

Running Head: MOVING THE CROWD AT THREADLESS

**Moving the Crowd at Threadless:  
Motivations for Participation in a Crowdsourcing Application**

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### Abstract

Crowdsourcing is an online, distributed problem solving and production model already in use by businesses such as Threadless.com, iStockphoto.com, and InnoCentive.com. This model, which harnesses the collective intelligence of a crowd of Web users through an open-call format, has potential for government and non-profit applications. Yet, in order to explore new applications for the crowdsourcing model, there must be better understanding of why crowds participate in crowdsourcing processes. Based on 17 interviews conducted via instant messenger with members of the crowd at Threadless, the present study adds qualitatively rich data on a new crowdsourcing case to an existing body of quantitative data on motivations for participation in crowdsourcing. Four primary motivators for participation at Threadless emerge from these interview data: the opportunity to make money, the opportunity to develop one's creative skills, the potential to take up freelance work, and the love of community at Threadless. A fifth theme is also discussed that addresses the language of "addiction" used by the interviewees to describe their activity on the site. Understanding this kind of "addiction" in an online community is perhaps the most important finding for future public crowdsourcing ventures. This study develops a more complete—though ongoing—composite of what motivates the crowd to participate in crowdsourcing applications generally, information crucial to adapt the crowdsourcing model to new forms of problem solving.

**Keywords:** crowdsourcing; motivations; IM interviews; online community; addiction

## **Moving the Crowd at Threadless: Motivations for Participation in a Crowdsourcing Application**

### Introduction

Coined by Jeff Howe in the June 2006 issue of *Wired* magazine, the term “crowdsourcing” describes a Web-based business model that harnesses the creative solutions of a distributed network of individuals through what amounts to an open call for proposals. In other words, a company posts a problem online, a vast number of individuals (the “crowd”) offer solutions to the problem, the winning ideas are awarded some form of a bounty, and the company mass produces the idea for its own gain (Brabham 2008a). Notable business examples of crowdsourcing include t-shirt company Threadless.com (*see* Lakhani & Kanji 2008; Fletcher 2006), microstock photography agency iStockphoto.com (*see* Brabham 2008b; Howe 2008), corporate research and development clearinghouse InnoCentive.com (*see* Lakhani 2008; Lakhani, Jeppesen, Lohse & Panetta 2007), crowdsourced Finnish science fiction parody film *Star Wreck: In the Pirkinning* (*see* Lietsala & Joutsen 2007), and user-generated advertising contests (*see* Brabham 2009).

More than just an online business model, Brabham (2008) has argued that crowdsourcing is a “problem solving model...that can have profound influence in the way we solve our world’s most pressing social and environmental problems” (p. 76), a sentiment increasingly echoed by others (*e.g.*, Haklay & Weber 2008; Brito 2008; Fritz *et al.* 2009). In that spirit, the business model of crowdsourcing is already being applied in non-profit, government projects. These examples include the Peer to Patent Community Patent Review project, which efficiently and effectively uses the crowd to review patent applications for the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (Noveck 2006), and a U.S. Federal Transit Administration-funded project with the Utah

Transit Authority to crowdsource the public participation process for the design of bus stops in Salt Lake City (NextStopDesign.com *n. d.*).

In order to continue applying the crowdsourcing model in new government and non-profit contexts, a coherent set of conditions for what makes a successful crowdsourcing arrangement is needed. This involves understanding what motivates the crowd to participate in these creative problem solving activities. Some existing quantitative data begin to explain the many reasons why crowds participate in crowdsourcing applications (*e.g.*, Lakhani *et al.* 2007; Brabham 2008b; Lietsala & Joutsen 2007), but these data are conflicting, especially regarding how important the opportunity to make money is as a motivator across varying crowdsourcing cases.

The present study examines the motivations of the crowd at well-known crowdsourcing company Threadless.com through a series of online interviews, contributing new insight into the intriguing landscape of existing data on motivations in crowdsourcing generally. Furthermore, the present study adds qualitative richness to the discussion of motivations in crowdsourcing applications, a needed supplement to the existing quantitative portrait on crowdsourcing.

Threadless is an online clothing company that holds an ongoing t-shirt design competition on its Web site. Findings from interviews with 17 members of the crowd at Threadless indicate that the opportunity to make money, the opportunity to improve one's creative skills, the opportunity for eventual freelance design work, and the love of community are important motivators for participation on the site. Interestingly, too, the notion of "addiction" to Threadless' online community emerged as an important theme in the interviews, extending the notion of "love of community" to an entirely new realm. Addiction in this sense indicates an affinity for a kind of online "brand community" (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001) coordinated by a business but driven

almost entirely by the passion community members have for taking part in growing and sustaining the business itself. This final theme of addiction is perhaps the most important finding in this study for organizations planning to employ crowdsourcing to solve public problems. These organizations must move away from agonistic, deliberative democratic models, must conceive of public crowdsourcing ventures as more than simply online replicas of traditional public participation methods; these organizations will need to allow the crowd to truly support the problem solving mission of a crowdsourcing venture for the public good, to generate in the crowd a sense of duty and love—and even addiction—to such a project.

### Literature Review

#### *Crowdsourcing & Threadless*

Drawing upon Howe's (2006a, 2008) and Brabham's (2008) work, crowdsourcing companies operate by broadcasting problems or challenges to the crowd. Individuals in the crowd offer solutions to these problems and post the solutions back to the online commons. In peer-vetted crowdsourcing approaches, ideal for ideation problems, the crowd assesses the solutions of its peers, often through a simple ranking or voting system, and the top solutions that emerge are then owned by the crowdsourcing company. While the individual providing the winning solution is rewarded some form of a bounty, often in cash, the crowdsourcing company can profit immensely off of this labor, sometimes by selling the solution back to the crowd.

Threadless is one of the exemplar cases of crowdsourcing: "pure, unadulterated (and scalable) crowdsourcing" (Howe 2006b). Threadless is an online t-shirt company that crowdsources the design process for its shirts through an ongoing online competition where registered members on the site can rate the design submissions of fellow members on a five-point scale. "A number of the highest rated t-shirts are then produced in short production runs

and sold on the site” (Fletcher 2006, p. 6). As of July 2009, designers who win the contest and create t-shirts that actually get printed are rewarded with US\$2,000 in cash and US\$500 in Threadless gift certificates.

Based in Chicago, Threadless is the flagship property of parent company skinnyCorp, whose motto is “skinnyCorp creates communities” (skinnyCorp *n. d.*). Threadless formed when “Jake Nickell and Jacob DeHart met through an online design forum, both entered into a t-shirt design competition, and Nickell won. They formed skinnyCorp and ... Threadless in late 2000 when Nickell was only 20 and DeHart only 19 years old” (Brabham 2008a, p. 76). As of June 2006, Threadless was “selling 60,000 t-shirts a month, [had] a profit margin of 35 per cent and [was] on track to gross [US]\$18 million in 2006,” all with “fewer than 20 employees” (Howe 2006b, ¶ 1).

In a problem solving sense (*see* Jonassen 2003), Threadless’ “goal state” is to acquire innovative, attractive, sellable designs for its t-shirt line, and, in a sense, the “task environment” or “problem space” for this design process occurs in the contest on its Web site. As a crowdsourcing company, Threadless’ “problem” is that it needs t-shirt ideas designed to be printed onto shirts and sold for a profit. Its “solutions” come from the crowd in the form of design submissions created in Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop programs following a downloadable t-shirt design template from the Threadless site. The crowd then votes on these designs for one week and the top vote-getting designs are chosen for printing. Threadless then sells these t-shirts back to the crowd at what would be considered a low price for a designer t-shirt: around US\$15-20. Shirts are shipped internationally from the Chicago warehouse.

On the site, members can sign up for free with a valid e-mail address and participate in the various functions of the Threadless community—submit designs, vote on designs, shop.

Additionally, a blog forum exists for members to chat about t-shirts or any other topic, and this forum is incredibly active, with several new posts created every minute.

### *Collective Intelligence & Crowd Wisdom*

In a crowdsourcing application, the “crowd” is the collective of Web-users who participate in the problem solving process by posing solutions. The crowd’s strength lies in its composite or aggregate of ideas, rather than in a collaboration of ideas. Based on his investigation of numerous case studies, from futures markets to cattle estimating, Surowiecki (2004) finds that “under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them” (p. xiii). This “wisdom of crowds” is derived not from averaging solutions, but from aggregating them. Scott E. Page (2007) extends Surowiecki’s work on crowd wisdom to make a more sophisticated claim about diversity in problem solving environments in general. In some problem solving situations, the problem benefits by having a number of individuals from cognitively diverse perspectives offer their solutions, even if those individuals are not themselves experts (Page 2007).

Additionally, Terwiesch and Xu’s (2008) research at crowdsourcing company InnoCentive found that “ideation problems” are suited for broadcasting to an online base of solvers. The problem solving function at Threadless is ideational because it concerns the generation of unique design ideas. Thus, the success of Threadless’ process can be explained both by the diversity of a wise crowd and the suitability of ideation problems in open innovation formats.

The Web is an ideal technology for aggregating millions of disparate, independent ideas without the dangers of “too much communication” and compromise (Surowiecki 2004, p. xix). Terranova (2004) writes that the Web is an ideal technology for distributed thinking because the

Web is “not simply a specific medium but a kind of active implementation of a design technique able to deal with the openness of systems” (p. 3). Crowdsourcing applications are ventures that harness and aggregate this wisdom of the crowd through the Web to produce solutions and products superior to those of collaborative groups or solo geniuses. Pierre Lévy (1995/1997) called this concept “collective intelligence,” and it is clear that networked crowds hold enormous potential and that understanding more about how to leverage this powerful crowd is important.

### *Motivations*

Uses and gratifications theories suggest that individuals in the crowd are likely drawn to crowdsourcing applications for a number of reasons and that they are gratified in various ways through participation. The ways in which individuals use and are gratified by new media technologies, such as the Internet, differ from studies of individuals’ use of “older” media technologies, such as newspapers and television. The primary categories of uses and gratifications that emerged from the many individual and collaborative efforts of Blumler, Katz, and Gurevitch in the 1970s (*e.g.*, Blumler 1979; Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch 1974; Katz, Haas & Gurevitch 1973), for example, are necessarily limited by the fact that the media of the time of those studies did not offer nearly as many interactive possibilities and user-productive modes as the digital technology of the Internet era. Today, audiences do not merely use and seek pleasure from content; today, audiences are producers *and* consumers, what futurist Alvin Toffler (1980) called a “prosumer,” of media content. This is not to say the behaviorist researchers of the “old” media era do not still have some relevance (*see* Ruggiero 2000). After all, their findings were important in that they discovered an audience that was not merely a passive receptacle for media content but was instead fundamentally interactive. Early uses and gratifications research prophesized a moment when the pleasures of media interactivity would amplify if users were

given media technologies that truly enabled production. The Internet, specifically given the recent Web 2.0 trend toward massive user-generated online content, is the vehicle for distributed, large-scale, *pleasurable* production.

To adapt to the new character of digital media, more recent studies into audience motivations for online media use have focused on the practice of open source software production. In this production, users essentially work for free to create software (Coar 2006), which in itself undermines the power of simple extrinsic motivators such as money, and it also complicates intrinsic motivators. Several studies on motivation in open source participation (*e.g.*, Bonaccorsi & Rossi 2004; Hars & Ou 2002; Hertel, Niedner & Herman 2003) support what open source pioneer and founder of Linux, Linus Torvalds, predicted would be the primary motivator: the pleasure found in doing hobbies. As Torvalds states, “most of the good programmers do programming not because they expect to get paid or get adulation by the public, but because it is *fun to program*” (Ghosh 1998b, ¶ 63).

Though similar, open source production is not the same as crowdsourcing, for a number of reasons (Brabham 2008, pp. 81-83). Where open source models emphasize the common good (Bonaccorsi & Rossi 2003, 2004; Lancashire 2001) and hobbyist (Ghosh 1998a, 1998b, 2005) interest in the success of certain applications, crowdsourcing models add to these factors the existence of a bounty. The bounty can sometimes consist of cash and prizes, but it also includes cultural capital and can help people learn skills and develop portfolios for future work and entrepreneurship (Mack 2006; Brabham 2007). Three quantitative surveys investigating the motivations of crowds paint a partial picture of how the opportunity to make money specifically, and other motivators generally, drive the crowd’s participation in crowdsourcing applications. In a study of the crowd at iStockphoto, Brabham (2008b) found that the opportunity to earn money

(the bounty) and the opportunity to develop one's creative skills trumped the desire to network with friends and other creative people, and it outranked other altruistic motivations. At crowdsourcing company InnoCentive, Lakhani *et al.* (2007) found that intrinsic motivators (*e.g.*, "enjoying problem solving and cracking a tough problem"), as well as financial reward, were significantly positively correlated to success as a solver on the site. And in the crowd-made film *Star Wreck*, it was found that the crowd participated in the creation of the movie because it was fun for passing time and they liked sharing knowledge and skills with others, among other altruistic reasons, but not because they wanted to make money (Lietsala & Joutsen 2007). The present study consists of online interviews with the crowd at yet another crowdsourcing company, Threadless. This study makes a contribution toward a more complete understanding of how crowds in general are motivated in crowdsourcing arrangements, as well as adding qualitative richness to the existing quantitative motivations data from the crowdsourcing cases at iStockphoto, InnoCentive, and *Star Wreck*. And, importantly, this study uncovers a theme of addiction, shedding light on intense relationship crowds have with crowdsourcing organizations.

Given the previous discussion of the literature, one broad research question came to guide this study:

- RQ1: Why do Threadless members participate on the site?

#### Method

I conducted a series of interviews with 17 adult (18 years old and older) Threadless members in March, April, and October 2008 via instant messaging (IM) programs. Following Institutional Review Board approval, I posted a URL in the Threadless blog forum using my own Threadless member name and asked participants to follow the URL to sign up for an interview with me at a later date. This participant solicitation wording was informal and friendly, in line

with the general attitude and linguistic norms of the blog forum and so as not to seem like an outsider intruding in the “space” of the community (*see* Appendix for an example of the solicitation wording). It is important that online studies do not burden participants (Kaye & Johnson 1999) and that they do not violate an online community’s expectations for topical relevance (Swoboda, Mühlberger, Weitkunat & Schneeweiß 1997) or its sense of privacy, tact, or politeness (Wright 2005). I am a long-time member of the Threadless community—since 19 October 2004—and I have picked up the norms of the community by being a passive observer of the blog forum. Thus, my long-time status as a “lurker” at Threadless, one who silently follows an online forum but does not contribute much to the discussion, was beneficial for me in crafting my study. My familiarity with the Threadless community norms and lingo was also beneficial for actually conducting the interviews, as I was able to relate to members, “speak their language,” and establish a sense of trust—all very important features of doing a good interview. This kind of online participant recruitment strategy has its drawbacks, namely in that it cannot possibly establish a random sampling frame (*see* Kaye & Johnson 1999; Wright 2005), but all non-probability online research methods have their own issues that are cause for caution (Schillewaert, Langerak & Duhamel 1998). Still, the benefits to this strategy include being able to hone in on a small, purposive, non-random convenience sample useful for this particular kind of study (Kaye & Johnson 1999). The purpose of these interviews is not to produce generalizable results for all crowds. Rather, the point is to add data—rich, qualitative data—from another crowdsourcing case to the stable of research on the crowdsourcing model, all with the intent to develop best practices and core findings about the model for use in government and non-profit applications.

Participants who chose to click on the URL in the solicitation were taken to a Web site hosted by my institution. The first page seen on this site was a typical statement of participants' privacy and rights as research subjects and a waiver of consent. Clicking to the next page of the Web site brought participants to a simple online form to enter their name, e-mail address, preferred interview times, and their screen names and preferred (IM) programs with which to conduct the interview. Using their submitted information, I contacted participants at a later date via IM to initiate the interview.

Conducting interviews via IM programs is the most appropriate way to contact members of the Threadless community. Research that "explores an Internet-based activity such as...online community" ought to be conducted online, since "research participants are already comfortable with online interactions" (Kazmer & Xie 2008, pp. 257-258). IM interviewing

allows synchronous and semi-private interaction and can automatically record the interaction text. The ad hoc conversational nature of IM interviews lets them resemble oral interviews. As a result, developing emergent probes in IM interviews can be easier than in email. (Kazmer & Xie 2008, p. 259)

As Kazmer and Xie (2008) acknowledge, IM interviewing allows for essentially perfect transcription, since all interactions can be stored in logs and entire IM windows can be saved as HTML files. Additionally, this logging produces a data bank that is already clean, organized, and digital, making computer-aided analytic methods simple to execute. Critics of mediated interviews worry that affective data may be lost that may have existed in face-to-face interviewing. This is partially true, because nonverbal cues, facial expressions, and tone of voice are lost in the mediated environment. However, Kazmer and Xie (2008) note that participants are still able to express themselves in IM interviews, but that this expression occurs through online

written conventions, such as emoticons, font changes, italics, bolding, and other methods (pp. 272-273). In fact, the anonymous veil afforded by the Web could even encourage participants to feel less inhibited and express themselves more honestly, emotionally, and directly (*see* Suler 2004).

A notable downside to IM interviewing, though, is that the researcher and the participant do not necessarily have to devote undivided attention to the questions being asked. In my interviewing, there were times when, due to scheduling preferences of participants, I conducted two IM interviews simultaneously. Likewise, because of some pauses in the conversation, it was clear that some participants may have been distracted in the middle of interviews. This split-attention surely can diminish the quality of responses to questions, though it could be as easily argued that these delays in responses allowed participants to develop more thoughtful responses. In face-to-face settings, the in-person expectations may have made it awkward for participants to take excessive pauses while answering questions. In essence, IM interviewing is merely a different qualitative approach, with its own set of strengths and weaknesses.

Based on my own substantial experiences in online communities like Threadless', I would consider IM interviewing, and possibly also e-mail interviewing, the only appropriate methods for contacting a person I had met online. To phone or meet face-to-face with an online friend is an extremely intimate gesture, and to suggest a phone call or a face-to-face meeting with someone at an inappropriate time would be a turn-off for the participant and would be seen as even a bit "creepy." Furthermore, I would argue that it would take someone quite experienced in the norms and written expressions of IM to conduct quality IM interviews, and my decade of experience with instant messaging is a benefit to my study.

## Results & Discussion

Of the 17 participants interviewed, all were young, between the ages of 18 and 30 (and one chose not to disclose her age). Seven participants (41.2%) indicated they had, at least once in the past, submitted a design to the Threadless competition. The other 10 had shopped and been active in rating submissions and using the blog forum, though they had never submitted designs themselves. The reasons they provided for not ever submitting a design were because they felt they did not have the artistic talent or technical skill necessary to create a design. This sample of participants is fairly consistent with the sample Fletcher (2006) studied at Threadless. In his survey at Threadless, Fletcher (2006) found that 40% of respondents had submitted designs to the competition and that those who did not submit designs felt they lacked the technical skill to articulate their ideas (pp. 53-55).

The IM interviews produced an automatically time-stamped transcript collection consisting of 51 single-spaced pages of text. Data analysis was an ongoing process, as I made marginal notes and other commentary in the digital transcripts after completing each interview. In a process similar to what Miles and Huberman (1994) and Lindlof and Taylor (2002) describe, these notes were helpful in developing emergent codes, which I then distilled into broad themes. No new themes were observed in the data beyond the ninth interview. This is consistent with Guest, Bunce, and Johnson's (2006) finding that theme "saturation" in qualitative interviewing typically occurs within the first 12 interviews and metathemes appear as early as within the first six interviews.

Five themes emerged from the interview data which inform the research question of why Threadless members participate on the site: 1) the opportunity to make money; 2) the opportunity to improve one's creative skills; 3) the opportunity for eventual freelance design work; 4) the love of community; and 5) addiction to the Threadless community.

*Making Money*

The chance to make serious money through one of the t-shirt design contests was a strong motivator. In response to the question about why he participates at Threadless, Jeremy<sup>1</sup>, a 29-year-old man living in Grimsby, England, replied:

money!<sup>2</sup>  
 [...]
   
the main reason is for the big prize package

Carrie, a 26-year-old woman living in San Luis Obispo, California, also acknowledged the possibility of monetary reward as a reason for her submitting designs to the site:

winning, of course, is great

Roger, a 28-year-old man in Rensselaer, New York, noted that

after seeing how threadless worked, i really felt like it was something that i could benefit from

Roger liked “the potential of winning \$” and felt that

in comparison to other t-shirt sites, threadless pays very well.

Even a member who admittedly lacked the design skills and had never submitted a design to Threadless, speculated how money might motivate her. Angela, a 21-year-old woman in Lansing, Michigan, writes:

the cash pay-out would be nice too lol

Peter, a 21-year-old man living in northern California, joined the site because

I was just amazed that there was a place, online, where all these artists could come together and share art  
 annnnnnnnd make money at it

All participants interviewed who had submitted a t-shirt design to Threadless in the past explicitly mentioned money as a motivating factor for their submissions. Only one participant

who had never submitted a design speculated about the lure of money as a reason for submitting designs.

### *Improving Creative Skills*

Three participants specifically mentioned that they enjoyed receiving feedback on their work. Roger stated that he appreciated

feedback on my designs from peers  
[...]  
the feedback i receive from comments and raising my own profile are  
really invaluable to me as a designer.

Jeremy saw submitting to Threadless as a way to improve as a designer, and his experience submitting designs to the site has played an important role in his self-education with Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator software. He writes:

I'd never done any design before my first threadless sub[mission], and  
each one was a learning process. It took me about 20 subs to get  
printed  
AND 2 years  
[...I am] Completely self-taught. I used photoshop for image manipulation  
for a few years before attempting any actual design though  
I work in Illustrator now, which I learned about a year ago

Now, Jeremy is part of the Black Rock Collective, a group of graphic designers that submits to Threadless and other t-shirt design contest sites, in the hopes of becoming recognized as an art collective. Despite this success, Jeremy does not consider it a primary focus for him:

It's a hobby for me. A bit of fun. I wouldn't want to do it 9-5, and have it  
lose its appeal that way

Luke, a 30-year-old man living in Philadelphia, also finds Threadless to be a place to improve his design skill. He “loves” the fact that

anyone could turn in some work of theirs and be given a lesson on what  
good design was free of charge.

He further claims that

Threadless has opened me up to another form of creativity i never knew i had in this way

[...]

I write slogans all day long and it's always a source of fun and inspiration for me now, and come up with ideas to make with artists

For many members at Threadless, creating and submitting designs is a hobby, and improving one's skills within a supportive, creative community is an end in itself. Jeff Howe (2008) speculates that the over-education of the middle class through liberal arts curricula and the increasingly specialized jobs of the information economy leave generations today unfulfilled and without appropriate creative outlets. The Web and participatory activities like crowdsourcing, he suggests, allow this latent creative talent to be tapped. Meanwhile, members in the crowd are satisfied.

### *Freelance Opportunities*

Some of these hobbies can develop into serious freelance opportunities or even full-time work. Carrie found that past success in the Threadless design contests led to further opportunity and success. Though academically trained as a graphic designer and now employed as a graphic designer in a design firm, she attributes much of her success to Threadless:

yeah, you definitely get exposure  
after my first win, i started getting offers pretty frequently  
for other contests and freelance opportunities

[...]

and it's all due to threadless  
because people go there and troll for new designers

Luke also hopes for eventual full-time work as a designer, motivated primarily from his success at Threadless.

through Threadless i have branched out to other companies contacting me, and have nine shirts that are or have been sold at Hot Topics across the country now!  
it's pretty amazing

lol  
i really wanna turn this into a part-time or full-time thing for me

The Black Rock Collective, too, represents an instance where Threadless designers are hoping to use their success and experience at Threadless as a spring board for future work and recognition.

Jeremy writes:

I believe it [Black Rock Collective] began a couple of years ago with about 6 designers from threadless submitting themed subs as a group. More people were invited to join over time and then a forum was set up for them all to use. Somehow I found myself on board about 18 months ago maybe, and I think there are now about 50 active members.

We do a lot of collaboration work and have had work printed that way by threadless and [Threadless competitor] design by humans, but now we're focussing on setting up our own shop, getting a recognised name for ourselves and having the collective grow that way

Members of the Black Rock Collective do not intend to completely leave Threadless behind, though. As Jeremy states about the possibility of hurting Threadless' business,

that's not going to happen. We'll always submit to Threadless to get money individually, and collectively. The ship will all be self-funded from our collective winnings. Our main goal is to be recognised as an art collective and the BRC shop will just serve to help us in that sense

### *The Love of Community*

Members of the Threadless community all very much enjoy the communal aspects of the site and the friendships they have made through the site. Several of the members interviewed described how exposure to the blog forum, the chatty pulse of the Threadless community, was a deciding factor for them joining the site. All but two of those interviewed mentioned their love of the Threadless community, and many specifically point to the humorous dialogue in the blog forum as a reason for continually returning to the site.

Carrie writes that a major motivator for her participation on the site

is the community  
i've actually made friends through the site and have met up with bloggers  
on multiple occasions  
no other site really offers that (to that extent) and especially no other t-shirt  
sites

Erin, a woman living in Santa Barbara, California, who chose not to disclose her age, praised her friendships through the site:

in less than a year, i've met the most amazing people, who are not only talented, but super generous and kind and caring, too. my life is different (better!) because i know these people.

Jackie, a 24-year-old woman from California, writes:

i like that so many people from all over have bonded over a common  
interest  
so much so that people are meeting in large groups and creating real  
friendships  
[...Threadless is] cool shirts, rad people, good times

Nancy, an 18-year-old woman living in East Lansing, Michigan, likens the Threadless experience to that of

A secret club that wants everyone to know they're welcome to join  
anytime.

She also emphasized the thrill of being able to wear such sophisticated and edgy art and to connect with a community of likeminded art enthusiasts. Luke writes that

Threadless folk are unlike any other kinds of people i've met in the world, online or otherwise. they are truly more of your friend than your usual digital friendship. People really put themselves out there, and everyone IS SO DAMNED CREATIVE, WITTY AND FUNNY! You just wanna go on and see what everyone's doing in their lives and what amusing thing they are going to show you or want to talk about, and then you want to share things yourself.

In terms of humor, Jared, a 31-year-old man living in Long Beach, California, notes that the blog forum "can be a real hoot," and Nancy notes that

i became a member once i saw the blogs. the people were funny and i

wanted to talk to them and be involved in the hilarity  
 [...]
   
i think what they [Threadless] do right is promoting the community aspect  
 of the 'brand'  
 the comparison i can give is the way owning a macbook creates a bond  
 between people. it makes you more loyal because you feel like  
 you're part of something.  
 except that threadless has a soul, lol.  
 [...]
   
i think what works for threadless is that it's a community. people interact  
 with eachother and with the people running the company.

This member draws parallels to what Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) call brand communities. A brand community is "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001, p. 412). In developing a vibrant online community based around a brand, a Web-based company can capitalize on the bonds between members in the community for monetary gain. In a crowdsourcing scenario, especially, the life of the community is directly correlated to the success of the enterprise. Without a community that truly loves to participate in crowdsourcing, a company is completely sunk.

### *Addiction*

Finally, an emergent theme was that of addiction. Without prompting, 11 of the 17 participants interviewed used language relating to addiction to describe their love of Threadless and their behavior on the site. Carrie wrote that

even if you don't win, it's a constant motivation to continually put work out  
 there  
 seeing your subs get scored and commented on becomes addicting

When asked about her choice of the word "addicting," she responded with

you want to know how bad it is?  
 [...]
   
some of us get iphones and then go check on the threadless blogs even if  
 we're not around computers

if you go on vacation, you can go through “withdrawls”  
[...]  
you’ll see blogs where people say that they’re leaving on vacation so  
nobody gets worried, haha

Angela explains:

i say addicted because i’m on the blogs almost every night, commenting  
or posting my own blogs. i seriously look forward to mondays  
because i know that means new shirts coming out.  
[...]  
and strangely enough, i get excited if i see someone wearing a threadless  
design. i have to resist the urge to run over and ask if they blog and  
find out their user name lol.  
[...]  
see, now i’m sitting here analyzing my threadless obsession. i was  
thinking “addicted” was too strong a word but it might be right on  
target.

Peter, asked how often he visits the site, responds:

ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh  
It’s kinda embarrassing when you think about it.  
ha ha  
at least once a day  
probably twenty minutes a day  
maybe more  
I try not to think about how much time I piddle away on the internet.  
ha ha  
[...being away from Threadless for a few days] really sucks; but after a  
week or so, it actually feels a little refreshing.  
It’s like prying the bottle away from an alcoholic.

Nancy expands the notion of addiction to the Threadless community by noting that

The idea of wearing art on your body is addicting. I love tattoos but being  
able to change you art daily, depending on your mood, is a genius  
concept.  
[...]  
Think of The Scream by Edvard Munch or The Lady of Shalott by John  
William Waterhouse or any painting that you connect with, it  
touches you and represents a part of you that you could explain to  
people but if they can visualize that piece, it sinks deeper. The thrill  
of finding your personality in artwork is amazing in itself. Now you  
can wear it. You can show people. Most people will look and not

think about it, but to connect with that one percent that sees and understands. That's pretty intense.

Jackie calls herself a “junkie” and Luke confesses that he’s become

full-blown addicted, and it’s the only social site i belong to now!

Though these participants may uncritically use the language of addiction as a form of hyperbole to describe the amount of time they spend on the site or their love of the site, the notion of addiction may not be entirely far-fetched. Addiction is a serious medical condition, and it suggests an attachment to a substance or activity that is unhealthy, to the point where the addiction can interfere with day-to-day responsibilities such as employment or school. Darlene, a 19-year-old woman in Maryland, admitted that

I got sucked in to the mass black hole that is Threadless.

[...]

You can get lost on the site for HOURS. I have skipped class just so I can play around on Threadless.

I mean, it’s a GOOD black hole

Two of those interviewed mention that their employers have warned them to avoid the Threadless site while on the job, because they spend more time engaged in the blog forum than in doing work. The obsession with the online community at Threadless may be connected with well-chronicled addictions, such as Internet addiction or online gaming addiction (*e.g.*, Whang, Lee & Chang 2003; Suler 1999). Yet, this language is particularly odd when considered beyond the bounds of the Web. For example, we would never say we were “addicted to our Rotary Club” or “addicted to the local organic gardening collective.” So why does the phrasing fit so well with online communities? The answer may lie in the technological fetish of the online community process. In truth, a real *thing*—the computer or the Internet—is facilitating a potentially unhealthy set of behaviors centered around an online group. The logic of addiction, in the same way we can be addicted to substances, fits this notion of online communities. The mediated

nature of the obsessive habit warrants lingo that might be more suited to an addiction to a media technology. Such a puzzling turn of phrase complicates notions of online community as “real” or “virtual,” similar to or different from face-to-face organizations.

But as John Suler (1999) makes clear, there is a line between healthy and pathological, or addictive, use of the Internet, and this distinction is whether the individual integrates Internet use into his or her offline life in healthy ways. Though some participants in this study indicated that their work and school commitments had been interrupted by their involvement at Threadless, most participants seemed to use the word “addiction” flippantly. Indeed, even Darlene was quick to emphasize that her choice to skip class because of Threadless was a good choice, one that she ultimately enjoyed and that did not, for instance, result in her failing out of school entirely. Suler (1999), discussing whether participation in online communities fulfills Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, states that “[m]any people feel they are expressing their creative potentials by engaging the technical and social dimensions of the Internet,” and this self-actualization explains why individuals may devote so much time and attention to online communities (p. 392).

How is this notion of “addiction” at Threadless useful for future applications of crowdsourcing, especially crowdsourcing ventures that will serve to solve problems for governments, non-profits, and the public good? It explains that crowds are more than just passive observers of an online process. The most active individuals in a crowd are likely to be enmeshed in the very structure of the crowdsourcing application. These “addicted” individuals will form online friendships with others through the chat spaces of a crowdsourcing site, and they may very well grow these online friendships into face-to-face friendships. These same individuals will see themselves as fundamental to the success of the crowdsourcing venture as a whole. That is, the crowd sees themselves as at the core of the crowdsourcing enterprise, one of the most

important factors in the success of the crowdsourcing business. Threadless staff listen carefully to the chatter of Threadless members in the blog forum. Staff respond to the criticism and praise of members and monitor the “pulse” of the community as a part of larger business strategy. Thus, it would be paramount for any public crowdsourcing venture—say, a crowdsourcing venture to solve an issue of public policy—to think of the crowd as the driver of the process, not as witness to it. And the best crowdsourcing applications cultivate a crowd that is so engaged as a primary stakeholder in the process that they long to spend time on the site, to connect with peers through the site, and to grow and improve the community. This desire to participate in crowdsourcing is, more or less, what Threadless members mean when they say they are addicted to Threadless.

#### Limitations & Conclusions

In all, five themes emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts. Four of these themes relate to motivational categories outlined in previous quantitative studies: the opportunity to make money; the opportunity to develop one’s creative skills; the potential to leverage freelance design work; and the love of the Threadless community. A fifth theme, addiction, arouses new interest in the intensity of the crowd in crowdsourcing applications, especially in the intensity with which they love being part of an online community. A vibrant *and obsessed* online brand community is exactly the kind of fuel needed to sustain a crowdsourcing application, since the production, vetting, and consumption of the product in crowdsourcing is dependent on an eager crowd.

These motivators in part support the existing motivational data from iStockphoto (Brabham 2008b) in that the opportunity to make money, develop creative skills, and leverage experience into freelance work were significant motivators for both the iStockphoto and Threadless study participants. However, the love of community is unique to Threadless.

iStockphoto members were very much unmoved by the possibility to develop a network with other creative people or to develop friendships through the site. Comparing the present study to the motivational data from InnoCentive (Lakhani *et al.* 2007), there are similar findings. The study participants at both InnoCentive and Threadless were motivated by the desire to make money. And, though the opportunity to develop one's creative skills (Threadless) is not exactly the same as enjoying the challenge of solving a problem (InnoCentive), there is some similarity: enjoying solving a problem is somewhat like enjoying sharpening one's skills and finding new ways to apply those skills in meaningful ways. The present study's findings partially align with the motivations data from the *Star Wreck* case (Lietsala & Joutsen 2007), as well. In the *Star Wreck* project, as in the present Threadless study, research participants expressed a desire to participate in crowdsourcing because it was enjoyable to be a part of a creative community. The major differing point between *Star Wreck* and Threadless, though, is that the *Star Wreck* study participants did not express an interest in making money through the project.

In sum, there appears to be a number of reasons for why crowds do what they do. Situating the present findings in the context of existing quantitative data on motivations in crowdsourcing, it is clear that a collection of motivators exist among the several cases—love of community, desire to make money, the opportunity to develop one's skills, the opportunity to challenge oneself, to pass the time when bored, for fun, to build a portfolio for future employment—but there is no definitive set of motivators that works for *all* crowdsourcing cases. At Threadless, the love of—or addiction to—community appears to be one of the strongest motivators for participation, but at iStockphoto there is less interest in community. At InnoCentive, iStockphoto, and Threadless, the opportunity to make money is a motivator, but not for the crowd at *Star Wreck*. Further research into why the importance of community differs

across sites is needed to fully hone the formula for a successful crowdsourcing application. Why, for example, is the love of community so important at Threadless, but not at iStockphoto, even though iStockphoto has a blog forum of its own equally as vibrant as Threadless'?

Most importantly in this study, perhaps, is the theme of addiction among the Threadless members interviewed. Individuals in the crowd at Threadless have cultivated strong bonds with one another through the site, and they crave the energy of the blog forum. Likewise, these most “addicted” individuals see themselves as meaningful actors in Threadless’ business process, as part of the organization rather than customers. Future crowdsourcing applications geared toward solving problems in the public interest should take note of the “addiction” among Threadless members. If Threadless is successful in part because of the labor and creative energy of a self-proclaimed “addicted” crowd, then it stands to reason that a public crowdsourcing application would benefit from an equally involved and integrated crowd. To translate crowdsourcing for use in government and non-profit problem solving, administrators should strive to build vibrant online communities that truly desire to take part in the process and to exchange ideas with peers through the site.

Limitations in this study include interviewing only a small sampling of Threadless members, and no doubt a biased sample that is extremely active in the community. Because the solicitation to participate in the interviews was posted in the blog forum, only members of the Threadless community who spent significant amounts of time in the forum—and were willing to schedule an interview—signed up. This no doubt constrained the sample to only the most active and enthusiastic members of the Threadless community. This probably explains the common theme of addiction among participants, and further interviews should be undertaken, especially with less active members of the site. Another limitation includes my role as a “lurker,” a long-

time member of the Threadless community who had rarely posted in the blog forum before. I was specifically asked about my absence from the blog forum by one of the participants, and I worry that my quiet legacy might have made members suspicious of my research intentions.

Additional research should be undertaken at Threadless and other crowdsourcing sites to further expand the base of knowledge about what motivates participation in crowdsourcing. Unlocking the reasons why crowds give their creative energy to these unique processes is crucial for being able to develop best practices for governments and non-profits hoping to take the genius of crowdsourcing further into the service of the public good. These findings contribute to the collection of motivations data on crowdsourcing, and they contribute qualitative insight into why exactly crowds are motivated. Future studies—both qualitative and quantitative—will only improve upon the knowledge base about crowdsourcing.

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Appendix: Participant Recruitment Wording Posted to the Threadless Blog Forum

**Please help me with some research about Threadless**

Hi everyone.

I'm a Ph.D. student and I'm studying the Threadless community. I would love to know what it is that makes all of you tick, why you love Threadless, and all that stuff. My study has been approved for human subjects research (sounds scary, huh?) by my university's Institutional Review Board...so it's legit.

Please! Click on this URL to learn more about my research and to schedule a time when I could interview you through instant messenger.

< LINK >

Thanks!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All names appearing in this manuscript are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

<sup>2</sup> Interview transcript excerpts are spelled in context in this manuscript, as true as possible to the expressive capabilities available to participants (including capitalization); the limitations of mediated synchronous communication; and the limitations of the specific instant messaging program used for interviewing. Each discrete message is displayed in its own line of text. Use of brackets in the manuscript indicates either 1) unimportant commentary omitted by the author, or 2) the participant's intended edits, compiled by the author for ease of reading. In the latter case, for example, if a participant types "shortwhiel" in one line, but immediately follows it up with "short while" in another message, it is understood that the participant intended to correct his or her spelling error, per the norms of IM conversations. In a case such as this, "[short while]" is included in place of the initial instance of misspelling.