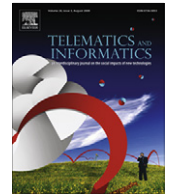




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Exploring perceptions of online sport commentary: A test of disposition effects hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at examining whether exposure to the positive/negative commentaries on the win/loss of readers' favorite team would activate their dispositions toward the favorite team and whether such disposition effects would lead reader's perceptions of online sport commentary. A two (the win of favorite team versus the loss of favorite team) by two (the positive commentary versus the negative commentary) within-subjects repeated measures experiment examined readers' perceptions in terms of quality, credibility, representativeness. Results showed that the positive/negative commentaries on readers' favorite team would be a stronger factor influencing readers' quality and credibility perceptions than the win/loss of readers' favorite team. However, the positive/negative commentaries and the win/loss of the favorite team both did not lead readers' representativeness perceptions.

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1. Introduction

Online commentary is unparalleled to reach more readers across time and space. With the increasing prevalence of newer communication technologies, readers are increasingly accessible to online commentaries, not necessarily at a particular time or in a particular place. In addition, online readers are highly involved in the digital world when they are able to show their emotions by simply commenting on the stories (Foust, 2011). However, readers' perceptions of online commentary are rarely examined in relation to their emotional responses. Although several studies focused on source and context effects on readers' perceptions (e.g., Bucy, 2003; Metzger et al., 2003; Reagan et al., 1998; Thorson et al., 2010), few studies examined the effects of online message structures on readers' perceptions. Indeed, commentaries surrounding various controversial features activate readers' various emotions, perceptions, and behaviors. Based upon the disposition effects hypothesis, sport commentaries have the ability to influence and alter audiences' perceptions of sport contests. Bryant et al. (1982) suggested that sport commentaries impact viewers' perceptions related the feelings and assumed motives between the players. Sullivan (1991) further examined the impacts of sport commentary on viewers' enjoyment of player aggression and violent behavior and suggested that sport commentaries yield main effects on readers' acceptance and tolerance levels towards violence. Therefore, readers would show emotional, perceptual, and behavioral responses to various sport commentaries, when these commentaries with certain features activate readers' dispositions.

Applying sport commentary in the new media environment, this study manipulates the win/loss of the favorite team and the positive/negative commentary on the favorite team in online sport commentaries as two factors to explore whether various features would direct readers' perceptions in terms of quality, credibility, and representativeness. Simply saying, the study may offer an insight that message perceptions are differently influenced by a series of situational conflicts between liked teams and disliked teams in online sport commentaries based upon the disposition effects hypothesis.

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2. Disposition theory

Disposition theory in communication research is first applied in Zillmann and Cantor's studies (1972, 1976) in examining how people appreciate jokes involving the disparagement of a particular person or group. Zillmann and Cantor (1972) proposed that when people witness a joke containing a disparagement, their affective dispositions would be directed toward the joke's characters on a continuum of affect ranging from extreme negative through a neutral point of indifference to extreme positive. When people encounter a humorous situation, they first identify the roles and activities of the characters and then react emotionally toward characters based upon their positive or negative experiences with the characters. Therefore, the strength and valence of affective dispositions are initiated by empathic reactions to the characters. Empathic reactions would lead people to align with those who are more experientially close to themselves, while counterempathic reactions would direct people to align against those who are more experientially distant. The principals of disposition theory of humor are used to the appreciation of drama. Zillmann and Cantor (1976) predicted that enjoyment of media content is a key function in activating viewers' dispositions toward characters of drama. When liked characters experience positive outcome and/or hated characters experience negative outcome, viewers' enjoyments would automatically increase. Conversely, when liked characters experience negative outcome and/or hated characters experience positive, viewers' enjoyments would suffer. Additionally, viewers' selection of favored or unfavored characters is morally justified. Viewers yield more dispositions with characters whose actions and motivations they judge as proper or morally correct and generate more negative dispositions with characters whose actions and motivations they judge are improper and morally incorrect (Zillmann, 2000). Thus, the valence and intensity of affective dispositions lead viewers to develop their anticipations about the unfolding outcomes associated with the characters of drama, and viewers' enjoyments of drama is a product of the anticipations in relation to the actual outcomes portrayed.

The bulk of studies using disposition-based principles in the context of sporting events confirmed the disposition-based theory of sports spectatorship (e.g., Raney, 2003; Zillmann et al., 1989; Zillmann, & Paulus, 1993). The theory hypothesizes that enjoyment from viewing a sporting event is a function of the outcome of the sporting event in relation to the strength and valence of the dispositions held toward its competitors. Similarly, viewers' enjoyments would increase when their liked team wins and/or their hated team loses the game. On the other hand, viewers' enjoyments would decrease when the winning one is their hated team and/or the losing one is their favorite team. Moreover, Zillmann and Paulus (1993) suggested that maximum enjoyment from sports viewing is activated when an extremely liked team beats an extremely hated team. Conversely, maximum disappointment is generated when the most favorite team is defeated by the most loathed team.

The concept of sport team identification is not only relevant to disposition theory, but also pertinent to social identity process (Spears et al., 1999). As suggested by Wann (2006), individuals have a high level of group identification when the actions of the group are central component of their social identity and when categorization as a member of this group is relatively import and relevant. Specifically, sport team identification is the extent to which a sport fan feels a psychological connection to a team and the team's performances are viewed as self-relevant (Wann and Branscombe, 1993; Wann et al., 2001). Some studies explored the antecedents and consequences of sport team identification in terms of affective responses, behavioral responses, and psychological well-being by using various social psychological theories (Sutton et al. 1997; Underwood et al., 2001; Wann, 2006). However, disposition theory is mostly applied in a variety of mediated sports. These studies using disposition theory concluded that fanship allegiance with a sport team or player shapes along the now-familiar continuum of affect from intense liking through indifference to intense disliking.

3. Psychological factors of disposition effects

To further understand the features of disposition theory, Raney (2009) used psychological perspectives to explore the principles of disposition theory. First, Raney proposed the enjoyment of media content as an important factor that influences people's affective dispositions. According to Vorderer et al., 2004, the central role of enjoyment in media entertainment experience is characterized in several essential psychological conditions (e.g., suspension of disbelief, empathy and interest) and motive conditions (e.g., mood management and escapism). Moreover, both conditions predict the power of disposition theories in explaining a piece of the enjoyment puzzle. Raney (2009) also defined emotional responses to media content as a key factor associated with affective dispositions, which implies that individual differences in empathy influence the extent to which viewers respond to media content. Furthermore, moral judgment precedes and coexists with emotional responses. In this regard, moral judgment plays a vital role in the disposition-formation process.

Viewer's feeling about media characters is another psychological factor associated with affective dispositions. Based upon schema theory, prior exposure to an actor/actress may influence the formation of dispositions toward characters subsequently portrayed by that actor/actress. Viewers who are used to seeing an actor/actress playing a certain type of character may later find it difficult to enjoy the same actor/actress as another type of character subsequently (Raney, 2004). Moreover, the extent to which positive feelings about characters are affected, viewer's enjoyment and affective disposition are affected. Raney (2009) also contended that dispositional affiliations toward characters are formed and maintained on a continuum from extreme positive through indifference to extreme negative expectation. Raney (2004) discussed that preexisting story offers immediate references to viewers in classifying characters as good or evil and influence viewers' initial dispositional judgments of characters. In this regard, story schemas provide moral-judgment shortcut and limit the application of the full

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