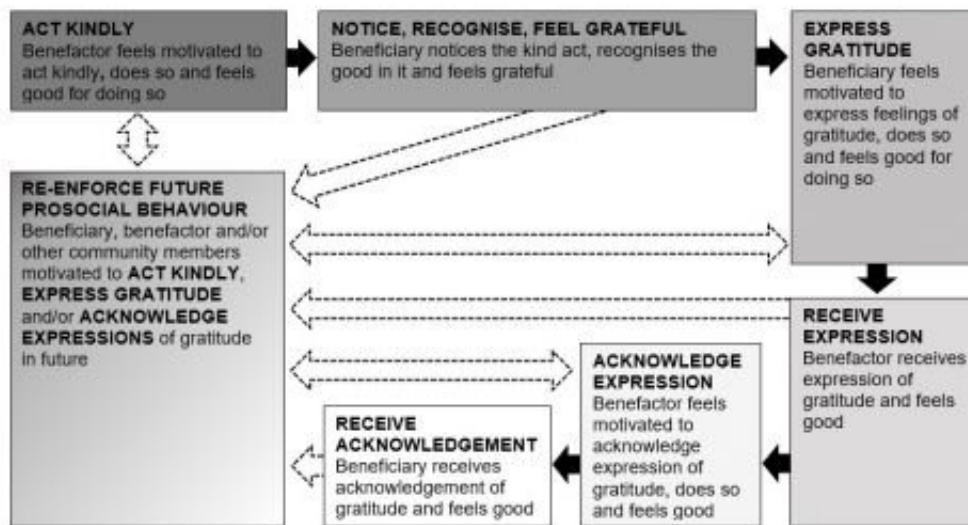


# Researchers publish novel study of gratitude in online communities

August 5 2019, by John Stevenson



The gratitude cycle.

Published in the Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology, Senior Lecturer in Human-Computer Interaction, Dr. Stephann Makri and his colleague Sophie Turner, offer a model of gratitude in online communities—the gratitude cycle—which has the potential to transform the design of online community platforms by encouraging acknowledgment of kind acts and expression of gratitude.

City, University of London researchers believe that a richer understanding of the relatively under-researched concept of gratitude in [online communities](#) could help ensure that future online community platforms are designed to support the expression and acknowledgment of thanks and encourage more online participation.

Titled, "'I can't express my thanks enough': The 'gratitude cycle' in online communities," and published in the *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, Dr. Stephann Makri, and co-author Sophie Turner, have undertaken a study examining the way users experience gratitude across online community platforms, focusing on how gratitude expression and acknowledgment occurs, can break down and can be re-enforced.

## **Process model of gratitude**

They argue that a "richer understanding of gratitude in online communities can inform the design of online platforms in ways that extend beyond existing superficial functionalities, such as 'like' or 'thanks' buttons and reward points, potentially motivating participation and thereby sustaining community health."

The researchers conducted interviews with users of various online community platforms (Facebook and Trip Advisor), discussion and support groups, social Q&A sites and review sites (Quora and Mumsnet), asking for memorable examples of when users had performed kind acts for others, or felt grateful for the kind acts of others.

Based on their findings, they presented a process model of gratitude in online communities, the 'gratitude cycle,' providing a detailed description of online gratitude expression and acknowledgment that can inform the design of online community platforms—such as digital forums and private social media groups.

The gratitude cycle is presented in Figure 1 above. The 'gratitude cycle' model identifies a 'benefactor' (performing a kind act someone will feel grateful for) who feels motivated to act kindly, acts kindly and feels good for doing so. The 'beneficiary' (whom the kind act is directed to) notices the kind act, recognises the good in it and feels grateful. The beneficiary may or may not express their feelings of gratitude to the benefactor. If they do, the benefactor may or may not receive the expression. If they do, they are likely to feel good and may or may not acknowledge the expression. If the benefactor does acknowledge it and the beneficiary receives the acknowledgment, the beneficiary is likely to feel good.

## **Meaningful gratitude expression and acknowledgment**

The cycle can potentially be broken (by users, technology or both) at all stages, but especially when a person feels, but does not express gratitude, or when gratitude is expressed and received but not acknowledged.

Feeling, expressing and/or acknowledging gratitude may positively re-enforce the future behavior of the benefactor, beneficiary or other community members. This forms a positive cascading cycle of kind acts and resultant gratitude.

The authors argue that a deeper understanding of the experience of gratitude is useful for reasoning about how to best support and sustain the process through design—by supporting individual stages and the overall gratitude process and by preventing breakdowns in the cycle and, conversely, encouraging re-enforcement. This aims to motivate users to act prosocially, perpetuating the cycle. They also argue that online community platforms "must move beyond existing lightweight and overly-reward-driven design approaches to support simple, yet

meaningful gratitude expression and acknowledgment."

Provided by City University London

Citation: Researchers publish novel study of gratitude in online communities (2019, August 5)  
retrieved 7 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-publish-gratitude-online.html>

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