



# The role of website format, blog use, and information-gathering acquaintance in online message assessment<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

By manipulating branded editorial, branded blog, and non-branded blog in a between-subjects experiment, this study examined online message perceptions in terms of credibility, quality, preference, and persuasiveness. The study explored whether website format, blog use, and information-gathering acquaintance would come into play when media users evaluated news information of various websites. Results suggested that the participants who evaluated websites as more credible did not translate into higher credibility ratings of the messages on the websites, nor did it lead to greater ratings of quality, preference, and persuasiveness. Additionally, information-gathering acquaintance and blog use were two crucial factors to online message perceptions. Both information-gathering acquaintance and blog use yielded joint effects with website format on online message perceptions. Moreover, blog use was found as less relevant to online message assessment than information-gathering acquaintance.

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## 1. Introduction

With the growth of online media, a key transformation is an obvious increase in weblog readership. According to the [Pew Internet and American Life Project \(2008\)](#), 33% of online media users (the equivalent of 24% of all adults) in the United States read blogs, with 11% doing so on a daily basis, and 12% (representing 9% of all adults) ever creating or working on their own online journal or blog. Weblogs have been one of the most reliable media formats when online media users attempt to gather news information. While news information gathered via online media becomes more accessible and comprehensive, certain differences emerge between news information obtained via online and traditional media sources. First, most messages delivered via the Internet are not operated by traditional media staffers due to the nature of online message production. Second, online media users have to familiarize themselves with the selective processing of online messages. Because of the flow of unchecked information online, media users must develop their initial sense-making strategies in discerning some intentionally or unintentionally inaccurate, biased, and misleading messages in an online environment ([Flanagin and Metzger, 2000, 2007](#)). Moreover, as the growth of online media has seen an attendant development of online fraud and misinformation, online media users discern the relative value or accuracy of online information differently based upon their various

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characteristics, including gender, social desirability, individual personalities, group disposition, media use motivation and behavior, and innovative behavior (Flanagin and Metzger, 2003; Johnson and Kaye, 2004a; Pan, 2012; Yang, 2007).

Websites with different features also influence media users' online message assessment. Branded news websites are well known for their professionalism, and messages delivered via branded news websites gain more credibility (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007). However, media users with different levels of reliance on online media perceive messages in branded news websites in different ways. Weblog is another format similar to a diary-style website that is commonly comprised of bloggers' commentaries, news stories, and recommended links to other sites (Palser, 2002). Weblog users are more inclined to rate messages delivered via weblogs higher on depth of information, even if they realize that these messages are not necessarily accurate (Johnson and Kaye, 2004a). Although traditional journalists and those who create blogs have argued over whether the messages posted to weblogs are reliable, few studies have compared online message perceptions of branded news websites with those of branded and non-branded weblogs. Moreover, little research has examined whether branding effects would direct media users to perceive online message differently in various website structures.

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of website format, blog use, and information-gathering acquaintance on online message perceptions. By manipulating different website structures, namely branded editorial, branded blog, and non-branded blog, in a between-subjects experiment, the study attempts to develop strategies for structural development of website format, pinpoint the role of media use experience, and provide conceptual insights into the core elements of message credibility, quality, preference, and persuasiveness that would be dominated by the independent or mutual effects of website format and media use experience in an online environment.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Online message assessment

Media critics blamed the Internet because of the decline in media credibility. Finberg and Stone (2002) observed that while traditional news sources and their online counterparts are restricted by professional standards and social pressures to provide accurate and unbiased messages in their news coverage, the Internet can deliver messages without any constraints. Similarly, messages posted to websites are not restricted by news gatekeepers' verification of the facts. People can post messages on their websites, and messages on the websites look so much like those in traditional media sources that even the mainstream press is taken in by online tricks, and these messages posted to the websites are often operated on a twenty-four-hour deadline (Foust, 2011). Therefore, websites become more flexible mediums to gather information, but they may not check whether the messages are factual (Brill, 2001). Those hired as website editors are often good at the operation of new technologies, but may not be trained as journalist experts (Agarwal and Barthel, 2013; Singer, 2003). Thus, the messages posted to the websites might have more errors than those in the traditional news media. Individuals who have more experience with the traditional news media may better discern whether online messages can be trustful. Moreover, traditional media users who judge credibility by various clues, namely the reputation of sources, style of information presentation and placement of stories, may find that the way news information is delivered via the Internet may obscure these clues (Newhagen and Levy, 1997).

Although early research found that media users do not consider the Internet to be as credible as traditional news media, some research suggested that Internet users judge weblogs as higher and even more credible than traditional media, indicating that Internet users may be motivated to read weblogs for a variety of reasons, including creative expression, social networking, fact checking traditional media, participation in the democratic process, and an alternative to face-to-face communication (Johnson and Kaye, 2004a; MacDougall, 2005). Specifically, Johnson and Kaye (1998) suggested that the Internet is judged more, or at least as, credible as traditional media, and concluded that the more media users relied on the Internet, the more likely they judged it to be credible. Another study by Johnson and Kaye (2004a) compared weblog source credibility with traditional media sources, indicating that bloggers rate weblogs as highly credible—more credible than traditional and online media. More interestingly, even if media users know that weblogs might be more biased mediums, their perceptions of weblog messages would not be negatively influenced. Indeed, even if online messages are not as credible as those messages delivered via traditional media, media users are more inclined to seek information from the Internet, especially those who heavily rely on the Internet.

To date, several issues were investigated with regard with online message credibility, including web design features (Johnson and Kaye, 1998; Palmer et al., 2000), cross-media comparisons (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000; Kioussis, 2001), source attributes (Sundar and Nass, 2000, 2001), and the role of users' reliance on web-based information (Johnson and Kaye, 2000, 2002). Although previous studies used various approaches to examining the influences of various features on online message credibility, few studies examined whether news content and presentation in websites may exert significant influences on media users' online message credibility. The present study aims to explore the influences of website format on online message assessments in terms of quality, preference, and persuasiveness. Therefore, the study proposes the first research question as follows:

**RQ1:** *How will website format affect people's perceptions of message credibility, quality, preference, and persuasiveness in an online environment?*

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