

Chapter 10

Human Behavior on the WWW

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ABSTRACT

This entry summarizes psychological research on human behavior on the World Wide Web, excluding WWW topics addressed in other entries in this encyclopedia (e.g., social networking sites, blogs, and Wikipedia). Four areas are examined: (1) Online research covers the methodology of conducting psychological research online. The focus lies on people's behavior as participants in Web-based research. (2) Internet addiction is a clinical psychological topic about the phenomenon of excessive Internet use that shares characteristics with compulsive or addicted behavior. (3) Online search behavior and information processing deals with how people search for information online and with the effects of hypertext on learning and cognitive load. (4) Online consumer behavior summarizes research of determinants of whether and how often people buy online.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet in general and the World Wide Web in particular have unleashed a dynamic that nobody anticipated two decades ago. Today, nearly a third of humankind uses the Internet, and developed countries are approaching the three-quarters mark (International Telecommunication Union, 2010).

The Internet shares some characteristics with traditional mass media but it differs from them in several ways. Unlike conventional mass me-

dia such as television, the Internet does not offer a circumscribed and stable media experience. Rather, the Internet is a decentralized platform of many different applications that call forth different cognitions, feelings and behaviors on the part of their users. Moreover, the Internet offers its users the possibility to interact and communicate with each other. While traditional mass media have mainly served as stimuli in psychological research, psychological research about the Internet takes into account that a growing number of

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people consciously select, process, interact with and produce content.

Of the various services that make up the Internet, the World Wide Web (WWW) is the most commonly used service besides e-mail. This entry looks at psychological research on human behavior on and around the World Wide Web. Human behavior on the WWW encompasses all behavior related to human interaction with the World Wide Web (e.g., participating in Web-based research, buying goods, searching for information).

OVERVIEW

As the WWW itself is only two decades young, psychological research on human behavior on the Web is a young field. Due to the fast pace of technological innovation on the Web, research methods and results evolve and expire quickly. An example is research about personal homepages: With the advent of social networking sites, many personal homepages were abandoned and many more were not built in the first place due to the arrival of Facebook and MySpace. Accordingly, most research on human behavior on the Web is less consolidated than is research in other fields of psychology. Instead of a gradual development of theories in the wake of an influential idea or paradigm, research on the Web constantly faces new phenomena.

Among the many ways of how humans interact with the Web this entry focuses on four areas: 1) Online research tackles people's participation behavior in Web-based research. 2) Internet addiction is an important strand in clinical psychological online research. It is centered around the observation that some Internet users spend excessive time on online activities with severe consequences for their professional and private life. 3) Online search behavior and information processing examine user behavior on search engines and in the hypertext environment of the WWW. 4) Online consumer

behavior addresses the factors that determine whether people purchase online.

Although being part of the WWW and therefore falling into the scope of this entry, social networking sites, blogs, chat rooms and Wikipedia are dealt with in dedicated entries in this encyclopedia.

ONLINE RESEARCH

The most stable phenomenon of research on human behavior on the Web is humans' participation behavior in this very research. Online research is a methodological area that is concerned with the quality of research data that are collected via the WWW. The current leading researchers in this area include Mick Couper and Roger Tourangeau from the University of Michigan (Couper, 2000; Couper, Conrad, & Tourangeau, 2007; Couper & Miller, 2008; Couper, Tourangeau, Conrad, & Crawford, 2004; Couper, Tourangeau, & Kenyon, 2004; Fricker, Galesic, Tourangeau, & Yan, 2005; Kreuter, Presser, & Tourangeau, 2008; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007) and Ulf-Dietrich Reips from the University of Deusto in Bilbao, Spain (Musch & Reips, 2000; Reips, 2002).

According to Musch and Reips (2000), the first Internet-based experiments were experiments on auditory perception conducted 1995 by Norma Welch. In 1996, Krantz, Ballard and Scher (1997) carried out the first experiment entirely over the Web. In the following years Web surveys and experiments took off (Couper, 2000; Musch & Reips, 2000). Couper (2000) points out benefits as well as drawbacks of the spread of Web-based studies: On the one hand, the Web allows conducting surveys at significantly lower costs. This makes surveys feasible for everyone, thus leading to a democratization of surveying itself. On the other hand, these cost savings engender a flood of surveys whose quality ranges widely. One quality problem is nonprobability sampling in surveys that claim representativeness. Another problem is

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