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Anonymous online compliments: Say it forward

A symptom of a kindness virus

BY DAHLIA KURTZ ,QMI AGENCY

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Thomas Pajot - Fotolia.com

Go ahead. Make someone's day. Anonymous complimenting is a new movement online, putting positivity to the oft-ugly face of anonymity. Out with cyber-bullying, in with cyber-boosting.

The viral trend began September 12 when four Queen's University students, Rachel Albi, Erica Gagné, Jess Jonker and Amanda Smurthwaite, returned from summer break, depressed by their workload. "We wanted to make a difference at our school in a positive way," says Albi, whose sister inspired her by doing something similar at her high school. So the friends created a Facebook profile for anonymous compliments. Students email praise for friends or strangers to the page administrators, who then post them to the page unidentified.

Albi adds, "We wanted to make Queen's a happier campus and just remind everyone to treat others kindly." The Flatter-4, as I call them, didn't just make Queen's a happier campus; they made Yale, Princeton, Columbia, and at least 112 other schools happier too, because the idea spread. It's all part of a kindness virus.

I first wrote about this social contagion some months back. In the column, "How social media is increasing social good," Richard Janda, a professor at the Faculty of Law of McGill University and co-author of a book on corporate social responsibility, explains this is a phenomenon of swarming. "The Internet helps us to gauge or measure our reactions

relative to those of others. It does this by allowing us to see and count how many others are swarming to what I like."

He notes that we need to know others are doing so as well, so that our willingness to contribute gains collective significance.

In a year in which we've had so many vile acts against humanity, we've also had an increase in the need for good and an increase in grace that invites us to restore our faith in humanity. Just look at how #26Acts of kindness spread around the Web in honour of the 26 Newtown victims.

As another example, a simple act of kindness can be found on Wilfred Laurier University's compliments Facebook page . An anonymous female extended a compliment to Nicole Kuindersma, "Now to you, I'm just a stranger, but to me, you're the reason I'm still here today ... "

The commenter explained her story: She got caught in the rain with her sister and Kuindersma ran across the street to offer them her umbrella. What Kuindersma didn't know is that they were returning from their mother's funeral. Had it not been for that kind act that restored the rain-soaked girl's faith in humanity, she said would have followed through with plans to kill herself that evening.

Other comments on these pages read more like eulogies than the generic "love your hair," or "pretty dress" posts we're used to. And that's the thing. Why wait until someone is dead to say how you feel?

In the few words it takes to make your New Year's resolution, why not take a few words to say it forward and maybe make someone else's day – or year.

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