

Engaging with interactive media may be a sequence of actions, assessments

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The way people engage with interactive media is usually portrayed as a single act—users either click on the content, or they do not. However, a team of researchers suggest that online engagement is not a single act, after all, but rather a sequence of assessments and interactions.

In two studies, researchers report that user engagement may be built on a continuum of four factors, including physical interaction, [interface](#) assessment, absorption and digital outreach. This model could lead to the development of [content](#) that people are more willing to share online and websites that can better promote learning and memory, they added.

"Our model starts with the physical interaction—swiping and tapping, for example—and then people assess the interface—they see if it's intuitive and easy to use—after that comes the actual absorption with the content," said S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory. "Finally, we see the digital outreach. This is when users are so absorbed in the content that they find it good enough to share with others."

Sundar worked with Jeeyun Oh, assistant professor of advertising, University of Texas at Austin and Saraswathi Bellur, assistant professor of communication, University of Connecticut.

Sundar said that the more users interact with and like using the interface, the more they become absorbed in the content and the more likely they

are to pass on the content to members of their social network. This sharing of content is important to marketers because they can inexpensively promote their messages to large numbers of people. The process can also promote learning and attitude changes, according to the researchers.

"For example, interestingly, it's physical interaction that really promotes memory," said Sundar. "When a user is moving around the hot spots of the site and spending more time to check out the interface, it promotes recall memory, which is good for learning. One application might be on an educational site, where physical interaction—making people do things or move things around the site—can be used to enhance storage of information."

According to Oh, there is a connection between the users' interactions and assessments and their attitudes and behaviors.

"Our data show that user interactions and assessments of the interface shape their attitudes and behaviors toward the content presented via that interface," Oh said. "When users perceive the interface to be easier, more natural and intuitive to use, they find the article on the site to be more concise, informative, insightful, and lively."

According to the researchers, who report their findings in the current issue of *Communication Research*, this process is different from how engagement is commonly viewed now, which is seen more like a single act, rather than a process.

"Engagement is a word that's been bandied about for quite a long time, but people have a somewhat of a rudimentary understanding of what engagement actually means," said Sundar. "But understanding engagement is of importance not just for researchers, but for people who do advertising and marketing, all these professionals who are trying to

get a sense of how people are engaged in media and how much money should they spend on advertising, for example."

Sundar said that user engagement is a relatively new concept for media researchers. Prior to online content, media were less interactive and used to be measured through exposure, rather than engagement. Exposure refers to how many times a person viewed, or heard media content. For instance, if they subscribed to a newspaper or watched television. But exposure is a superficial way of understanding how people interact with media, according to Sundar.

"With so much of our daily interactions transpiring on social [media](#), we are no longer looking at an 'attention economy,' but rather an 'engagement economy,'" Bellur said. "That is why it is important for both researchers and designers to view user engagement as a process, to understand what makes users come, stay, consume and share content as a cumulative process, and not as disparate acts. The model we propose in this study is a step in that direction."

The researchers used data from two experiments of 263 undergraduate students interacting with websites. After browsing the sites, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire. To study physical interaction, the [researchers](#) measured how much time the participants spent on the different parts of the interface. They asked the participants questions to determine their assessment of the interface, as well as how absorbed they were in the content and whether they would share it.

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