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Context, context, context: Priming theory and attitudes towards corporations in social media

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ABSTRACT

Social media is one of the most contextually based media ever created. As such, the effects anticipated by priming theory would be expected to be especially strong. Using an online experiment, this study assessed the effects of linguistic tone and message relatedness present in the context of social media on publics' attitudes towards organizations. It was expected that positive and negative tone would have positive and negative effects, respectively, and that the relatedness of the contextual prime would enhance those effects. About 100 participants in the study were randomly assigned to an experimental group to see a prime in the format of the popular social media site, Twitter. An analysis of the results showed that only negative primes had a significant effect on publics' attitudes towards organizations, possibly reflecting an expectancy violation effect. Public relations professionals are called to engage in broader environmental monitoring to ensure their messages will be most effective.

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1. Introduction

If there has been one new technology that has enamored the public relations field of late, it has been social media. From scholarly research to self-declared gurus, there are many prevailing theories of the best way to harness this new technology. Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations (1984), called for a shift in the profession towards their two-way symmetrical model. Social media, ranging from Twitter to Facebook to blogs and beyond, have enabled these symmetrical conversations to take place on an unprecedented scale.

The embrace of social media has not been without its issues. From the offensive, such as Kenneth Cole's tweet that made light of the conflict in Syria (O'Toole, 2013), to the poorly timed, such as the NRA's "Good morning, shooters" tweet in the aftermath of the theatre shooting in Aurora, Colorado (Fitzpatrick, 2012), organizations on Twitter still have a long journey in front of them of learning how to use social media effectively.

One matter currently in hot debate is the applicability of traditional media effects models, such as framing, agenda setting, and priming (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), in the world of social media. Some evidence exists to suggest that priming theory may still be a powerful tool in the web era (Mandel & Johnson, 2002), but more work is still needed. It is difficult to determine how social media context (contextual primes) affects the response of publics to corporate postings on social media. Many public relations departments are on various social media outlets having these symmetrical conversations, but are many times paying little attention to the context in which they are taking part in these conversations.

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In this vein, this research attempts to take an experimental look at contextual primes and how they can affect individual's attitudes towards corporations in social media. There is a need for information regarding how the context in which a social media post is viewed affects the perception of that post. Thus, the current study aims to investigate if priming is at work in social media today, and if it is, how?

2. Theoretical framework

Social media is drastically transforming the balance of power in the realm of public relations. Prior to these new media, the power was primarily in the hands of the organization that held the brand and the few news media outlets accessible to any given consumer. Today, however, public relations professionals find themselves in a place where individuals have found new influence, in a sense that “the ‘nobodies’ of the past are now the new ‘somebodies’” (Booth & Matic, 2011). Now that the consumer has a louder, direct voice, public relations professionals feel like the control of their brand is out of their hands more than ever. The corporation is no longer an elevated entity, rather, the postings of a company receive the same emphasis in a user's social media feed as postings from their friends and family. With the exception of advertising in social media, the distinction between the “institutional and personal arenas” is incredibly low (Aula & Laaksonen, 2010).

Even in the early days of the web, researchers found that an organization's online behavior and audience perceptions of that behavior was “far more important than overt philanthropy, donations to charities, flashy websites or even annual CSR reports printed on recycled paper” (Jones, Temperley, & Lima, 2009). Barnes (2008) further confirmed this idea with research that found that 74% of consumers made purchase decisions based at least in part on the experiences of others that were shared online. This requires a shift in public relations from a monologic model to a dialogic model—we're more responsible than ever for conversation management, not just sending out news releases and talking to shareholders (Lewis, 2001).

With an estimated 70–80% of American online adults engaging with social media on at least a monthly basis (Duggan & Smith, 2013), social media isn't going anywhere any time soon, but presents great risk to the attitudes individuals hold towards our organizations. Thus, we must consider how the context of social media is affecting the attitudes of our publics towards our organization. In the field of marketing, attitudes towards advertisements or brands are referred to as Aad or Abr, respectively. These are two of the most vital measurements for a marketer. As seen in Hallahan (1999), these measurements can be co-opted somewhat for research in public relations, with Aad being revised as a construct of Am, or attitude towards the message.

The increased contextualization of social media (Marwick & boyd, 2010) over other computer-mediated communication, such as email (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) can create risk, as already mentioned, but it can also create potential benefits. Social media is creating more connections than ever between the internet and the physical world (Qi, Aggarwal, Tian, Ji, & Huang, 2012; Kennedy, Naaman, Ahern, Nair, & Rattenbury, 2007). If we can better grasp how the context of social media affects message reception and thus attitudes towards organizations, we should be able to mediate the potential risk and actually use social media to increase positive attitudes.

One of the primary theories used to study the effects of media context is priming (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Priming holds that the human brain likes to take shortcuts, in essence. If it can use a recently employed structure to interpret a new piece of information, it will do so (Valenzuela, 2009). This effect has been shown to be especially strong when the recently employed structure came from a respected figure, such as government official or news reporter (Veenstra, Vraga, Edgerly, & Kim, 2010). Most important, however, is the fact that this priming effect often takes place completely unconsciously. Many times people are completely unaware that they are interpreting information differently as a result of this priming (Herr, 1989).

There is not an extensive amount of literature directly studying priming as it relates to either public relations or digital media, but there is some that can provide helpful guidance in analyzing these effects. From a public relations perspective, we can look to Wang (2007) for a premier example of this research. Participants were variously exposed to messages that contained priming, framing, priming and framing, or none of the above. The study found that those who were exposed to priming messages used those messages in analyzing a later piece of information about an organization. Wang argues that public relations practitioners are primarily “prime and frame strategists,” emphasizing the importance of understanding these effects.

Research on internet messaging and priming has also been performed. Mandel and Johnson (2002) performed a study in which participants were primed for either price or another product factor, then given an option of product choices, one of which was stronger in the area of the prime than the other. Their research found that even a subtle prime like a page background had a significant effect on the participant's choice. Those primed with a price-related background were more likely to choose a cheap sofa than a comfortable sofa, while those primed with a comfort-related background were more likely to choose the comfortable sofa. However, they do suspect that their use of fake brands may have increased the priming effect, as the participants had no other context on which to base their decisions.

While there may be limited literature when it comes to public relations and priming, there is an immense amount of literature related to advertising and priming. A substantial amount of research has been put into how the tone of a television program affects the reception of the advertisements contained within that program. Initially, this research seemed to indicate that advertising in happy television programs was consistently more effective than advertising in sad television programs (Goldberg & Gorn, 1987). It was believed that the emotion of the television program primed these participants to respond to the advertisements differently.

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