You had me at hello: How personal, developmental and social characteristics influence communicator persuasiveness and effectiveness

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Executive Summary

As stated by Rabinovich, Morton and Birney (2012), communication is more than merely transferring information; it involves understanding each others' positions, knowledge and motives. In order to better understand communication, and more specifically persuasion—which uses communication to achieve an intended attitude or behaviour change—this study explores how a communicated message can garner different responses and perceptions based upon the individual's characteristics like knowledge base, cultural background, cognitive approach, and more (Eveland & Cooper, 2013). By understanding and exploring these different responses, this paper provides public relations professionals with empirical evidence on the methods and manners in which communicators can effectively communicate the message to achieve the desired and intended behaviour outcome.

This research reveals trust as a crucial piece for successful communication between the receiver and the communicator, acting as a heuristic cue or, in other words, a mental shortcut for the receiver. This mental shortcut leads to what researchers call the peripheral route, which requires less cognitive processing and could contribute to faster decision-making. Communicators should be aware of the level of trust with the intended audience, as trust can motivate the receiver to more quickly adopt the message as intended without considering its format or quality. As stated by Goodwin & Dahlstorm (2014), when you foster trust with the receiver it reduces their need for message evaluation and provides a less demanding cognitive process of persuasion.

A significant finding of this research is the determination of three ways communicators can build trust: authenticity, credibility and expectations. Communicators can be perceived as authentic by being identifiable as well as encouraging and supporting dialogue. Through authentic dialogue with the receiver, trust can be repaired. Dorzd, Lehto and Oinas-Kukkonen (2012) indicate the positive implications of two-way communication for public relations professionals, stating dialogue can be used to remind and reinforce receivers to increase commitment and act on the message.

In addition to authenticity, credibility is equally as crucial to build trust. The level of credibility is determined by the receiver's evaluation of the communicator based on various qualities like expertise, attraction and communicator identification. Lastly, communicators should realize the significance of determining and preparing for the receiver's expectations of the message—as the success or failure of meeting receiver expectations influences the amount of trust in the relationship.

Future research should push further than the known foundations for effective communication and explore more effective scales for testing receiver perceptions. This continuation of research would provide better tools for measurement and assessment of communications for public relations professionals. There should also be a continual development of how to more effectively analyze receiver reactions to persuasion, which could aid in processing large sets of data, like those in social media. As knowledge increases in the field of persuasive communication, public relations professionals can learn to better effectively communicate messaging with the desired publics to achieve intended behaviour outcome.

Introduction

Communication is a complex interaction between the communicator and the receiver. Beyond merely transferring information, it involves understanding others' positions, knowledge, and motives (Rabinovich, Morton & Birney, 2012). Persuasion is the use of communication to achieve an intended attitude or behaviour change; in essence, the goal of public relations. To achieve this goal of persuasion, the message, the receiver, and the communicator all need to be taken into consideration. The message consists of both the content that embodies the changes the communicator wants to impart, and the channel or format of the message. In other words, what is being said and how it's being said. Different individuals receiving the same message will respond differently based on their own characteristics, such as knowledge base, cultural background, cognitive approach, and more (Eveland & Cooper, 2013).

Furthermore, how audiences respond to specific messages is often dependent on the individual that is delivering the message and the receptivity of the audience to that messenger. This difference in how certain people respond can best be illustrated in the current political climate in the United States and the United Kingdom – some political leaders communicate effectively to their intended audiences while those same audiences see those same communicators as ineffective and at times untrustworthy. This differential susceptibility has been categorized by Valkenburg and Peter (2013) as differences in dispositional, developmental, and social variables:

- Dispositional variables: personal characteristics like personality, mood, or individual need for cognition;
- Developmental variables: individual's developmental characteristics, such as age-based preferences; and,
- Social variables: based on an individual's social environment, from immediate interpersonal relationships to large societal roles and identities (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

While these receiver factors are largely outside of the communicator's control, the communicator's qualities, which are in their control, will determine how these factors affect the perception and reception of the message. Communicators can present themselves in a certain way to cater to the receiver or particular communicators can be chosen for qualities that will best resonate with the target audience.

The purpose of this paper is to provide public relations professionals with empirical evidence on the methods and manners that communicators can employ to help increase their effectiveness in delivering messages to their intended audiences that are meaningful and have the desired and intended behavioral outcome.

Trust

Successful communication often relies on trust between the receiver and the communicator. Trust is the favourable impression or consideration of a communicator that is held by the receiver. Trust emerges through the combination and interaction of between the dispositional, developmental and social characteristics exhibited by the communicator and the expectations of the receiver. It often acts as a heuristic cue, or a mental shortcut for decision-making, such as if the applicant for a job graduated from the same university as you did, you

may not do extensive research or reference checking because you trust that the quality of the education received at that particular university makes them a suitable candidate for the position: this mental shortcut requires less cognitive processing, especially when the receiver is not motivated to process the message (Cummings, 2014).

This mental shortcut can lead to what researchers call the peripheral route to cognitive processing and decision-making: if I like the communicator, it she represents my position on a public policy issue, if they graduated from the same university and if they cheer for the same sports teams, I will be more open and excepting of their messages. As an example, for those individuals who were regular viewers of Oprah's daily television show, when she recommended a book those viewers were more likely to buy those books – the trust the viewers had in Oprah meant that they didn't have to research the books or find other sources of information about the book. The fact that Oprah recommended the book resulted in simpler peripheral cognitive processing for the viewer and a quick purchase decision.

While communicator characteristics can matter less when the receiver is motivated to willingly accept the intended messages, trust has been shown to shift some motivation in a positive manner toward the communicator. When trust exists between the communicator and receiver, receivers are more likely to respond positively to the message without considering its format or quality. This positive response results from the integration of the message's content into the receiver's mental representation or understanding of the world, and manifests as positive attitude, intention, and behaviour change (Nan, 2013; Rabinovich, Morton & Birney, 2012; Ross, Fielding & Louis, 2014). Therefore, the receiver accepts the message content by associating it with the trusted communicator, rather than the message's format. By fostering trust, the communicator can reduce the need for message evaluation, thereby providing a peripheral route, or an easier and less demanding cognitive process, of persuasion (Goodwin & Dahlstorm, 2014).

Examining political blogs, Ruffin, Medina and Rey (2013) also found trust to be the mediator for satisfaction and commitment. From a risk perspective, receivers perceive messages from trusted communicators as low risk and safe (Fang, Fang, Tsai, Lan & Hsu, 2012). Therefore a lack of trust will make communication efforts more difficult because the receiver will likely only rely on judgments of the message quality and format, which is often met with resistance. Building trust in persuasive communication essentially creates a bypass for the message content to reach the receiver without encountering this resistance. Otherwise, it becomes increasingly important how the message is crafted and delivered. In this case, persuasion takes a central route, where the receiver carefully evaluates the message content, quality, and format.

Central cognitive processing is the opposite of peripheral processing meaning that the message receiver takes a more in-depth and detailed assessment of the information and as a result, usually results in a slower decision-making process. Using the example of Oprah's book club, a more central cognitive processor would not immediately order the recommended book and most probably would scan for other reviews before making a final purchase decision. There could be many reasons for this including an overall distrust or resistance to Oprah, a desire to go against the trend of those supporting or promoting Oprah's recommendation, or a reactance of celebrity endorsements.

In the political arena, an independent voter might look at and listen to a candidate's communication and decide to "fact-check" their claims. They may also decide to watch news coverage of the candidate's comments or read online analysis of their positions on issues that are

important to them and their families. Once again, this is a demonstration of the central route of cognitive processing and decision-making.

It is important to distinguish the difference between lack of trust and distrust. While a lack of trust provides no peripheral route to persuasion through the communicator, distrust is a negative perception that can produce resistance before the message is even processed (Rufin, Medina & Rey, 2013). It is based on a lack of credibility and a belief that the communicator does not have one's interest in mind, making it even more detrimental than just the absence of trust. Message resistance will be greater and can lead to more polarized attitudes and beliefs.

Communicators can build trust in various ways and multiple factors often need to be addressed. Three major factors are authenticity, credibility, and expectations.

Authenticity

Authenticity is an individual judgement of perceived personal relevance regardless of factual truth. It allows for newly acquired knowledge to be integrated into our mental models of everyday life (Petraglia, 2009). Communicators and messages that fit the receiver's sense of self and the world are viewed as authentic. Authentic communicators also inspire the most admiration and respect, as they are best able to present ideas in the context of real life situations (Grabowski & Rasmussen, 2014).

While dispositional receiver factors include more inherent and stable characteristics like personality, they also include a wide range of transient ones, like mood and experience. Rudman, McLean and Bunzl (2013) found individuals' support for politicians based on climate change policy changed after experience with nature disasters. Those participants with negative attitudes toward environmental politicians switched their opinion after directly experiencing Hurricanes Irene and Sandy (Rudman, McLean & Bunzl, 2013). This underscores the importance of authenticity.

Effective communication can convey personal relevance, without actual personal experience, which can then change highly-resistant attitudes. For example, Hart and Nisbet (2012) found no correlation between knowledge of climate change and support for climate change mitigation policies. Individuals may have knowledge and exposure to a particular topic, but without direct experience or authentic communication, they will continue to maintain their beliefs and resist opposing messages. Messages can become authentic when they come from authentic communicators.

One way for the communicator to be perceived as authentic is to be identifiable. Communicator identification is the perception that one can identify with the communicator through shared characteristics, social group membership, and fairness (Ross, Fielding & Louis, 2014). Through identification, receivers can make inferences of shared values and interests based on other similarities and social closeness.

Another way is to encourage and support dialogue. Being engaged with the communicator and their message, receivers can further understand how the information is relevant to their lives. By promoting authenticity through dialogue, new information is integrated into pre-existing schemas. These new associations will underlie changes in attitude and behaviour. Dialogue could be used to remind and reinforce (e.g., praise) receivers to increase commitment and motivation, and to help receivers act on the message (Dorzd, Lehto, Oinas-Kukkonen, 2012). This approach has been effective in promoting HIV prevention in Southeast

Asia, where communicators ask receivers to discuss the messages in and among groups thereby making both communicators and messages more authentic (Petraglia, 2009).

Dialogue is also crucial to maintaining or repairing trust following crisis situations, such as a product recall. When reputation is on the line, emphasizing a personal two-way relationship can turn around a potentially negative outcome (Yang, Kang & Johnson, 2010). Of the companies studied by Ki and Nekmat, (2014), those that regarded this type of relationship were more successful, as measured by receiver response. This two-way relationship is established by the communicator's commitment to the receiver. By engaging in continuing dialogue, the communicator shows that the receiver has a desire to maintain a relationship, to which the receiver reciprocates (Rufin, Medina & Rey, 2013). Commitment from both sides of, the communicator and the receiver promotes long-lasting and meaningful mutual persuasion.

Credibility

In addition to authenticity, the receiver's perception of communicator credibility is crucial for building trust. Credibility is believing the communicator is capable of making decisions and relaying messages that benefit the receiver and can be realized by the receiver's own evaluation of the communicator, based on various qualities like expertise, attraction and communicator identification, or from other's endorsement (Drozd, Lehto, Oinas-Kukkonen, 2012; Ross, Fielding & Louis, 2014). Meaningful endorsements come from respected individuals or groups, which are determined by their previous evaluations of the communicator's credibility. Such respected sources often represent connections to the receiver's own influence groups. By fostering credibility with others, the communicator can build positive rapports with different social groups, making subsequent communication more effective (Joyce & Harwood, 2014).

While each instance of credibility established by the communicator can have their own individual persuasive effects on the receiver, they also interact in different and combined ways, making it crucial to consider the qualities of the communicator as a whole. Even then, the qualities of a communicator are rarely the sole determinants of the receiver's evaluation of credibility. For example, the receiver's cognitive need to evaluate and form opinions can influence the impact of credibility on persuasion. Those with low cognitive processing needs or are interpreting the communicator's messages peripherally are more easily persuaded by a message than when the communicator's credibility is revealed before the message. However, those with high cognitive processing needs or are evaluating the communicator those more central cognitive routes are not affected by the timing of credibility identification (Nan, 2013).

Expertise

One important communicator quality that determines credibility is expertise—the receiver's perception of the communicator's ability to make well-informed decisions (Major & Coleman, 2012). Expertise contributes to credibility through the belief that experts make more valid arguments. For example, Major and Coleman (2012) found young African Americans rated messages regarding HIV testing from a physician as more effective than that from a minister, due to the physician's knowledge and experience with the matter.

When examining the effect of expertise, it is important to consider the receiver's initial beliefs and whether the message opposes or supports those beliefs. Individuals may perceive opposing expert messages as more threatening, and therefore scrutinize them more (Clark,

Wegener, Habashi & Evans, 2012). When communicated messages contradict the receiver's own beliefs, those messages are likely to be met with resistance and the use of expertise may backfire, resulting in greater polarization (Hart & Nisbet, 2012). Conversely, when trying to reinforce already accepted and shared attitudes, weak arguments are seen as inadequate and prompt individuals to second guess and scrutinize the message (Clark, Wegener, Habashi & Evans, 2012). The significance of argument strength and congruency is especially relevant when dealing with polarizing topics, such as healthcare, climate change, and other public policies.

Attractiveness

Attractiveness, the presence of desirable or likeable features – not necessarily only physical traits -- has long been understood to be an important factor in persuasion. While there is often agreement on attractive traits, they can vary greatly across individuals. A communicator's overall likeability can produce a halo effect where receivers process ambiguous information in a positive way, making the communicator seem to have other positive traits – this is known as positively bias (Petty & Brinol, 2010). Individuals tend to associate themselves with those they find attractive due to a desire to identify with them, and can do so by agreeing with and adopting their attitudes and behaviour.

Since behaviour change is acting on intentions based on attitudes and beliefs, an individual's confidence in their own thoughts, known as self-validation, determines whether any communicated attitude change translates into behaviour change. Highly self-validated thoughts are stronger and more likely to be acted upon (Clark, Wegener, Sawicki, Petty & Brinol, 2013). Evans and Clark (2012) found the receiver characteristic of self-monitoring, or the tendency to adjust one's own behaviour to match their social environment, played a role in self-validation. . The receiver's level of self-monitoring affects how he or she will respond to factors of credibility. Low self-monitors rely on their inner cognitions and are more confident in the beliefs shared with a communicator perceived to be an expert. Conversely, high self-monitors emphasize their affiliation with others and have greater self-validation when the communicator is perceived to be attractive (Evans & Clark, 2012).

Communicator Identification

In addition to perceiving a communicator as more authentic, identifying with the communicator makes the communicator inherently appear more credible. This identification provides credibility because the more the receiver connects to the communicator through similarities and perceptions of fairness, the more they perceive the communicator as having their best interests in mind (Van Laer & De Ruyter, 2010). Presenting anti-sexting videos as a PSA made by a government organization or a viral video from their fellow peers, Joyce and Harwood (2014) found university students responded better to the viral video. Social identification signals shared interests, reduced risk, and in-group membership, which build trustworthiness. Van Laer and De Ruyter (2010) compared the persuasive effects of an apology on behalf of a company, by either a spokesperson or an employee, and found participants identified more with the employee and returned more trust toward the company when shown that apology. In this case, participants perceived the employee as more credible because they were more relatable.

Considering persuasion arises from processing information regarding both the communicator and the message, the degree of focus toward each has a considerable influence. When the receiver focuses on the message, they often have greater self-validation toward

thoughts that come from highly credible communicators, regardless of argument strength (Clark, Wegener, Sawicki, Petty & Brinal, 2013). When the receiver focuses on the communicator however, the interaction between credibility and argument strength becomes more important than just credibility. Greater self-validation emerges from messages with matching strength and communicator credibility, such as a weak message from a low-credibility communicator, than from mismatched strength and credibility. Even when told to focus on the message, communicator qualities can drive persuasion, and even low-credibility messengers can be persuasive (Clark, Wegener, Sawicki, Petty & Brinal, 2013). Whether the receiver focuses on the communicator or the message can depend on expectation, attention, or motivation. Communicator focus is considered a peripheral or heuristic route of persuasion because it is a shortcut, allowing the receiver to arrive at a conclusion regarding the message without having to process all its components. When the receiver's motivation to process the message is low, they will often rely on this peripheral route. Drawing attention toward the communicator's credibility should be done separately from presenting message content itself, either before or after, because evaluations of credibility are largely processed independent of message processing (Sparks & Rapp, 2011).

Expectations

The receiver's pre-existing knowledge, attitudes, and perhaps biases combine to establish the expectations they bring to communication. Whether or not the communicator meets the receiver's expectations can influence the amount of trust in the relationship (Rabinovich, Morton & Birney, 2012). Receivers use prior knowledge to generate expectations of a communicator's position or intention—doing so allows them to mentally prepare for processing and response. When expectations match, the receiver can build on the pre-established schema. However, the communicator does not always benefit. If the receiver has opposing attitudes, they may expect and prepare to resist persuasion by preparing counterarguments or selectively avoid aspects of the message. On other hand, when the communicator's position doesn't match expectations, the same cognitive resources used for resistance may be diverted toward rationalizing the contradiction. This process of rationalization can generate more trust in the communicator. For example, some individuals find scientists who refute climate change as more trustworthy than those who meet conventional expectations. The violation of expectations may suggest that they have enough compelling evidence for them to switch positions (Wood & Eagly, 1981). For expectations of intentions, messages are better received when the communicator's motive was expected. Participants in Rabinovich, Morton and Birney's (2012) study rated scientists as more trustworthy if they appeared to persuade or inform as expected. To accommodate for expectations, communicators need to be aware of them and prepare accordingly.

Future Directions

While research has revealed the foundations for effective communicators, there are many areas that can be explored. More effective scales for testing receiver perception of various communicator traits would provide public relation professionals the tools to prepare and assess communications. It is also important to consider follow-up communications to address any unintended effects or develop new relationships.

Considering the importance of open dialogue and the increasing ease to create engagement between the effected parties because of advancements in communicative

technologies, subsequent communications may be more important than initial ones, which set the tone for continuing interaction. Different analyses of receiver reaction, like sentiment, tone, or semantics, can be useful for processing large sets of responses, such as those in social media, and can be helpful in understanding how individual receiver differences and changes in communicator qualities can influence persuasion.

Further research should examine the relationships and interaction between determinants of trust to better understand how factors affect each other and which strategies are more effective for fostering meaningful relationships between communicators and receivers. For example, in some circumstances, credibility may be more important than authenticity. By understanding which factors have greater influence in certain situations, communicators can cater to them and maximize persuasive effect.

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