

# **Attributes of Online Social Systems**

Draft

Adrian Chan  
March 27, 2006



Gravity7

415 626 4980

[adrian@gravity7.com](mailto:adrian@gravity7.com)

<http://www.gravity7.com>

## Common Attributes of Social Systems

---

Social software systems vary by their thematic type. Themes, in turn, inform the system's predominant activity. LinkedIn is a popular career networking system and so serves those either looking for work or looking to hire. We would say that its theme is jobs (careers, employment), and its activity is networking. Tribe is a cultural community organized around shared interests. Members can browse one another, partake in discussions, post classifieds, events, and so on. We would say that its theme is community (tribes, cultures, subcultures) and its activity is social networking. Friendster is a relations-based dating system. Its theme is dating (interpersonal relations from short to long-term, from friendships to partnerships) and its activity is flirting. Many more kinds of social software systems exist, facilitating activities from education and distance learning to P2P networks and file-sharing.

The social interaction designer's first step is to identify a social software system's overall theme. Any given theme will define a social networking site only insofar as participants adhere to thematic guidelines. Thus we are best advised to consider themes as a continuum, rather than as a strict set of social rules or definitions. For example, a career networking site may be more impersonal and professional in tone than a dating site, and more serious than an online community—its structure, features, layout, and tools favoring professional networking—but personal interactions (flirting included) can still happen and often do.

Each of the following thematic attributes describes a continuum: from personal to impersonal, from fast to slow, and so on. Our interest in laying out this rough anatomy of thematic organization is in making distinctions among some of the high-level system characteristics that shape social practices. In other words, we are not describing individual user practices, but rather the social framework that often guides user practices.

### Personal/Impersonal

Personal social software systems are about getting to know other members. They serve the needs of personal interaction and relationship building. They facilitate direct interactions among members and emphasize biographical information (in fact personal information is often the site's main content). Impersonal systems, on the other hand, de-emphasize the member personality and instead emphasize his or her resources, possessions, trade-ables, expertise, and so on. One might say that the personal peaks with intimacy; the impersonal peaks with anonymity.

*Attributes include:*

- Celebrity
- Ratings (personal ratings, character ratings; testimonials; etc.)
- Rising and falling popularity
- Social feedback
- Personal responsibility and accountability
- Connectedness (shown as number of friends, size of personal network, etc.)
- Time a member has been on system (to position the member as an active or inactive member)

- Independent review or rating systems (not only to qualify members but to instill responsibility and restraint)

## **Public/Private**

Online communities thrive on member contributions: conversations, discussions, and postings show participation and fuel interaction. They build a kind of virtual public. But not all systems are designed to feed or encourage community participation. There are many systems in which the software matches up members and facilitates contact or trade between individuals, (such as private messaging) and which don't demand high levels of public member participation. In contrast to the community sites that strive to become online destinations, these ones allow members to get in and get out; efficiency and privacy matter more in these systems than an active and well-populated public.

*Attributes include:*

- Personal profiles oriented towards biographical information
- System indicates whether a member is currently online
- System indicates the number of members currently online
- System indicates incoming and outgoing message status. Member information and resources available to others will be more or less accessible and public. (Member assets can be developed as community resource or as a private asset.).
  - files available (for downloading, sharing, etc)
  - physical and dating information
  - biographical information
  - connections and network
  - group memberships and affiliations
  - employment history
  - expertise, opinions, preferences
- Communication is made public (e.g. discussions, such that member contributions develop the system's overall value).
- Communication is kept private (e.g. private messaging, such that privacy is valued and protected).

## **Work/Leisure (Personal/Professional)**

Collaboration software and knowledge management systems are growing features of networked computing today. Not only do they further decentralize the office, they bring it to the home and even to the commute in between. Leisure and entertainment activities, too, depend increasingly on communication technologies. Regardless of how strictly some social software systems may aim to serve work purposes only, the blurring distinction between the personal and the professional affects all social software. Users inevitably become interested in one another as people, not just as resources, connections, potential job leads, and suchlike.

*Attributes include:*

- The “structuredness” of relations and conduct among members: from informal to formal, from personal to professional, and from “killing time” to work-related task management, activity coordination, and more.
- The orientation of interaction: from consensus-building to loose and unstructured interaction.
- Degree to which mode of interaction also accomplishes something (in coordinating individuals, moving work or decisions forward, etc.). Modes include monologue (blogs), dialogue (discussion), poll, stepped or sequenced (e.g. circulation of documents to which comments and milestones are attached).
- Prevalence of features designed to highlight members’ professional attributes, from work schedule and calendar to task assignments.
- Connections among members may reflect an organization’s hierarchy and positions. Systems deployed in organizations may use professional hierarchy to structure communication flow, access, and dependencies.

## **Serious/Non-Serious**

There are two primary modes of participating in social interactions: straight up (serious) and theatrical (non-serious). We find both in social software systems regardless of whether the system itself is serious or not. This complicates the matter of verifying which is which. In serious activities, users may be loathe to give away too many real names, references, contacts, and personal information. In play-oriented applications, they may be more likely to exaggerate and push conventions and expectations. It would seem that by separating the very members it connects, networking technology decreases the probability that users will find themselves having a shared framework of activity—and thus what are personal risks to some users are opportunities for dramatic performance and play to others.

Risk management describes participants degree of comfort with self-exposure. Online, however, certain kinds of risks are reduced: the risk of embarrassment in front of others, the risk of being found unattractive, the risk of simply having a bad hair day. Non-serious interactions benefit from this, and online play can become surprisingly frank, intimate, and risqué. The counterpart then to risk management is competency at play.

*Attributes include:*

- Activity and disposition
  - Serious dispositions and activities would include job hunting, file sharing, buying and selling, classifieds, and so on.
  - Non-serious would include game-based services, fantasy communities, and a number of informal group and community interactions and communications intended to stage personality, character, role-play, and more.
- Users will be more or less serious about how they complete their personal profiles depending on the system’s tone. (Playful member profiles can undermine networking in many professions—while being desirable signs of personality in others. The context informs.)
- Because it is impossible to write a testimonial for another member without drawing attention to one’s intentions, members write them with the system’s theme in mind. In a dating service, the

testimonial is a certain indication of the company one keep. In a career networking system, testimonials are also a reflection of one's own professional qualifications. (Insofar as testimonials are a mirror, they can be turned to one personal facet or another.)

- Personal expression and style—in short, personalization—tend to correspond with a non-serious system tone. In systems that draw attention to character and personality (e.g. for dating), members often skirt embarrassment by adopting self-effacing and tongue-in-cheek language.
- Self-censorship and self-control are more likely to be found in a serious community or system than in one geared towards self-expression and play.

## **Fast/Slow**

Social encounters have a speed and a rhythm. Fast-paced activities tend also to be exciting and engaging, slow activities—with the exception of suspense—tend to be more lethargic. Online communities and interactions tend to speed up when they involve time-sensitive activities and interpersonal communication. Members will check in and post/respond more quickly if participation is a means of getting results. A system in which interpersonal or group interaction is not tied to results, or doesn't move activity along, will probably be a slow system. It's in getting answers from other members that a lot of systems derive their speed and pacing; the time between a question asked and an answer received has emotional content that no published information or web search could possibly have. (One could argue that communication as interaction always beats communication as publishing when it comes to compelling participants to act with speed.)

*Attributes include:*

- Interactions tend to increase in speed and intensity with the number of participants. This is an online version of "the more the merrier," for the probability of something happening increases with the number of participants. (The maxim doesn't mean that bigger groups are more fun.) Paired interactions are most vulnerable to member absence.
- A system that measures the popularity of its own activities or members is more likely to build speed and intensity. Though it depends on how it is used, popularity (and other manifestations of "trend") tends to engage and excite participants, becoming a self-reflexive feedback loop.
- A fast social system needs public places (visible discussions) *or* competition. Members respond more quickly to messaging when it's time-sensitive. Speed matters in dating sites, in job sites, auctions, and in "hot" discussions because *faster* responses get attention. When attention is a scarce resource, responsiveness rises.
- System signals and alerts, as well as screen location and prominence, either feature or conceal activity (the ubiquitous "new message" alert). A system lacking this essential indicator would probably grind to a halt.

## **Informational/Interactive**

Systems may be designed to capture, organize, and provide access to information and other community resources; or they may be designed to facilitate interpersonal messaging, personal and biographical profiling and matching, and other person-person encounters. A system intended to cultivate and make public various kinds of expertise (Amazon.com, Epinions.com), for example, may feature publishing, search, browse, ratings, rankings, and directories—all of which serve to

organize information. By contrast, a dating system will likely emphasize member statistics and vital signs, pictures, biographical information, friends/connections, and interpersonal messaging.

- About the manner in which all these are keying technologies, and the matter of social practices that are then formed around each technology. So there are internal and external frames of reference: online and real world. Somewhere in there, between the translations and familiar past times, is a set of activities over which the social interaction has some influence... if he understands how the technologies work.
- We need to list out the ways in which interactions are changed. The ways in which the possibilities for new experiences are created, and how they are arranged... what the interactional possibilities are.