereas r/AskReddit and r/ExplainLikeImFive are open forums for users to ask open-ended questions to the rest of the Reddit community.



Figure 1: Shown are the comments in reaction to a post of a chair crafted by a user in r/woodworking.



Figure 2: Under the same post as Figure 1, a conversation is opened up between the original poster and other users regarding technical aspects of the chair's creation.

Subreddits form close-knit communities of people who can bond over shared understandings of what is important to them. The ability to discuss interests in dedicated forums gives people an intimate sense of belonging in a community. This is especially true for niche interests, which can be more alienating. It is hard to find someone who shares a niche interest in one's immediate vicinity--by definition, there are relatively few people interested in it. Niche subreddits facilitate the sharing of creations, opinions, and advice with similarly interested strangers. Take for example the unaltered interactions in Figures 1 and 2, which are from the r/woodworking subreddit. The comments are in response to a picture and description of a chair the OP (original poster) crafted with great care. Every response in Figure 1 shows admiration of the hard work OP put in and interest in the final product itself. The abundance of positive involvement underlies the shared understanding that woodworking is a difficult, time-consuming, and personal hobby. One user in Figure 2 shows concern with the sturdiness of the chair, and a conversation is opened up between other users and OP in which they discuss technical details of the chair's construction. r/woodworking has clearly provided an outlet to share personal creations with an engaged audience for OP, as well as a means of interacting with other woodworking enthusiasts.

The anonymity of users may seem to detract from the depth of intimate interaction. Although this may be true to the extent that users lack information about the physical identity of other users, anonymity also adds to the depth of the interaction in its own way--by making users feel truly comfortable in self-expression. OP in the above example might hesitate in bringing up their woodworking in casual conversation with everyday peers, but they certainly would not bring this fear with them to r/woodworking. If this point seems less obvious, consider the fear of

judgement members of any fetish community experience in their everyday romantic pursuits.

Reddit's many fetish subreddits offer sanctuary to such people. Matt Hart corroborates this idea in his pilot study of youth intimacy on Tumblr. In studying the fetish communities on Tumblr, he demonstrates that anonymity eliminates the fear of judgement as a barrier to self-revealing behavior, "fostering an intimacy incapable of being sustained offline or elsewhere" (Hart). Other potential barriers to self-revealing behavior include hostility and incivility in discourse. This is where the guidelines and guideline enforcers on subreddits step in.

Subreddits have guidelines for posting, as well as moderators and auto-moderators (bots) to ensure that these guidelines are met. The combination of guidelines and guideline enforcers (bots and moderators) eradicates the vast majority of hostility and incivility on Reddit. For example, Rules 7 and 8 on r/AskReddit state "No begging for goods and services" and "No demeaning terms or personal attacks." Bots specifically programmed for these rules will then use natural language processing techniques to filter the posts which most obviously offend these guidelines. Moderators can take down or report the users of posts which are less obviously offensive. This structure is by far the most effective and intentional of Reddit's features in encouraging progressive discourse on the platform. Incivility is truly a rarity on Reddit. In fact, in finding evidence for this claim, one need only to look to the comments of virtually any popular subreddit. Every appended figure in this essay demonstrates the rarity of incivility in most interactions. The guideline/enforcer structure efficiently eradicates the roadblocks to intimate discussion, whereas Reddit's other features softly (indirectly) encourage intimacy. Among these indirectly encouraging features are karma and the gifting of medals.

↑ Posted by u/ProtoFawk 3 months ago

292 ↓

### Thanks for all the Karma (Karma Fanart) - by PomegranatePopCulture

[Thanks for all the Karma](#)  
Artist: [PomegranatePopCulture](#)

Hey everyone!  
Thank you all for all your kind comments and up doots on my last [post](#).  
I hope you guys will enjoy this one as well!

If you want to see more of my OCs in action or have a suggestion to put them on their next pop-culture related adventure, please feel free to check out my page with the link above or leave a comment!

14 Comments Share Save 91% Upvoted

↑ OnyxWarden **Yup, That Tasted Purple** 25 points · 3 months ago  
↓ Take my updoot for this amazing art of my favorite Mid/Supp flex pick  
Reply Share Report Save

↑ TheEndlessDreams 11 points · 3 months ago  
↓ No love for the best Karma? and by this I mean Tank Karma Top obviously.  
Reply Share Report Save

Comment deleted by user 3 months ago (2 children)

↑ bezopboomgumbochops **Splitpush Zilean (Lit Soybean)** 5 points · 3 months ago  
↓ Woah, cool style.  
Reply Share Report Save

↑ DeusVite69 2 points · 3 months ago  
↓ as someone who owns all the skins (and border) I can confirm that the honor is 'heavy' :)  
Reply Share Report Save

↑ Sailto 1 point · 3 months ago  
↓ Those drawing are so cool dude keep it up  
Reply Share Report Save

↑ Z7moon 1 point · 3 months ago  
↓ This is GREAT!!!  
Reply Share Report Save

↑ DianaIsMyWife  1 point · 3 months ago  
↓ haha  
Reply Share Report Save

Figure 3: A user shows great appreciation for the karma they received on an artwork previously posted.

The concepts of karma and gifting on Reddit encourage civility and compassion. This opens up discourse to self-revealing behavior and rewards positive involvement. When a comment or post is upvoted, a user gains ‘karma’, and the opposite is true for downvoted comments and posts. The traditional idea of karma implies a belief in the idea that good things eventually come to good people. By choosing to name their comment voting system ‘karma’, as opposed to simply ‘likes’ or ‘favorites,’ Reddit implicitly affirms the just-world hypothesis which karma presupposes. This affirmation is central to the structural reward for civility in conversation. Seemingly small decisions in word choice like this have a significant impact on the psyche of users and their perceived goal, or paradigm of use, on the app. Users subconsciously develop a motive to be candid, positive, and civil in discussion. Figure 3 shows a user displaying, with civility and compassion, a great appreciation for the karma they received after posting an artwork. The immediate responses to this post show civility and compassion as well. Such gratitude is often seen on popular subreddits, indicating that users experience a sense of joy and acceptance when their post “blows up” with karma. Even more frequently seen is users showing gratitude for receiving Reddit gifts, which add to the sense of charity and compassion on Reddit.

Reddit users can buy and gift silver, gold, or platinum ‘medals’ to other users for comments that they particularly appreciate. Recipients of gold or platinum medals are given temporary access to Reddit premium features, but the value in Reddit gold or platinum, like silver, is mostly intrinsic--it makes the recipient feel good about themselves due to the validation and appreciation of their comment or post. This positive involvement creates a one-way sense of intimacy for the recipient (gifting is anonymous). Reddit silver, gold, and platinum have become extensions of the ‘karma’ paradigm of use. The result is a community which is largely

welcoming to intimate displays of honesty and vulnerability.

↑ festlier 2.2k points · 17 hours ago  
 ↓ I was a young, naive freshman in college and had basically no experience talking to boys. This guy had sat next to me for My whole 2 hour psych lecture and casually talked to me the whole time. Just little comments about the lecture, showing me things on his laptop. Innocent stuff. When lecture ended and we got outside it was POURING. Like, to this day I've seen rain like that maybe twice in my life. Rain that would physically HURT to walk in. He offered me a ride and I said yes, but as he was pulling the car up I thought to myself "don't get in" and took off running to my dorm. Saw him on the news a few months later for raping two women.  
 ■ Reply Give Award Share Report Save

↑ sappydark 612 points · 13 hours ago  
 ↓ Whew---you truly dodged a bullet there.  
 ■ Reply Give Award Share Report Save

↑ festlier 302 points · 13 hours ago  
 ↓ Yeah. Maybe not "saved my life" but pretty damn close. My stomach dropped when I saw that on the news.  
 ■ Reply Give Award Share Report Save

↑ kieree!!!29 240 points · 13 hours ago  
 ↓ Saved your life as you know it. Victims of rape aren't the same after the fact  
 ■ Reply Give Award Share Report Save

1 more reply

1 more reply

↑ Confused\_Elderly\_Owl 141 points · 12 hours ago  
 ↓ People are marvellous things. We can recognise small movements and instantly know their meaning without having seen them before. You probably saw him moving with more strong, sudden movements instead of the normal, smooth ones, and saw him getting giddy about a catch. All without realising  
 Such marvellous things, brains are.  
 ■ Reply Give Award Share Report Save

3 more replies

↑ Shadeofcarus 230 points · 12 hours ago ⓘ  
 ↓ Funny story from the other perspective. Exact same scenario, but when I pulled the car up she was just like "nevermind" and ran off... With my umbrella. Dropped the class.  
 I still look back and think "wow, the world is so shitty a simple kind gesture I'd offer to any human can be scary for women".  
 I get why she ran I guess, not that I would have done anything, I just wish that wasn't a world women have to live in where they can feel like that.  
 ■ Reply Give Award Share Report Save

↑ ILoveShitRats 208 points · 11 hours ago ⓘ  
 ↓ You totally can't blame yourself or her though. Women are often victimized. The numbers speak for themselves. If a ba intuition is only accurate 1 time out of 10, then they need to listen to it every time.  
 As a guy, it does feel like a gut pouch of a girl gets "creeped out" by me. But if I have to be a part of the 90% of upset, occasionally misunderstood men, to save her from that 10% of evil, then it's well worth it.  
 ■ Reply Give Award Share Report Save

23 more replies

5 more replies

Figure 4: A woman responds to a question in r/AskReddit. An intimate conversation ensues.

Figure 4 shows an unaltered example of the abundance of civility and intimacy on r/AskReddit. In response to OP's question, "when did a gut feeling save your life," a female user felt comfortable enough to share a haunting experience she had avoiding a potential rapist by turning down a car ride home. The replies to her comment all show acceptance and support. One man candidly replies with his perspective being on the other side of a similar situation--having a girl accept and then back out of his offer to drop her home. He demonstrates emotional maturity and an understanding of the fear towards male strangers many women hold in their everyday life. A comment in response assures the man that he should not take such a rejection personally, and expounds on the justification of such a fear. The woman's story garnered over 2000 karma. Both replies to the woman's account were anonymously gifted silver, and each were rewarded with over 200 karma. Although this interaction is by no means the most meaningfully intimate one can have online, it demonstrates a level of meaningful intimacy which can be achieved thanks to the structure and community of Reddit. Intimate interactions like these are the norm on non-humorous r/AskReddit posts.

One might question how "meaningful" an intimate interaction on a subreddit can be. After all, such interactions are formed within communities structured to bring together people who are interested in similar things, and posts are not a holistic representation of the person behind them. However, this argument becomes clearly fallacious once one understands the true nature of self and identity. In our interactions with others, we present only a fraction of our "true selves." Even one's perception of their own identity is incomplete, as most of their behaviors are determined by their subconscious, and their opinions by their upbringing. There can never be a holistic representation of a person in any form other than that person in their unobservable

entirety. We must then completely abandon the idea that a holistic representation of a person is a necessary prerequisite for meaningfully intimate interaction, as no arbitrary amount of self-expression can be determined as sufficient in representing one's "true" self.

Matt Hart implicitly accepts the possibility of meaningful intimacy on social media, suggesting that "intimate relationships...can be sustained by most in meaningful ways without needing to be transitioned offline and into physical co-presence" (Hart). I agree with Hart's claim that intimacy can be found in such online communities, and furthermore that co-presence is not a necessity in intimate relationships. In opposition to this claim of geographical and physical independence in intimacy is Sherry Turkle's argument that "digital connections...may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship" (Turkle). In her book, Turkle argues that technology is moving us away from "face-to-face" relationships and diminishing the quality of intimate relationships (Turkle). Her arguments seem to presuppose that physical co-presence is an important tenet of any meaningfully intimate relationship. However, what Turkle refers to as "Darwinian buttons" (of eye contact and expression) are merely showcases of--as their name suggests--the emergent psychological characteristics of the naturally evolved mind. These naturally evolved features of the human mind should not form an arbitrary basis for "meaningful" intimacy. I am not refuting that a perceptually superior sense of intimate connection can be formed in physical proximity--there is a case to be made here. However, presupposing that physical proximity is a necessity to meaningful intimacy employs an appeal to nature fallacy.

Having no tangible conception of a "holistic representation of the self," nor a sufficient reason to believe that physical co-presence is necessary, it is natural to define meaningful

intimacy in the abstract, and as an entirely subjective experience. This is why, for measurable characteristics, I look to the abstracted version of Prager's definition of intimate interaction initially asserted. This "abstracted version" is an important modification, as it strips Prager's definition of its rather outdated implicit assumptions of physical co-presence and mutuality, and allows us to include one-way intimate interactions under the umbrella of meaningful intimacy. Once again, a legitimate case can be made as to the superior sense of intimate connection in two-way intimate relationships. However, they should not form a basis for excluding one-way intimate experiences from the realm of meaningful ones. As Rick Garlikov claims in his essay, "The Concept of Intimacy," such interactions are "intimate to, and for, a person if and when she or he finds it personally meaningful...even though the other person(s) did not experience it in the same way with her or him" (Garlikov).

As highly evolved primates living in an increasingly digital world, we must move past archaic notions of intimacy and look for more meaningful abstractions. This paper has made the claim that meaningfully intimate interactions do not require a "true" representation of one's identity, nor physical co-presence, nor mutuality. Essentially all intimate interaction can subjectively be considered meaningful, because intimacy imbues meaning into our social interactions. Under this more forgiving lens of meaningful intimacy, Reddit stands amongst the currently popular social media as one of the platforms most conducive to intimate interaction.

Intimate discourse is the most important tool we have as a species. In an emotional sense, it imbues meaning in our lives, as "human beings have a need for intimacy that, when unfulfilled, leaves them feeling lonely and depressed" (Prager). In a political sense, it is a prerequisite to progressive discourse--interlocutors must have a sense of belonging, purpose, and

shared understanding in our society before they can care to vote or tackle contemporary existential threats. Without a baseline level of intimate interaction, progress as a species would be impossible: we would find ourselves alienated, depressed and unmotivated to solve problems, and in lack of any “shared ground” of understanding upon which to expand. As social media play increasingly important roles in the human condition, they must strive to bring people together through intimate discourse, rather than tear them apart in the hateful and alienating discourse which is prevalent among many platforms, and society as a whole, today. In the sense of this cause, Reddit is a modern success story.

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