

Computer age produces new social system

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A Canadian scientist says members of peer-to-peer file sharing networks, like the early users of Napster, are part of a previously unseen social system.

"Everything that is crucial to establishing a system of social solidarity through gift giving -- social distinctions, norm of reciprocity, and rituals and symbolisms -- could also be found in the consumption activities of Napster users," said Markus Giesler of the Schulich School of Business at York University in Toronto.

As traditional social systems, self-imposed rules emerge in the process of downloading and uploading files, and symbolisms appear in the usernames people choose, said Giesler. Members of online file-sharing communities also adhere to a norm of reciprocity -- that is, they must share music if they want to receive any.

"One of the most interesting conceptual take-aways of this research is that social solidarity is not only to be found in the classic and often romanticized social organs of family, neighborhood, or church community," said Giesler.

The research appears in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

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