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Use of affect in blog communication: Trust, Credibility, and Authenticity

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test the compelling-arguments hypothesis in an agenda-building framework, focusing on the role of affect in blog communication. Conducting a 3×3 factorial experiment with two manipulated independent variables (valence and arousal), this investigation examined the influences of these variables on public relations outcomes (credibility, trust, and authenticity) as potential consequences of agenda-building relationships. Our findings showed main effects of both independent variables on perceived trust and authenticity.

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1. Introduction

Agenda-setting theory describes that media tell the public "what to think about," as well as "how to think" about objects (McCombs, 2004; p. 71). Numerous studies have found positive correlations supporting the transfer of salience regarding objects or attributes between the media and public agendas (i.e., McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Expanding from agenda-setting theory, scholars also explored who sets the media agenda by examining the transfer of salience between external sources (i.e., public relations information subsidies, such as news releases or spokespeople's statements) and the media agenda (i.e., Miller, 2010). The concept of agenda building suggests that public relations practice can contribute to shaping agendas for news media and public opinion.

The two levels of agenda building are object and attribute salience, and attributes have two dimensions: substantive and affective. Substantive attributes are based on cognitive reasoning (i.e., issue frame, reputation attributes) while affective attributes are based on emotional tone (McCombs, 2004; Sheafer, 2007).

The notion of "compelling arguments" explains the effects of attributes (second level) on object salience (first level) (McCombs, 2004; Kiousis, 2005; Sheafer, 2007). In an experimental setting, Kiousis, Bantimaroudis, and Ban (1999) found that portrayals of candidates' qualifications on media coverage can influence a public's overall affective perceptions of political candidates. Surprisingly, not many studies have examined the effects of attributes on overall evaluations of objects. In particular, the influence of affective attributes has been less investigated than substantive attributes.

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2. Theory

2.1. Affective attributes

The valence (tone) of a message is the most commonly used affective attribute in agenda-setting and agenda-building studies. However, other than valence, the role of emotions has been less explored in agenda-building research. Investigating the effects of emotions on communication messages, scholars have observed that emotionally arousing messages can increase the effectiveness of advertising (Lang, Dhillon, & Dong, 1995), and emotions can play a significant role in evoking in-depth and rational thinking about an object (Coleman & Wu, 2010). Prior scholarship has focused on multiple dimensions of affective attributes: valence and arousal (i.e., stimulating or not) (i.e., Gorn, Pham, & Sin, 2001). Emotional arousal can increase cognitive thinking, and consequently, it can increase the importance judgment of an object.

2.2. Public relations outcomes

Consequences of agenda setting and agenda building have been explored in political or business communication, including a public's voting intentions or their perception of corporate reputations (i.e., Carroll & McCombs, 2003). As critical factors to evaluate public relations efforts, this study explored effects on the perceived trust, credibility, and authenticity. Perceived trust is a multi-dimensional concept of integrity, dependability, and competence (Hon & Grunig, 1999); credibility is about how one evaluates an object as persuasive and credible (i.e., Johnson & Kaye, 2004); and authenticity refers to the perceived uniqueness, originality, or genuineness of an object, a person, an organization, or an idea (Molleda, 2010).

3. Method

3.1. Sample and procedure

A 3 × 3 factorial experiment with two manipulated variables (i.e., valence and arousal) was completed to examine agenda-building relationships. Valence indicated whether a message was positive, neutral, or negative; while arousal indicated whether a message was stimulating or not. A total of 242 participants were recruited from a crowd-sourcing web service, "Mechanical Turk" (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). The participants were randomly assigned into one of nine conditions, and each participant reads a corporate blog message. A fictitious sportswear brand's blog page was created describing its products, customer service, and a general health message promoting exercise.

3.2. Manipulation

To manipulate the valence of a message, it differentiated how much messages described an organization positively or negatively. For example, a positive message emphasized excellent customer service (i.e., awarded prestigious national customer service award) and innovative product design (i.e., inspirational and stylish graphic prints) by the company. Also, it contained users' comments on the page that praised the organization's service. After participants read the blog message, they evaluated the valence of the message by two five-point semantic differential scales with the following word pairs: positive-negative and pleased-annoyed (Capota, van Hout, & van der Geest, 2007; Gorn, Pham, & Sin, 2001). An index score of the tone of a message was created by summing up the scores of the two items (Pearson's $r = .86$, $p < .001$).

The level of arousal in a message indicates how such messages provoked emotional appeal. In the current study, the level of arousal was manipulated with the use of emotional words (i.e., delightful, kind, awful, or horrible) and multimedia cues (i.e., YouTube video) in a corporate blog message. A high-arousal message contains a public relations campaign video and several emotional words in the text (i.e., energize, prestigious, exceptional, delightful, awful, and horrible). The level of arousal of a message was measured by two seven-point Likert scales: aroused and stimulated (Capota, van Hout, & van der Geest, 2007; Gorn, Pham, & Sin, 2001) (Pearson's $r = .71$, $p < .001$). The two independent variables were successfully manipulated: valence ($F = 6.690$, d$f = 2$, $p < .05$) and arousal ($F = 5.583$, d$f = 2$, $p < .05$).

3.3. Measurement

Trust was measured by 11 seven-point Likert scale items including the following statements: "I believe that this organization would act in my best interest," and "If I required help, this organization would do its best to help me" (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002, p. 355,) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .98$). Credibility was measured by four seven-point Likert scales (Johnson & Kaye, 2004, p. 627,), and the responses were summed to measure the perceived credibility of the corporate blog where higher scores indicated higher credibility (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Authenticity was measured by 10 items including the following statements: "generally speaking, the image or claims of the organization evoke pleasure and fun," and "I feel the organization's offering accurately represents an original idea and design" (Molleda, 2010). Each statement was evaluated by a seven-point Likert scale and responses were summed to measure the perceived authenticity of the organization (Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$).