Full length article

Political ideology, media-source preferences, and messaging strategies: A global perspective on trust building

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A B S T R A C T

Using global survey data based on the 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer annual survey, this paper looks at predictors of business trust in the top five countries based on GDP ranking – the United States, China, Japan, Germany, and France. Demographics emerged as significant predictors of trust across countries, while political ideology was a key driver of trust in the U.S. Political ideology also interacted with preferred media choice in predicting trust. Theoretical and practical implications for effective public relations practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Research has confirmed the critical role of political ideology in structuring consumer choice and behavior in various decision-making situations (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004). The political trust literature also suggests that the effects of political trust on government-related decisions and behavior also vary across individuals based on their ideological interests (Rudolph, 2009; Rudolph & Evans, 2005). Despite its widespread impact in consumer behavior and political trust research, political ideology has received scant attention in media source credibility research and trust-relationship research in public relations. Given the critical role of different media channels in helping publics obtain organization-related information and in fostering trust between publics and business organizations, it is important to look into the function of political ideology as a driving force in media source selection and as a factor influencing how mediated content is processed in trust evaluations toward business organizations.

Therefore, in this study, we test the effectiveness of media source preference in predicting public trust in business. We also explore the consistency of demographic characteristics and political ideology in predicting trust. Our research focuses on how political ideology at the individual level can be used as a foundation to explain the unique media sources that publics select to get business information, and the corresponding trust in business that develops from that source selection. In doing so, we relied on data from the 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer annual survey. Specifically, we tailored our analysis to the top five global economies (i.e., the United States, China, Japan, Germany, and France) based on GDP ranking as released by the World Bank in 2013. GDP measures the total output of goods and services for a given country and has been used as

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a comprehensive and consistent indicator of economic growth, economic sustainability, and overall market activity (The World Bank, 2013).

Through our analysis, we found several consistent results, including (1) certain demographic indictors significantly affected publics' trust in business organizations; (2) political ideology at the individual level affected publics' trust in business organizations in certain countries; (3) public attention to public affairs had an influence on their trust in business organizations; and (4) political ideology and media preference had an interactive effect on public trust in business organizations. The interactive relationship between media source and political ideology is particularly striking as the results contribute largely to existing knowledge of trust research in public relations. The practical implications for public relations, audience segmentation, and messaging strategies are discussed along with theoretical implications for public relations theory development and future trust research.

2. Literature review

2.1. The commitment-trust theory of business relationships

Scholars of business relationships and relationship marketing have paid growing attention to issues of trust and its role in the process of relationship building and maintenance, as exemplified by work in a variety of disciplines, including sociology, psychology and marketing (e.g., Geyskens, Steenkamp, Scheer, & Kumar, 1996; Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1993; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992). This work has provided useful insights concerning the central role of trust in fostering business relationships, including the importance of commitment in such relationships. Commitment refers to a customer's long-term orientation toward a business relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This orientation is said to be based on an emotional bond between a consumer and organization (Moorman et al., 1992, 1993; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Like other types of committed relationships, it also carries with it an expectation of increased benefits the longer one remains part of the relationship (Geyskens et al., 1996). Consequently, committed customers see themselves as having a closer relationship with an organization, which in turn, enhances overall feelings of customer loyalty and trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Public relations researchers have long agreed about the impacts of elevated public trust levels on the relationship management process. Specifically, high levels of public trust tend to correlate positively with a number of relationship management variables, including relationship strength, which help to explain how an organization can better manage its relationships with its various publics (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Organization-public relationship scholarship is one of the most frequently relied upon conceptual frameworks in all of public relations research (Ki & Shin, 2006; Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2003). The framework is used to address the importance of recognizing the relational perspectives of communication outcomes for evaluating the effectiveness of public relations activities (e.g., Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ki & Hon, 2007a, 2007b; Bruning & Ledingham, 1998). Hon and Grunig (1999), in an attempt to address the importance of viewing public relations as a relationship-management process that uses communication strategically, have suggested the following six dimensions to properly understand how members of the public perceive of their relationship with an organization: *trust, control mutuality, commitment, satisfaction, communal relationship,* and *exchange relationship.*

Hon and Grunig (1999) further proposed three sub-dimensions of trust—integrity, dependability, and competence—in an attempt to clarify the role of trust in perceptions of relationship quality. These sub-dimensions have been included in relationship quality indices, which have been tested and verified in terms of their reliability and validity across various organizational and cross-cultural settings (e.g., Huang, 2001; Hung, 2004, 2005; Lee & Jun, 2013), including work in marketing and consumer relations, media relations, issues management, public affairs, and crisis and reputation management (see Ki & Shin, 2006). More recently, scholars have expanded the scope of work around this framework by exploring the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of trust and its related dimensions and sub-dimensions (e.g., Ki & Hon, 2007a, 2007b). Perhaps not surprisingly, trust, among other key relational features, has emerged as a critical relationship indicator, even in cross-cultural settings, which further confirms the importance of the concept as an effective measure for organization-public relationships (Ki & Hon, 2007b). In short, trust represents the essence of quality relationships between an organization and its various publics.

2.2. Media platform credibility and trust

Previous public relations scholarship investigating trust as a predictor of quality relationships has focused largely on the perceptual and behavioral outcomes of the organization-public relationship. Unfortunately, the roles of specific or preferred media platforms as predictors of trust have not been carefully investigated across diverse groups of stakeholders and organizations. Of course, we should not consider the absence of work in this area as a comment on the importance of the relationship between media source preference and larger trust evaluations. Since at least the 1950s, perceptions of source competence, attractiveness, and expertise, among other characteristics, have been demonstrated to impact the credibility and persuasiveness of communication content (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Research in the domain of traditional media (for example, offline newspapers and magazines) has confirmed that features such as perceived objectivity, fairness and a lack of bias can increase the overall trustworthiness ascribed to these media platforms (e.g., Zhu & Zhou, 2002). The perceived credibility of a medium enhances its authority, usefulness and readership, which should impact the persuasiveness of its content.