

REACTIONS TO ONLINE INTERACTIONS: CONCEPTUALIZATION AND SCALE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE INTERACTION PROPENSITY

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SUMMARY

Companies are using interactive electronic channels for various marketing activities, ranging from advertising, branding, and promotion to selling, service delivery and research. Various types of companies and institutions (e.g., IT companies, fast moving consumer goods companies, universities, local governments, etc.) offer online support options for their products and services, such as instant chat between customers and employees, discussion boards, and online customer communities.

The success of these interactive channels, however, partially depends on the willingness of customers to actively participate and engage in online interactions. It is a commonly observed problem that much more people “lurk” (read and silently observe) than actively participate online. The relative percentages are estimated to be as drastic as 90 percent lurkers versus 10 percent active participants (Cothrel and Williams 1999). As a result, a free-rider problem occurs since a majority of people consume content that is created by a minority. Thus, it is important for companies to understand the communication preferences of their customers in order to fully realize the commercial potential of interactive online channels. Furthermore, it is also important for online consumer behavior theory to consider the essential individual consumer differences in their predisposition to engage in online interactions and subsequently the resulting differences in online communication behavior. Surprisingly, the reasons for this behavioral difference online remain largely unexplored.

The traditional communication and psychology disciplines that deal with face-to-face communication have long recognized that individuals have different predispositions to communicate with others (e.g., Mortensen et al. 1977). In this literature, variability in communication behavior was successfully associated with personality traits, such as willingness-to-communicate (McCroskey and Richmond 1990). However, as all interaction on the Internet is mediated by technology, it is profoundly different from face-to-face communication (e.g., Hoffman and Novak 1996; Valacich et al. 1993). Online interactions are mostly asynchronous, text-based, and lack both verbal

and especially non-verbal cues. In addition, due to the truly global nature of the Internet, a large percentage of online interactions occur between strangers. Many people who chat with each other have never met in person, and postings on newsgroups, discussion boards, and in online communities can have potentially global audiences. Due to these fundamental differences between offline and online communication, it is not suitable to simply transfer the offline communication traits and apply them to the online context. Rather, it seems necessary to investigate online interactions separately.

Although an impressive stream of research has investigated the interactivity of technology and of different online channels (e.g., Burgoon et al. 1999; Stevens et al. 2000), the existence of individual differences in online interaction preference has so far been overlooked. In order to close this gap in the literature, our research has two main objectives: (1) to propose and conceptualize a behavioral orientation – online interaction propensity – that captures the general tendency of an individual to engage in online interactions; and (2) to develop and empirically validate a scale for its measurement.

Based on scale development procedures recommended by Churchill (1979) and Rossiter (2002), we conducted two qualitative and three quantitative studies to establish and empirically validate a measurement instrument for online interaction propensity. In the first study, we explored the concept of online interaction propensity and generated initial scale items by means of two in-depth case studies and a literature review. In the second study, interviews with academic and business experts helped to select and refine the initial scale items. The third study quantitatively tested the factor structure of the resulting items in a survey with 287 respondents. The fourth study (n = 308) evaluated discriminant validity by assessing the online interactions propensity scale together with conceptually close constructs and response set bias. The fifth study (n = 195) established nomological validity by demonstrating the explanatory benefit of online interaction propensity for the behavior of customers in an online community setting. The details of each study and its results will be provided during the presentation. References are available upon request.

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