



Chapter X

Stance Analysis: Social Cues and Attitudes in Online Interaction

Peyton Mason, Linguistic Insights, Inc., USA

Boyd Davis, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, USA

Deborah Bosley, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, USA

Abstract

In this chapter, we will first discuss what stance is and highlight how we identify and measure stance using multivariate techniques, using an ongoing example taken from an Online Financial Focus Group. We review differences in stance between online real-time focus groups and online chat, as well as between online and face-to-face focus groups; and finally, proffer examples of stance analysis in two very different online focus groups: older adults discussing financial services and teens discussing clothes. As marketers see that online focus groups offer valuable marketing information by understanding the significance of how something is said as well as what is said, their confidence in the use of online focus-group data should increase.

Background

Discourse is different in the online world. It takes place in an on-screen environment that is typically text based, devoid of the natural cues we typically interpret in face-to-face environments and which frame the participants' severely truncated, often terse and elliptical phrases. Synchronous (real-time) online interaction inhibits our usual reliance in face-to-face interaction on using body language or facial expressions to guess at meaning, or on listening to tone and intonation for clues to intention. The on-screen text of real-time interactions cannot replicate the back and forth, give and take of the normal face-to-face, two-party conversation that allows us to immediately modify our responses or clarify our intent.

Conventional wisdom holds that the limitations of online chats and focus groups are many: the interactants may or may not know each other (Campbell & Wickman, 2000); the size of the window available for text may affect the ways they send messages to each other (Cech & Condon, 2002); and turn-taking is affected because the line a person is typing is not always the line seen on the screen. In addition, the text-based universe of chat and online focus groups can have multiple conversants online at any one time, each of whom can be simultaneously sending small texts that "flash up on a participant's screen, or form part of the growing interactive text" (Yates, 1996, p. 77) being created in the online site for a particular chat room, chat channel, or focus group.

In this chapter, we will first discuss what *stance* is, and highlight how we identify and measure stance using multivariate techniques. Our examples and illustrations throughout will be keyed to an online focus groups about financial services. We will briefly characterize features differentiating online real-time focus groups and online chat, as well as between online and face-to-face focus groups; and finally, give extended examples of stance analysis applied to two very different online focus groups: older adults discussing financial services and teens discussing clothes.

Neuage (2003) comments that chat conversation has a double context. First, the reader sees the words in a line of text itself, which is often added a phrase at a time, in reference to words in preceding lines. Second, chatroom members can come and go during a conversation and reenter at any time, "bots" and "buddies"—programs that are automated to insert messages and even advertisements—show up on the screen at various intervals (Frey, 2002). Learning to read messages in online chat is one set of skills; learning to participate by reading, writing, and occasionally including emoticon faces demands another set. And all the while, the screen keeps scrolling.

Despite the debate over whether online real-time chats are trivial or incomprehensible and whether online real-time focus groups might be socially uninforma-

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