

I Celebrate Myself: Social Cataloguing Sites as Self-Expression

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*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loaf and invite my soul...
Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"*

They're called "social cataloguing" web sites: web pages designed to let users list, rate, and review products they own or have consumed. Most online stores (for example, the online bookstore *Amazon*) allow customer reviews, but social cataloguing sites are not specifically associated with a store. Pages like *Goodreads*, *Last.fm*, *Flixster*, and *Basenotes* allow people to express their preferences and opinions and share their views with other people. These pages are extremely popular: *Goodreads*, for example, has over 5.2 million members (Frassica). Most striking, perhaps, is that there is no monetary reward for any of them: people review for the fun of it. What social and psychological benefits do users of such sites receive to make it worth their while to engage in the time-consuming communicative activity of cataloguing, reviewing, and recommending products?

This paper examines the psychological and social satisfactions of using social cataloguing sites as a rhetorical act, with a specific focus on three such sites: *Goodreads*, *Flixster*, and *Basenotes*. Ten users were picked from each page and their patterns of use looked at for examples. The resulting patterns are used to discuss the nature of identity on the Internet and the ongoing project of the modern individual to construct a public persona as a constellations of likes and dislikes.

Social Cataloguing Sites: *Goodreads*, *Flixster*, and *Basenotes*

The three sites chosen to examine reflect the diversity of social cataloguing sites. All of them offer not merely a place to express oneself, but a variety of services which allow users to connect with other users and share their thoughts and opinions.

Goodreads, for example, is a book review site started in 2006 that gives users the opportunity to rate their books using a five star system or to write detailed reviews. In addition, however, it also lets users categorize their books, build lists of book

recommendations, share in discussions, collect and list favorite quotes, and partake in trivia challenges.

Flixter has offered much the same service for movie buffs since 2007. In addition to ratings and reviews of movies, users can make recommendation lists, construct polls about favorite movies, make their own trivia quizzes, join fan clubs for actors, and participate in discussions.

Unlike the previous two sites, *Basenotes* features reviews of a tangible product: perfumes and colognes. Founded in 2000 as a resource for men's cologne and expanded in 2004 to include women's fragrances (Robin), it allows users to review fragrances, keep blogs about perfumes, and join in discussion boards.

Ten users from each of these three sites were chosen to reflect a cross-section of users. Users were not chosen randomly, but were selected as the last ten reviewers to post on Nov. 29 2011. This was in order to insure that the users chosen were accounts that were active, not empty accounts created and then forgotten. Accounts were examined for sex, location, number of friends, length of participation and frequency of participation in order to find patterns of use. Before the specific sites are looked at, however, the links between choice, culture, and self-expression will be examined in more depth.

Obligated to Be Free: Modern Culture and Choice

To begin with a story: while traveling in the United States with my sister and her two small daughters (aged five and seven), they played casual games to pass the time during car rides. Two games were their favorites. In the first, someone posed a choice (for example, "winter or summer?") and people took turns giving their reasons for preferring one option to another. It was expected that everyone, even the youngest child, would be able to clearly express their preferences and their reasons for them, and it was not considered acceptable to say, for example, "because my mother likes it." The reasons had to come from within the self and express something about the speaker's self.

The other game was "I'm unique because..." Speakers were expected to come up in ways they were different from everyone else in the group. At one point, while eating ice cream, my elder niece said "I'm unique because I have a sugar cone and everyone else has regular cones. My sister is unique because she has chocolate ice cream and everyone else has vanilla. Aunt Jen is unique because she's the only person with sprinkles on her ice cream." She looked at her mother's cone: vanilla ice cream, with a regular cone and no sprinkles. After a long, contemplative moment, she concluded triumphantly, "And Mommy is unique

because she's the only person whose ice cream cone *is not unique*." Having salvaged success from near-disaster, she ate her ice cream cone in the serene knowledge that everyone was secure in their uniqueness.

Children in Western cultures tend to be encouraged at an early age to express their preferences clearly and strongly, as well as to focus on what makes them different and unique from everyone else. When I was a child, Fred Rogers (the host of the popular children's show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*) assured me and millions of other children my age that "there's only one person in this whole world like you; that's you yourself, and I like you just the way you are." The emphasis on uniqueness and individuality permeates nearly every part of Western life. It can be found in incredibly diverse places, like a book discussing psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism: "For most people, just the thought of being ordinary is like a cross to a vampire; it's the thing they fear the most" states the author confidently (Magid 45). Or in comic-book writer Grant Morrison's approving statement about the 1970s punk movement: "It was okay to be different. In fact, it was mandatory" (172). These two examples come from books I just happened to be reading while writing this paper; nearly any random assortment of books from an individualist society would reveal similar statements throughout.

With so much emphasis on the existence of a unique and precious self within all of us, it is no surprise that the project to discover who that self is can be a lifelong work. In her book *The Art of Choosing*, Sheena Iyengar notes that "With the rise and spread of individualism, whether as a culture's dominant paradigm or merely as a contrast to the way things have always been done, identity has become a more personal matter. At the heart of individualist societies is the idea that what you are in terms of race, class, religion and nationality cannot fully determine *who* you are--a core self or essence exists independent of external influence" (Chapter 3, "Song of Myself," II. "Do Your Thing.") The dominant Western metaphor to understanding the self, she explains, comes from the great sculptor Michelangelo's statement that his statues were already in the blocks of stone he worked with, he merely had to remove stone to free them. In the same way, Iyengar continues, Westerners believe that

beneath the many layers of shoulds and shouldn'ts that cover us, there lies a constant, single, true self that is just waiting to be discovered. We think of the process of finding ourselves as a personal excavation. We dig deep, getting under the surface, throwing away the extraneous, to reveal our everlasting self. And the tool with

which we unearth the piece de resistance is none other than choice. Your choices of which clothes to wear or which soda to drink, where you live, which school to attend and what to study, and of course your profession all say something about you, and it's your job to make sure that they are an accurate reflection of who you really are.

(Chapter 3, "Song of Myself," II. "Help Yourself.")

When framed this way, the quest to understand the Self becomes not just an option, but a near-sacred requirement. We must assemble ourselves through a careful consideration of what we prefer and dislike, knowing that every choice we make, every expression of taste, reflects upon our fundamental essence in a significant way. As the British sociologist Nikolas Rose points out in his book *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (1999): "Modern individuals are not merely 'free to choose,' but *obliged to be free*, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice" (87).

The strength of this obligation can be measured by a simple dining ritual, familiar to any Westerner and confirmed in Ariely and Levav's 2000 study "Sequential Choice in Group Settings: Taking the Road Less Traveled and Less Enjoyed." Imagine that you are at a restaurant with five of your friends. Looking at the menu, you realize you really want to order the steak. The chicken is your second choice, but you would greatly prefer the steak. When the time comes to order, the first of your friends to choose picks the steak, your preferred first choice. Now it is your turn. Which meal do you choose?

If you have been raised in an individualist society, the answer is clear: you choose the chicken, your second choice. Ariely and Levav, studying beer choices with groups of diners, found that when diners chose their beer by anonymous ballot, they tended to all choose the same beer. However, when diners chose sequentially--going around the table and ordering in front of each other--there tended to be a much wider variety of beers chosen. This implies that people tended to choose beers they didn't want as much in order to increase variety around the table. Why? Because a public choice is a statement of identity, and in a modern, individualist society, if you choose something that someone else ordered, you risk looking like you simply followed someone else's lead and didn't make your own decision. As Iyengar explains:

The first person to order had no other obligation than to be true to himself, but each subsequent customer who had been planning to order the same beer was faced with a dilemma. They could simply have said, 'Funny, that's just what I want too!' or pushed

aside their self-consciousness about ordering the same thing, but the desire to assert their independence led them to settle for beer choice B. Once someone else had claimed their first choice, ordering the beer they wanted became subordinate to showing that they could choose a beer on their own, thank you very much. (Chapter 3, "Song of Myself," V. "Do You See What I See?")

Perhaps most interestingly, in Ariely and Levav's study the people who chose their beers by anonymous ballot (and thus got their first choice) reported being happier with their beer than the people who chose to express their individuality by choosing a different beer than their fellow-diners. The implication is that given a choice between being happy with their choice and expressing their individuality, Westerns will choose to sacrifice their short-term happiness in order to assert their independence and uniqueness.

Social Cataloguing as a Rhetorical Statement

Seen in this light, it is no surprise that people would take the business of social cataloguing very seriously indeed. With every ranking, every review, even something as innocuous and fleeting as a "like" clicked on *Facebook*, one is building a persona and a self, engaging in a lifelong project of differentiating one's self from everyone else on the Internet. For many people, this is serious business.

A brief look at the profiles on *Goodreads*, *Flixster*, and *Basenotes* confirms that for some users--not all--social cataloguing is a hobby that consumes a fair amount of time and energy. On *Goodreads* and *Flixster*, for example, users have the option to either submit "ratings" (a simple 5-star system) or "reviews," a short essay explaining one's reaction to the book or movie. Naturally, the less time-consuming ratings are more common than reviews. On *Goodreads*, the sampled users had an average of 19.6 ratings apiece, and 8.0 reviews each. It is not surprising that the numbers are higher on *Flixster*, as it usually takes more time to read a book than to watch a movie. However, the numbers on *Flixster* are staggeringly higher: the *Flixster* users sampled had an average of 660.5 reviews each, and an astronomical 12,293.4 movies rated. The *Flixster* numbers may have been artificially inflated by the presence of the aptly-named "Flixsterman," who claimed to have rated no less than the implausible number of 103,448 movies. The *Basenotes* sample reveals a similar pattern, with an average of 152.4 reviews per person skewed by the presence of two users with 532 and 600 reviews and all the others at less than a hundred. However, even when "Flixsterman"'s

numbers are removed from the *Flixster* average, that still leaves each sampled user at more than two thousand movies rated each, a substantial number.

Flixster's higher numbers are also function of the relative "age" of its users: the ten users sampled had been active on *Flixster* for an average of a little more than three years each, with the "youngest" user joining five months ago. On *Goodreads*, on the other hand, the average user had joined less than a year ago, and half of the sampled users had joined that very month. It is difficult to be certain what caused this discrepancy: causes could range from a more devoted user base at *Flixster* to a sudden surge in popularity for *Goodreads*, perhaps triggered by media coverage. The third service, *Basenotes*, had a sampling of users who joined an average of two and a half years ago, which is closer to the *Flixster* average than the *Goodreads* average, so perhaps it is *Goodreads* that is the outlier.

User reviews tended in all cases to be highly personal, focused on what the perfume/movie/book meant to the subjective tastes of the reviewer--in other words, what the reactions of the reviewer revealed about the reviewer's self. "I really enjoy how 'In the Library' smells,' notes "Comdiva" on *Basenotes*, continuing: "I do get wafts of paper, leather, wood and furniture polish. I just don't think *I* want to smell like that." On *Goodreads*, "Joy" explains about a book that "This was the kind of light read I needed right now--except when it wasn't. The author's abuse makes harrowing reading. I'm glad she got help to deal with it." "It makes me laugh. It makes me cry. It is way better than *Cats*," says "Julie" about the movie *Harold and Maude*. The focus is on the reviewer's personal reaction to the thing reviewed, something necessarily highly individual and unique. We all can agree that *The Darjeeling Unlimited* is a movie about three brothers on a train ride through India, but it says something unique about "Aliceinpunderland," the reviewer, when she says "I'm not one of three brothers, but if I were, I'd want this type of love-hate, instinctive, irrational relationship."

Obviously this is not the only way to approach reviewing; some people prefer to focus on more technical aspects of the things being reviewed. "Hawk Ledge" on *Flixster* is a good example of this approach: "Original, creative comedy which develops dramatic momentum that never detracts from its comedic elements" is his review of *The Artist*. However, the majority of reviews are more similar in tone to "Alexandra"'s review of the supernatural romance *Fallen*: "Again, another impulse by on my birthday, the other authors i read haven't gotten anything out yet and i fell in love with the blurb alone. I am a sucker for a romance novel, especially one out of this world." From a body of reviews, one can often learn more about the reviewer than about the things reviewed. Taken as a whole, an image of

a person's self slowly emerges. "Alexandra," for example, is an impulse buyer who loves vampires and romantic fairy tales, who tends to "lose herself" in a book completely and "fall in love" with the characters, often reading the book in a single setting. "Comdiva"'s perfume reviews on *Basenotes* construct an image of a woman who loves "sparkling" scents with "elegant simplicity," especially rose scents--a sophisticated, articulate person who loves "classic" perfumes but is willing to be adventurous with overtones of tobacco or other more masculine scents. Over and over again, we see people creating a self on review pages, carefully constructing an image of the kind of person they are. Sometimes this process is quite calculated; more often it is more natural and unconscious, but a large part of the pleasure being gained from participating in such sites is the pleasure of tailoring and refining one's image and sharing that image with others.

It's striking that the most popular review pages are for non-practical products. There appears to be a special pleasure in reviewing music, movies, perfume, restaurants, and books as opposed to vacuum cleaners, computers, and sneakers (there are, of course, reviews of the latter on the Internet as well, and it would be interesting to see if such reviews also seemed to construct a sense of the self.) Sheena Iyengar explains the reasons why that would be true in *The Art of Choosing*: "We can't avoid the fact that any choice we make may be considered a statement about who we are, but some choices speak more loudly than others. The music we choose to play on our stereo will probably say more about us than the brand of stereo we play it on, as music choice is supposed to be determined by personal taste. The less a choice serves some utilitarian function, the more it implies about identity, which is why we pay special attention to categories such as music and fashion that serve no useful purpose." (Chapter 3, "Song of Myself," V. "Do You See What I See?") A review of a cleaning product is more likely to focus on the efficacy of the product; a review of a perfume will tend to focus on the emotional associations of scent and the type of person who would wear such a scent. Such social cataloguing sites are ideal for expressing one's "true self," a place to chip away some of that marble to reveal the graceful and polished statue of the soul that was always hiding within.

Conclusion: Be Yourself

"Be yourself" has been common advice in the West for hundreds of years: it was likely already cliché when Shakespeare had Polonius advise his son in *Hamlet*: "This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be

false to any man." But what exactly does it mean to "be yourself"? What else, indeed, can one ever be?

The cliché reveals how deep the assumption runs that the self is somehow *more* than a person, something within us, yet not *us*. The self is something quite real, not constructed in relationship to others: it is something that one can be true or false to, or that one can "find" on a quest of "self-discovery." Westerners often portray themselves as inspired (or cursed) with the need to uncover the secret, true self and then to express it in clear, public, rhetorical ways. "To be oneself is to make the choices that best reflect the self, and these choices--taken cumulatively--are the expression and enactment of that most treasured value: freedom." (Iyengar, Chapter 3, "Song of Myself," II. "Do Your Thing.") Social cataloguing sites provide a convenient, organized way to unearth the true self and share it with others. Such sites serve as texts that reveal how people approach the process of expressing the self, and could be a fruitful source of rhetorical research in the future. Even more interesting would be to do a comparative analysis of how people from different cultures--for example, collectivist versus individualist cultures--approached such sites. Do they use them differently, or frame their use differently? Such discussions could shed interesting light on the nature of the self and the expression of the self in different cultures.

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