

INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES, COGNITIONS, AND PREDISPOSITIONS

IDENTIFYING COMPULSIVE COMMUNICATORS: THE TALKAHOLIC SCALE

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A ten-item Likert-type scale, named the "Talkaholic Scale," is advanced as a method of identifying individuals who are aware of their tendencies to over-communicate in a consistent and compulsive manner. People who score beyond two standard deviations above the mean on the scale are labeled as "talkaholics," a term chosen to reflect the similarities in the compulsiveness and regularity of the behaviors of these individuals and of those who are labeled "alcoholics" or "workaholics." The instrument is unidimensional, demonstrates good internal and test-retest reliability, and has strong face validity. It is expected to prove useful for future research relating to over-communication and over-communicators.

Variability in people's talking behavior has been the subject of research in the fields of communication and psychology for over a half-century. The quantity of talk, and the reasons for variability in quantity of talk, has held a central position in this arena of research. Most of this attention has centered on low-quantity verbalizers, with particular attention to factors believed to result in less talking such as communication apprehension, low self-esteem, introversion, and inadequate communication skills (Daly & McCroskey, 1984; Jones, Cheek, & Briggs, 1986; Leary, 1983; McCroskey, 1977; McCroskey & Richmond, 1991; Phillips, 1981; Zimbardo, 1977). Comparatively little attention has been directed toward high verbalizers, particularly extremely high verbalizers. When the phenomenon of over-communication is mentioned at all in this literature, it usually is viewed as an aberrant response to high communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1984).

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Research on the impact of talkativeness on interpersonal perceptions such as source credibility, leadership ability, interpersonal attraction, powerfulness, and attitude similarity has found strong, positive, linear relationships (Allgeier, 1974; Daly, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1976, 1977; Hayes & Meltzer, 1972; Hayes & Sievers, 1972). That is, this research indicates that the more a person talks, the more that person is perceived to be credible, a leader, interpersonally attractive, powerful, and to have similar attitudes to those of the perceiver. This linear relationship has been found to hold up to and including such excessively high levels as talking 75 to 95 percent of the time in a small group. Plots of the relationships indicate no significant decline of positive perceptions even at the most extremely high levels of talking behavior. The results of these studies call into question the concept of talking "too much." In studies involving real communication as well as studies employing highly unique simulations, the results are essentially the same: no level of talking could be appropriately labeled as talking "too much." Nevertheless, in surveys of college students and non-student adults, we have yet to find a person who would not claim to know someone who "talks too much."

One possible explanation for this apparent discrepancy between results of the formal research and what lay people consistently report is that lay reports may be confusing quality with quantity. That is, if a person does not like what someone says, one of the ways of describing that response is to refer to the person as one who "talks too much." Thus, "talks too much" is a negative quantitative term for a negative qualitative reaction. Indeed, it might be difficult for person "A" to use the "talks too much" description for a person who spends an excessive amount of time talking to other persons about A's positive qualities, even though such behavior might be somewhat embarrassing to "A."

While we believe the above explanation might account for a large portion of the "talks too much" descriptions in everyday interaction, we do not think it will account for all such descriptions. Not all attributions of excessive talking can be discounted. There really are some people who "talk too much." We have had them as students, as professors, and as colleagues, in addition to coming into contact with them in everyday non-academic life. While the proportion of such individuals in the population probably is small, such people exist and, for the most part, they know who they are. As a first step toward a research program intended to identify these people, determine what impact their behavior has on others and on themselves, and to identify potential causes of this type of communication behavior and remedial actions if the effects of the behavior are negative, the present study was designed to produce a self-report measure useful in identifying such over-communicators.

The Talkaholic Construct

While we believe over-communicators do exist, we do not believe their behavior is entirely volitional, or even necessarily controllable. We see excessive communication as "too much of a good thing." Communication, like other potentially good things, can be taken to excess. Often, taking a good thing too far is a function of compulsive behavior. A person essentially becomes addicted, and cannot help themselves. Hence, we have chosen to label

such over-communicators as "talkaholics." This term is drawn from common usage references to people with other compulsive behaviors which take a good thing to excess: alcoholic, workaholic, chocoholic. The first characteristic of talkaholics' behavior, then, is compulsiveness. Talkaholics are more than just highly verbal, they are compulsively highly verbal. This is seen as an important distinction between talkaholics and people who simply talk a lot. The latter people are able to selectively vary their quantity of talk.

Whether talkaholic behavior truly qualifies as "compulsive" remains to be proven. If it is found to be volitional, the "talkaholic" label clearly would be inappropriate. However, if "talkaholics", when identified, reject efforts to get them to modify their behavior, believe their behavior is competent in the face of contrary evidence, and/or acknowledge that they can't quit on their own, our choice of label will receive justification. By including items which directly related to compulsive behavior in the present study, we provided an initial test of the appropriateness of our label. Since such items, as will be noted below, were found appropriate for inclusion in our scale, our chosen term has passed its first test for acceptance.

A second characteristic of the talkaholic is self-awareness. That is, this person is aware that her/his talking behavior is seen as excessive by others. While it is possible to be an excessive talker and not know it when one is very young, it is likely that as one grows older he/she will become aware of others' perceptions of excessive talking behavior. Peers, particularly when irritated, usually are not hesitant to tell someone they think they talk too much. In fact, this is one of the more common "insults" exchanged in peer interactions. After hearing this comment from a large number of people, most people will recognize there may be some truth in the allegation.

The third characteristic of the talkaholic is the manifestation of behavior that is not just above the norm, but is highly deviant. That is, the behavior is *far* above the norm and *consistently* so. The excessive talking pattern is present in most, if not all, communication contexts.

The final, and possibly most serious, characteristic of the talkaholic is that he/she will continue to communicate even though he/she knows it is not in her/his own best interest. Talkaholics talk themselves into trouble when all they would have to do to stay out of it would be to keep quiet.

Combining the above we see the talkaholic as a person who communicates excessively, even when to remain silent would be in the person's best interest. This person is very much aware of her/his own behavior but is unable or unwilling to change it.

It is important to make clear that the opposite of the talkaholic is neither the communication apprehensive nor the person who never talks. Rather, the opposite of the talkaholic simply is the person who does not communicate excessively. People who are *not* talkaholics are neither automatically quiet people nor people with high communication apprehension. Rather they are people who talk within the normal range in terms of talking quantity.

Most importantly, non-talkaholics are *not* people who are compulsively quiet. Unlike many individual difference constructs relating to communication, it is not assumed that an appropriate measure of this individual

difference would yield scores falling on a continuum with two extreme ends, both of which are meaningful. Rather, the presumption here is that talkaholism falls on a continuum from being a talkaholic (high) to not being a talkaholic (all other scores). It is not assumed that people who score low on a measure of talkaholism have any unique characteristics *at all*. Just as people who are not alcoholics, or workaholics, or chocoholics are not all alike, it is only assumed that they are not talkaholics. Two such people may have no other characteristic in common. Thus, only extremely high scores on such a measure are presumed to be meaningful.

Development of the Instrument

A total of 25 items were generated for the initial data collection. Items were included which were consistent with the conceptualization outlined above as well as items which were expected to form an additional dimension (or dimensions) distinct from the one presumed to measure the talkaholic construct. The items in this initial measure are presented in Table 1.

The 25-item measure was completed by 816 college students on the first day of class in basic courses in communication studies following these instructions:

DIRECTIONS: The questionnaire below includes 25 statements about talking behavior. Please indicate the degree to which you believe each of these characteristics applies to you by marking, on the line before the item, whether you (5) strongly agree that it applies; (4) agree that it applies, (3) are undecided, (2) disagree that it applies, or (1) strongly disagree that it applies. There are no right or wrong answers. Work quickly; record your first impression.

The data were submitted to iterated principal components factor analysis with oblique (promax) rotation. Kaiser's Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .90. An examination of the plot of the factor eigenvalues (scree test) indicated a two-factor interpretation was appropriate. The factor loadings based on that solution are included in Table 1 (Scoring of items was reflected prior to factor analysis so as to make high scores indicative of high talking behavior). Twelve items had their highest loading on the first factor, while thirteen had their highest loading on the second factor. The interfactor correlation was .46, indicating a moderate association between the factors.

An examination of the items with their highest loadings on factor 1 indicated they represented the construct of the "talkaholic" presented above. The second factor included primarily items relating to avoiding communication, items which were included to permit factor discrimination between items believed to measure the intended construct and items which did not.

Ten items with their loadings on the first factor were selected to become the focal items on the Talkaholic Scale. The ten selected were those with the highest loadings. In order to test the discriminate validity of these items, they were included in a supplementary factor analysis with items from a 10-item measure of Responsiveness (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992) which the subjects

TABLE 1
ORIGINAL SCALE ITEMS AND FACTOR LOADINGS

ITEM	FACTOR 1	FACTOR 2
1. I talk more than I should sometimes.	.63*	.36
2. Often, I talk when I know I should keep quiet.	.57*	.28
3. Given the choice, I would rather read than talk.	.20	.36*
4. Sometimes I keep quiet when I know it would be to my advantage to talk.	.21	.61*
5. Given the choice, I would rather watch television than talk.	.16	.38*
6. Often I keep quiet when I know I should talk.	.20	.68*
7. I am a talker, rarely do I stay quiet in communication situations.	.53	.71*
8. I feel I must express my opinion in classes and/or meetings.	.23	.50*
9. I am a "talkaholic."	.75*	.43
10. In general, I talk more than I should.	.78*	.41
11. I am <u>not</u> a talker, rarely do I talk in communication situations.	.38	.56*
12. Quite a few people have said I talk too much.	.67*	.24
13. People often accuse me of interrupting them.	.43**	.17
14. Sometimes I feel compelled to keep quiet, even though it would be better if I talked.	.22	.58*
15. I am a compulsive talker.	.78*	.37
16. Given the choice, I would rather talk than watch TV.	.29	.40*
17. I just can't stop talking too much.	.69*	.22
18. In general, I talk less than I should.	.44	.62*
19. Given the choice, I would rather talk than read.	.25	.41*
20. I feel I must express my opinion in conversations.	.26	.52*
21. I am <u>not</u> a "talkaholic."	.68*	.34
22. Sometimes I feel compelled to talk, even though it would be better if I kept quiet.	.47**	.36
23. I am <u>not</u> a compulsive talker.	.61*	.33
24. Sometimes I talk when I know it would be to my advantage to keep quiet.	.48*	.29
25. I talk less than I should sometimes.	.42	.59*

*Highest loading on this factor.

** Highest loading on this factor, but lower than top ten items.

had completed on the same day they completed this measure. It was assumed that these two constructs were distinct from each other and appropriate measures of each should form distinct factors. The scores on ten items from each scale (total 20 items) were submitted to iterated principal components factor analysis with oblique (promax) rotation.

Kaiser's Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .90. The scree plot suggested the presence of two distinct factors. The loadings of the 20 items are reported in Table 2. The interfactor correlation was .01, indicating a clear distinction between the factors with virtually no overlap.

The Talkaholic scale is presented in Table 3. It includes ten scored items and six filler items designed to balance the polarity of items in the actual scale. Instructions for scoring the scale are included. Scores on the scale may range from 10 to 50. The mean score for the present sample was 24.8 with a standard deviation of 7.58. Alpha reliability for the 10-item scale is .92. Test-retest

reliability, based on 112 subjects with a 13-week delay between administrations, is .76.

In keeping with our conceptualization of talkaholics being comparatively rare and highly deviant from most communicators, we recommend considering only those people who score more than two standard deviations above the norm on the scale as true "talkaholics." That means that people scoring 40 or above on this scale qualify as "talkaholics." For research purposes, it may also be useful to study those individuals one standard deviation above the normative mean (scores 33-39), but these individuals should not be confused with the highly deviant group scoring 40 and above.

TABLE 2
LOADINGS OF TALKAHOLIC AND RESPONSIVENESS ITEMS

ITEM	FACTOR 1	FACTOR 2
Talkaholic 1	.00	.62*
Talkaholic 2	-.02	.55*
Talkaholic 3	.11	.77*
Talkaholic 4	.04	.78*
Talkaholic 5	.05	.65*
Talkaholic 6	-.02	.80*
Talkaholic 7	-.03	.68*
Talkaholic 8	-.02	.70*
Talkaholic 9	-.01	.63*
Talkaholic 10	.01	.54*
Responsiveness 1	.53*	.02
Responsiveness 2	.46*	.06
Responsiveness 3	.75*	-.01
Responsiveness 4	.79*	.01
Responsiveness 5	.71*	-.04
Responsiveness 6	.68*	.04
Responsiveness 7	.73*	-.02
Responsiveness 8	.78*	-.04
Responsiveness 9	.80*	.01
Responsiveness 10	.57*	.11

* Highest loading on this factor.

CONCLUSIONS

The construct of "talkaholism" representing an individual difference relating to degree of compulsive over-communication has been advanced. A scale is reported which is believed to be a valid measure representing that construct. The measure has good internal reliability and satisfactory test-retest reliability. The face validity of the instrument is high, in that the items expected to form the scale, based on the nature of the construct, did so. The factor representing the measure is clearly distinct from a factor representing a measure believed not to be related to the talkaholism construct. While future research must be conducted to test the predictive validity of the instrument, the Talkaholic Scale is presented at this point as a satisfactory research instrument.

TABLE 3
THE TALKAHOLIC SCALE

DIRECTIONS: The questionnaire below includes sixteen statements about talking behavior. Please indicate the degree to which you believe each of these characteristics applies to you by marking, on the line before each item, whether you (5) strongly agree that it applies, (4) agree that it applies, (3) are undecided, (2) disagree that it applies, or (1) strongly disagree that it applies. There are no right or wrong answers. Work quickly; record your first impression.

- | | |
|-------|---|
| _____ | 1. *Often I keep quiet when I know I should talk. |
| _____ | 2. I talk more than I should sometimes. |
| _____ | 3. Often, I talk when I know I should keep quiet. |
| _____ | 4. *Sometimes I keep quiet when I know it would be to my advantage to talk. |
| _____ | 5. I am a "talkaholic." |
| _____ | 6. *Sometimes I feel compelled to keep quiet. |
| _____ | 7. In general, I talk more than I should. |
| _____ | 8. I am a compulsive talker. |
| _____ | 9. *I am <u>not</u> a talker; rarely do I talk in communication situations. |
| _____ | 10. Quite a few people have said I talk too much. |
| _____ | 11. I just can't stop talking too much. |
| _____ | 12. *In general, I talk less than I should. |
| _____ | 13. I am <u>not</u> a "talkaholic." |
| _____ | 14. Sometimes I talk when I know it would be to my advantage to keep quiet. |
| _____ | 15. *I talk less than I should sometimes. |
| _____ | 16. I am <u>not</u> a compulsive talker. |

* Filler item. Asterisk should not be included when scale given to subject.

SCORING: To determine the score on this scale, complete the following steps:

Step 1. Add the scores for items 2,3,5,7,8,10,11, and 14.

Step 2. Add the scores for items 13 and 16.

Step 3. Complete the following formula:

Talkaholic score = 12 + total from Step 1 - total from step 2.

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The Talkaholic Scale

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- _____ 1. ✓ Often I keep quiet when I know I should talk.
- _____ 2. I talk more than I should sometimes.
- _____ 3. Often, I talk when I know I should keep quiet.
- _____ 4. ✓ Sometimes I keep quiet when I know it would be to my advantage to talk.
- _____ 5. I am a "talkaholic."
- _____ 6. ✓ Sometimes I feel compelled to keep quiet.
- _____ 7. In general, I talk more than I should.
- _____ 8. I am a compulsive talker.
- _____ 9. ✓ I am not a talker; rarely do I talk in communication situations.
- _____ 10. Quite a few people have said I talk too much.
- _____ 11. I just can't stop talking too much.
- _____ 12. ✓ In general, I talk less than I should.
- _____ 13. I am not a "talkaholic."
- _____ 14. Sometimes I talk when I know it would be to my advantage to keep quiet.
- _____ 15. ✓ I talk less than I should sometimes.
- _____ 16. I am not a compulsive talker.

SCORING: To determine the score on this scale, complete the following steps:

Step 1. Add the scores for items 2,3,5,7,8,10,11,and 14.

Step 2. Add the scores for items 13 and 16.

Step 3. Complete the following formula:

Talkaholic score = $12 + \text{total from Step 1} - \text{total from step 2.}$