



When students want to stand out: Discourse moves in online classroom discussion that reflect students' needs for distinctiveness



Li-Tang Yu ^a, Diane L. Schallert ^{b, *}, Jeong-bin Park ^c, Kyle M. Williams ^b, Eunjin Seo ^b, Anke J.Z. Sanders ^b, Zachary H. Williamson ^b, Eunjeong Choi ^c, Rachel E. Gaines ^b, Marissa C. Knox ^b

^a Department of English Language and Literature, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan

^b Department of Educational Psychology, University of Texas at Austin, USA

^c Foreign Language Education Graduate Program, University of Texas at Austin, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study extends the research on uniqueness-seeking theory (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980) to explore how students with different needs for uniqueness participated in online classroom discussion and to examine their collaborative interaction in the dialogic process of the discussion. Eight focal participants with low, moderate, and more than moderate uniqueness-seeking levels were selected from a graduate-level course with face-to-face and computer-mediated discussion at each meeting. Data included beginning- and end-of-semester surveys adapted from Lynn and Harris' uniqueness-seeking scale (1997), students' reflections on their discussion experiences each time, and the online discussion transcripts. To analyze students' discourse moves quantitatively and qualitatively, we adapted a coding scheme from Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) community of inquiry model. Results showed the participants engaged in online discussion with different amounts of social and cognitive presence, and with some exceptions within their grouping of uniqueness-seeking levels, were either more cognitive than social in their moves or made equal use of these moves. The dynamic nature of online discussion entailed that more factors than simply uniqueness-seeking needs seemed involved in explaining students' contributions.

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1. Introduction

Our study aimed to explore whether a construct from an older literature in personality and social psychology, *uniqueness-seeking*, would be useful in understanding students' discourse moves in online classroom discussions. Because individuals are said to vacillate between wanting to belong and wanting to stand out and be recognized for their unique contribution to a group, Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006) suggested that one's need to be unique is likely to affect identity work, which in turn seems essential to the internalization of academic discourse (Duff, 2010). The related construct of *optimal distinctiveness* has been applied to politics (van Hiel & Mervielde, 2002), decision-making (Crosby, Kim, & Hathcote, 2006), nursing (Armstrong, Saunders, Owen, Roberts,

& Koch, 2009), and business (Lynn & Harris, 1997).

Uniqueness-seeking and *optimal distinctiveness* represent interesting constructs in the context of online discussion exactly because online discourse is often described as fostering a sense of anonymity (Polat, Mancilla, & Mahalingappa, 2013) and alienation from others (Lee, 2005), an environment in which wanting to receive a response from others may be particularly salient (Lee & the D-Team, 2012). Finding little research associated with these constructs when students participate in online discussion, we set out to understand whether students' uniqueness-seeking needs would be related to their *discourse moves*, that is, how students would approach, construct, handle, and contribute to the discourse, when interacting in online discussions.

2. Background literature

We begin with three lines of work relevant to our project. First, to understand the context we studied, we discuss research on the

* Corresponding author. Department of Educational Psychology, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712, USA.

E-mail address: dschallert@austin.utexas.edu (D.L. Schallert).

use of classroom computer-mediated discussion. Because of its association with the phenomenon of uniqueness-seeking, we next turn to the work on social identity and social presence. Finally, we turn to our focal construct, uniqueness-seeking.

2.1. Online discussion in the classroom

As the development of technology continues to progress apace, educational institutions are increasingly adopting online contexts for teaching and learning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). As Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Cammack (2004) asserted, learners in today's technology-saturated world need to develop strategies and skills to undertake new literacy activities in which technologies and the Internet play a crucial role. Among different applications of technologies, computer-mediated discussion (CMD) is a popular classroom practice that researchers have begun to explore (Lin, Huang, & Liou, 2013; Sauro, 2011). CMD facilitates learners' interactions with one another, allowing them to know about and be influenced by others' perspectives and enhancing collaborative learning and social communities (Jordan, 2008). To describe the nature of CMD, Herring (1996) identified at least three distinctive properties: (1) the language of CMD incorporates a less formal register in written language; (2) the nature of interactions reflects the fact that it occurs "without the benefit of extra-linguistic cues" (p. 4) such as gender and identity; and (3) a sense of community may to different degrees be fostered in such contexts.

As for online community, although CMD affords the potential for equal participation (Selfe, 1990), such democratic access does not necessarily ensue. Zhang (2013) found some learners could dominate an online forum just as can happen in face-to-face discussion, and Herring (2001) stated that the disadvantages experienced by individuals of certain class, gender, and race/ethnicity in face-to-face situations may still crop up in online talk. Wade and Fauske (2004) reported on how learners of different backgrounds shaped online discussion in different ways.

In addition, there have been reports of the variable ways students participate in the literacy practices required of online discussion. Vogler et al. (2013) identified three patterns of conversation moves among students involved in online discussion, patterns that were likely to be mixed at different points. These patterns illustrated how reading, writing, and thinking could be interleaved in the service of learning. Also, Lee et al. (2011) reported that, contrary to views of resistance as a negative feature of a conversation, students' online discussions displayed resistance in friendly, polite ways that invited more open and productive discussions associated with evidence of learning. Other works have reported on politeness strategies (Schallert et al., 2009a; Yang et al., 2006) and on uncertainty expressions as integral to learning online (Jordan et al., 2014).

2.2. Social identity and social presence in online discussion

Also relevant to our study is the prolific work on identity and social presence. As Dennen and Wieland (2007) described, in addition to learning, socializing is also an important component of participating in online discussion. Participants establish their online persona, building what Ashforth and Mael (1989) called a *self-definition*, of which a large proportion is their social identity. Tajfel (1981) theorized that social identities represent one's conception of his/her membership in various social groups based on the person's valuing of the language and behaviors of the groups. As a shared social identity develops, learners can acquire a sense of belonging to the group (Rogers & Lea, 2005). In their essay acknowledging

identity as social, fluid, and recognized, Moje and Luke (2009) reviewed the different ways that researchers have dealt with the construct of identity by organizing these literature as five metaphors. For example, the metaphor of identity-as-difference "focuses on how people are distinguished one from another by virtue of their group membership and on how ways of knowing, doing, or believing held or practiced by a group shape the individual as a member of that group" (pp. 419–420). Another metaphor, that of identity-as-position, casts identity as a social construction and highlights the power of others' positioning on individuals' identity. When taken online, participants in a forum are positioned and position others by their words (Schallert, Song, & the D-Team, 2009).

These recent perspectives on identity construction seem closely related to an older construct, developed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), on *social presence*, the "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (p. 65). In online contexts, learners project their identities and feel the presence of others, thus creating communities with norms and conventions, with social presence originating from learners' interactions (Gunawardena, 1995). Actions that foster social presence have been identified (e.g., Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2007), such as the use of humor, self-disclosure, and emoticons. Social presence has been found to influence students' affect and self-efficacy in cyberspace and to be associated positively with satisfaction with online discussion (Swan & Shih, 2005) as well as perceived learning outcomes (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Thus, for our study, these constructs highlighted how students in an online discussion are likely to be engaged in social as well as cognitive work.

2.3. Uniqueness-seeking and optimal distinctiveness

A third line of relevant work grew from the initial delineation of uniqueness-seeking needs by Snyder and Fromkin (1980) and of optimal distinctiveness by Brewer (1991). With their uniqueness theory, Snyder and Fromkin (1980) proposed that individuals are influenced by their needs to maintain a sense of moderate self-distinctiveness because they experience negative feelings when perceiving extreme similarity to or uniqueness from relevant others. Building on their theory, Brewer (1991) posited that social identity is derived from two opposing forces, assimilation to and differentiation from others. Individuals need to establish their social identity by negotiating between these two forces to keep themselves from feeling uncomfortable when sensing themselves to be too similar to or different from others in social contexts, thereby reaching a sense of optimal distinctiveness. Different levels of uniqueness-seeking needs are postulated across individuals and in particular contexts because "as people perceive more similarity between themselves and others in the group, they become increasingly motivated to reaffirm their distinctiveness, creating a need for uniqueness" (Lynn & Snyder, 2002, p. 396).

Since this early work, research has suggested that needs for seeking uniqueness and reaching optimal distinctiveness are useful constructs to understanding human interactions. Lynn and Harris (1997) found that consumers' dispositional needs for uniqueness were positively related to their preference for unique shopping venues and to the desire for scarce, innovative, and customized products. Their hypothesis that need for uniqueness would correlate negatively with consumer susceptibility to social influence, however, was not supported, suggesting that the needs to fit in and to be unique may function independently. In contrast, Imhoff and Erb (2008) recruited university students in Germany and

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