Exploring the impact of ethnic identity through other-generated cues on perceptions of spokesperson credibility

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ABSTRACT

Although previous studies indicate that perceived similarity can influence perceptions of source credibility, less is known about the impact of ethnic identity on these perceptions in social media environments. A quasi-experiment was designed to manipulate the strength of ethnic identity of an African American spokesperson promoting a health news story. The results indicate a substantive condition by participant ethnicity interaction, in which African Americans assign greater credibility to high ethnic identity spokespeople, while Caucasian respondents found low ethnic identity spokespersons more credible. The results are discussed in terms of the understanding of credibility perceptions across diverse audiences, and the implications for health communication professionals working with historically underrepresented populations.

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1. Introduction

As noted by Appiah (2003), there is debate across the literature on whether African American and Caucasian audiences will be equally compelled and informed by media messages that are tailored to specific ethnic groups. In a study by Spence, Lachlan, Westerman, and Spates (2013) examining the role of ethnicity and credibility on social media, health messages presented by Caucasian or African American avatars were evaluated in terms of their impact on Caucasian or African American audiences. The results indicated that African American avatars on social media pages were, for the most part, found to be highly credible by participants when promoting a health news story germane to the African American community. African American participants consistently rated the avatar as more competent, caring, and trustworthy, regardless of avatar ethnicity. More noteworthy, however, was the finding that the specific combination of African American audience members viewing Caucasian avatars led to the highest level of perceived credibility among the four groups. The Spence et al. (2013) study raised numerous questions and areas for future research. Because previous research has shown that individuals tend to seek out information from similar others, it is notable that when all things were held constant, African Americans found similar others less

credible. In response to that finding, the current study seeks to replicate and extend the Spence et al. (2013) study, specifically examining the impact of representations of avatar ethnic identity on credibility perceptions.

1.1. Source credibility in social media

Mass media provide several vehicles that can be used to educate audiences about different issues, and health related issues have received a substantial increase in attention in recent years. With the average American devoting more of their internet usage (22.5%) to social media (Nielsen, 2011), such outlets have undoubtedly become one of the most prominent media-related phenomena today. Social media has become a popular resource for health information (Cline & Haynes, 2001; Fox & Jones, 2009; Kivits, 2009), and the high rate of diffusion of the internet has placed an unprecedented amount of health information within reach of the general public (Neuhauser & Kreps, 2003). Although studies have looked at the characteristics of individuals that use new media resources to obtain health information, (Fox & Fallows, 2003; Fox & Rainie, 2000), little is known about how individuals make credibility judgments regarding the promotion of online health information, and less is known about the intersection of race, social media, and credibility judgments (Spence et al., 2013).

The term social media is typically used to describe a variety of electronic media resources that are intended for use in both

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creating and distributing content collaboratively. They are built upon, and take to a higher degree, a fundamental characteristic of Web 2.0; they have been promoted as a means of harnessing collective intelligence (O'Reilly and Battelle, 2009). Such social media outlets offer a platform for users to work together to create content, in part by engaging in discussions as a way of creating better content collaboratively, and by coming to a shared understanding of the content that is created. In this way, the content of these media are almost completely user-generated and user-monitored. The rapid diffusion of social media allows health related information to gain the attention of potential consumers with greater reach and at a faster rate. However, with this speed and user-monitoring comes issues about the credibility of sources.

Perceived source credibility is defined as "judgments made by a perceiver…concerning the believability of a communicator" (O'Keefe, 1990, p. 181). Three dimensions of perceived source credibility are generally represented in previous research: expertise/competence (the perception that a person knows the truth), trustworthiness (the perception that a person will tell the truth if they know it), and goodwill (the perception that a person cares about the perceiver) (McCroskey and Teven, 1999). Despite the fact that source credibility has been examined in many contexts – such as interpersonal, persuasion, public health messages, and political campaigning – little is known about how people make sense of source credibility in social media contexts (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2012). One issue that may enhance source credibility for specific populations in social media contexts is ethnic identity.

1.2. Differences in credibility perceptions

Audience segmentation is the process of dividing large groups of people into smaller, more homogeneous subgroups by demographic, behavioral, psychosocial, geographic, and ethnic characteristics (Kreuter & McClure, 2004). As noted by Hinyard and Kreuter (2007), traditional persuasion research indicates a positive relationship between similarity of the "source and receiver of a persuasive message and perceived expertise of the source on the persuasive topic generally facilitate persuasion (Alpert & Anderson, 1973; Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970; Simons, Berkowitz, & Moyer, 1970; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993)" (p. 785). This is supported by research suggesting that ethnic-specific messages enhance the effectiveness of health communication strategies.

Experimental studies have manipulated ethnicity to examine the ways in which the race of a communicator impacts impression formation. Herek et al. (1998) found that African Americans evaluated AIDS educational videos as significantly more credible, attractive, of higher quality, and more favorably overall when the message was delivered by an African American announcer as opposed to a Caucasian announcer, especially when the message was ethnically targeted. In this same study, Caucasians did not rate messages higher based on ethnicity of the communicator. Anderson and McMillion (1995) looked at the impact of similar and other-race modeling in breast self-examination educational videos on African American women. Perceptions of source credibility, appropriateness, efficacy expectations, and personal relevance were greater when the physician was an African American female as opposed to a Caucasian or Hispanic male, or an unseen narrator.

In addition to traditional media health messages, several studies have examined how Caucasians and African Americans view ethnic-specific sites (manipulated with racial cues in the instructions, website title, and pictures). Appiah (2003) found that African Americans did not evaluate White or Black targeted sites differently, but recalled more factual information and spent longer browsing on Black-targeted sites; whites were equally attentive to the White and Black specific sites. A follow-up study (Appiah,

2004) revealed that African Americans with strong ethnic identities spent more time browsing sites and viewing stories if the site was targeted toward African Americans. They also indicated that they found the site and the content more favorable when the messages were Black specific. These findings support the notion that African Americans, respond more favorably to ethnic-specific messages conveyed by someone with characteristics similar to their own, especially when they have a strong ethnic identity. These findings support the similarity-attraction hypothesis, which states that levels of physical attractiveness, intelligence, interests, and attitudes will be shared among friends because people are attracted to similar others (Byrne, 1969). Similar results have been found in computer-mediated environments.

Research suggests that similarity, whether perceived or actual, may have a significant impact on the interactions between humans and computer agents. Similarities between individuals and computer agents have been examined in regards to personality, behavior, and appearance. Behrend and Foster Thompson (2011) looked at the effect of similarity for both appearance and behavior. The researchers had participants complete an online training program with a computer agent to measure whether an individual preferred and/or learned better from an agent that was similar to them. Those who perceived the agent to be similar to them in regards to feedback giving behavior showed significant and positive effects related to their reaction to the training, level of engagement, and overall liking of the computer agent. Nass, Moon, Fogg, Reeves, and Dryer (1995) also found that individuals preferred and were more satisfied with a computer agent when it matched their personality type; i.e., a dominant person preferred a dominant computer personality, and a submissive person preferred a submissive computer personality. Further research by Nass and Lee (2001) focused specifically on computer-synthesized speech and perceptions of personality similarity, where only auditory cues were present. In this experiment, participants were assigned a computer whose voice was considered either introverted or extroverted. Participants were able to correctly identify which type of personality the voice of the computer was, and preferred the personality type that matched their own, viewing it as more credible.

Additional research on similarity by Van Vugt (2010) studied the effect that facial similarity had on participants' responses to a computer agent. Participants were assigned to two computer agents; one was created to look like them, and the other was dissimilar to their appearance. Participants were either given agents that were helpful, or agents that were unhelpful in the assigned task. In the condition where the agent had facial similarity to the user and was helpful, participants indicated higher levels of involvement. For females, this effect was consistent regardless of the agent's helpfulness. However, males rated agents with similar features to their own more negatively when the agent was unhelpful. Thus, similarity may only be beneficial if the agent is perceived as an aid versus an obstruction. However, like perceived similarity, ethnic identification may influence perceptions of source credibility.

1.3. Ethnic identity

A tremendous amount of variance can be detected across individuals in terms of their level of ethnic identity (Gong, 2007; Sodowsky, Kwan, & Pannu, 1995). Previous research in advertising, marketing, and consumer behavior has outlined the associations between ethnic identity, attitudes toward products, and subsequent behavior change (Deshpande, Hoyer, & Donthu, 1986; Donthu & Cherian, 1992). Moreover, several studies suggest one's level of ethnic identity may predict preference for content delivered by those of similar race (Arpan, 2002; Deshpande & Stayman, 1994; Whittler, 1991).