Chapter XLV
Locating Presence and Positions in Online Focus Group Text with Stance–Shift Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Social cues in online focus groups surface in the ways group members manipulate language, to signal their attitudinal shifts in position toward the group's topics and what both moderators and members may have said. Their primary mode is task-based: their "job" is to respond to topics introduced by the focus group moderator; they also engage in "sidebar chat" among themselves. Using stance-shift analysis on a million-word corpus of online text genres, we identify 10 characteristics of online focus group chat, which may help researchers and retailers to identify when and how group participants might be strongly committed to what they have just written.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate how online focus group members manipulate language to signal attitudes and opinions about focus group topics, and to a lesser extent, about other members, and to characterize the ways they create text. Our discussion will have four parts. We will first highlight two of the approaches used to characterize online text chat (as opposed to voice chat) as a subset of computer mediated communication:

- its writing conventions, such as typographic symbols, abbreviations and punctuation, and
- its use of chunks or utterance breaks to manage information.

Next, we will highlight current research on participant positioning and interaction in online focus groups. Third, we will identify 10 characteristics of online focus group talk, which incorporate subtle social cues. Fourth, we will outline key components in stance-shift analysis and demonstrate how we use it to identify atti-

tude and opinion in online focus group text chat. Stance-shift analysis is a type of quantitative content analysis that we have designed in order to minimize investigator bias and to maximize understanding of online language behaviors involving attitude and appraisal. This analysis combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, to wring as much information as possible from the lines on the screen.

BACKGROUND

Two Characteristics of Online Text Chat

E-commerce, e-government, and e-justice all wrestle with finding the personal human presence in text-based online communication, whether asynchronous or synchronous (Crystal, 2006). Social features are present, if subtle (Davis & Brewer, 1997; Walther, Gay, & Hancock, 2005). Online text is persistent and pervasive: waiting in a mailer, survey "box" or bulletin board, hyperlinked in blogs, scrolling in chats, or in the blurting, telegraphic abbreviations of chat groups convened for specific purposes.

Writing Conventions

Synchronous text chat, which is an online multiparty written interaction, is a far more complex language activity than it initially appears. As with other forms of computer mediated interaction, text chat raises hackles about its nature and its impact. People have problems deciding just what computer mediated interaction is. As Naomi Baron asks: "first, is computer mediated communication (CMC) more like written or spoken language . . . and second, is CMC corrupting written language standards? (2005, p. 360). David Crystal has been at pains in his study, *Language* and the *Internet* to explain that CMC and the Internet are not eroding standards in the way people write and

think, but instead are "enriching the range of communicative options open to us" (2006, p.276). What causes this concern about standards is the distinctive orthographic conventions that CMC in general, and to a large extent, text chat both use for communication.

The communication conventions in CMC can be defined as "behaviors expressed in text that are designed to present a recognizable self, set a context for the interactions, share affect and meaning, and minimize misunderstanding" (Murphy & Collins, 1997,p.5). These include:

- the use of typographic symbols for emoticons to show various emotions that otherwise would be carried by tone of voice or facial expression,
- capitalization, typically used to show emphasis,
- punctuation used in ways that differ from traditional written or print text, and
- verbal "shorthand," or abbreviations, acronyms and shortened versions of words.

Baron (2004, 2005) comments that college students use fewer of these conventions than high school chatters; Herring (2004) finds that females use more iconographic representations of smiles or laughter than males.

The Internet itself offers many guides to typographical emoticons. For example, U.S. emoticons can be reviewed at http://www.worldstart. com/guides/emoticon.htm; Japanese emoticons are presented at http://club.pep.ne.jp/~hiroette/ en/facemarks/. (Interestingly, Herbst (2003) advances the claim that emoticons developed in part from programmers' conventions: text chat has an orthographic history). Sites come and go almost as quickly as the evanescent emoticons and abbreviations; however, the recent popularity of text messaging has helped standardize abbreviations: see sites such as Webopedia, which combines chat and text messages http://www.webopedia. com/quick_ref/textmessageabbreviations.asp.

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