

# Instrumentality killed the cat (but curiosity saved it): The role of showcasing curiosity in information-gathering

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## Background

**How can we make networking interactions more effective and more enjoyable for all involved parties?**

Although networking helps people reach their personal and professional goals, individuals are often very hesitant to engage in it. Networking makes people feel uncomfortable because they are using others to advance their own interests.

Current work addressing networking reluctance assumes that all the discomfort related to networking is experienced by the ego, ignoring the experiences of their counterparts. Our work questions this assumption and seeks to provide a recommendation for how egos can make information-gathering interactions more enjoyable for themselves and their counterparts.

**Hypothesis 1A:** Showcasing curiosity leads to more engagement with the ego.

**Hypothesis 1B:** Showcasing curiosity leads to more positive evaluations of the ego and interaction.

**Hypothesis 2:** Showcasing curiosity reduces perceptions of instrumentality.

**Hypothesis 3A:** Perceptions of instrumentality mediate the relationships between showcasing curiosity and engagement.

**Hypothesis 3B:** Perceptions of instrumentality mediate the relationships between showcasing curiosity and evaluations of the ego and the interaction.

## Study 1

**Does showcasing curiosity on Twitter lead to greater engagement and positive evaluation?**

**Design:** Showcasing curiosity was operationalized as the presence of “#curious” in a tweet. Using Twitter’s Academic Research API, we collected all tweets that expressed curiosity with “#curious” in 2019 that were written in the English language. We excluded retweets or reply tweets from our analysis. This resulted in a dataset of 11,425 tweets. Then, we collected all questions asked without “#curious” in 2019 by the users associated with the “#curious” tweets.

**Results:** We used negative binomial models with a random intercept for user to estimate the number of retweets using a dummy variable that reflect whether or not a tweet in our dataset had “#curious.” The presence of “#curious” positively predicted retweets ( $b = 0.81$ ,  $se = 0.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) as well as likes ( $b = 0.73$ ,  $se = 0.02$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## Abstract

People are often reluctant to engage in professional networking despite its importance to career success. They worry that requesting information from others to accomplish personal goals will make their counterparts feel used and their interactions disingenuous. We argue that expressing curiosity facilitates networking and information-gathering. Specifically, when an individual showcases curiosity in their ask, their counterpart is less likely to feel used, increasing their counterpart’s willingness to engage and leaving their counterpart with more positive impressions of both the interaction and the asker. We find support for our hypotheses across two field studies on Twitter and Reddit and three lab studies (total  $n = 11,190$ ). Our research suggests that curiosity is a valuable tool in networking and information-gathering. By showcasing curiosity, individuals can make networking interactions more effective and more enjoyable for themselves and their counterparts.

## Study 2

**Does showcasing curiosity on Reddit lead to greater engagement and positive evaluation?**

**Design:** Using Reddit’s API, we requested the top 1000 posts on the r/NoStupidQuestions sub-Reddit by score. An independent judge coded the title of each of these posts (which was commonly the question being asked) for the level of curiosity expressed on a five-point scale (1 = not curious at all, 5 = extremely curious).

**Results:** We used Poisson models to estimate the number of comments and the scores of each question using the judge ratings of expressed curiosity. According to these models, expressed curiosity significantly predicted the number of comments ( $b = 0.39$ ,  $se = 0.001$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the scores ( $b = 0.41$ ,  $se < 0.001$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) of the questions.

## Study 3

**Design:** We asked 192 full-time workers in the United States to recall and write about “an interaction in which a work colleague asked [them] for information.” Then, they responded to measures of the curiosity showcased by the information-seeker, their perceptions of instrumentality, and their evaluations of the information-seeker and the interaction.

**Results:** The curiosity showcased by the information-seeker negatively predicted perceptions of instrumentality ( $B = -0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). Curiosity showcased also predicted liking ( $B = 0.56$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), interaction enjoyment ( $B = 0.86$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and openness to future interactions with the information-seeker ( $B = 0.53$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Perceived instrumentality mediated the relationship between showcased curiosity and each of these outcomes.

## Study 4A

**Design:** We randomly assigned 384 participants to either the role of information-giver or an information-seeker. Both participants had to solve a business case, but the information-seeker was given the opportunity to have a conversation with the information-giver to ask them questions about the business case. The conversation happens after the information-giver completes and is evaluated on the case but before the information-seeker begins their case. Information-seekers were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: ask direct questions or ask curious questions.

**Results:** Information-givers in the curiosity condition (versus control) reported greater information-seeker liking ( $B = 0.43$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), interaction enjoyment ( $B = 0.30$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.037$ ), and openness to future interactions with the information-seeker ( $B = 0.28$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.050$ ). However, condition did not predict information-giver perceptions of instrumentality ( $B = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $p = 0.499$ ).

## Study 4B

**Design:** It was an asynchronous version of Study 4A that allowed information-givers to interact with multiple information seekers. Information-givers were randomly showed them four sets of the questions brainstormed by the information-seekers (two from the curiosity condition and two from the control condition) and asked to evaluate the people who asked them.

**Results:** Information-givers in the curiosity condition (versus control) reported greater information-seeker liking ( $B = 0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), greater interaction enjoyment ( $B = 0.35$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), greater openness to future interactions with the information-seeker ( $B = 0.27$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and lower perceptions of instrumentality ( $B = -0.32$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, instrumentality perceptions was a significant mediator of these relationships.

## Discussion

In this paper, we show that by showcasing curiosity, egos can make information-gathering sessions less unpleasant for themselves and their alters. When egos express more curiosity in their questions, their alters are less likely to feel objectified and more likely to engage with the egos. As alters experience egos’ willingness to engage with their information-gathering pursuits, egos’ networking discomfort may decrease and they may be encouraged to engage more in networking behaviors.

## Zoom Link

<https://hbs.zoom.us/j/99489662900?pwd=NU9rVHQ0SyUN25aS09vLy8vYkldz09>

Meeting ID: 994 8966 2900

Passcode: 643052