More “likes” or no “likes”? An Online Experiment Evaluating the Effects of Secondary Cues on the Perceived Source Credibility of Corrective Messages

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Abstract

Adopting an experimental design, this study examined the combined effects of tweet popularity data, profile image type, and need for cognition (NFC) on individuals’ perceived source credibility (PSC) of health education messages that correct popular myths about COVID-19. Three major findings were identified. First, PSC is positively associated with perceived message effectiveness and intentions to retweet a corrective message. Second, NFC moderates the effects of popularity data on PSC, such that high NFC individuals perceived tweets without popularity data to be most credible while low NFC individuals considered tweets with high popularity data most credible. Finally, in the high NFC group, a combination of a medical logo profile image and no tweet popularity data resulted in the highest PSC, and in the low NFC group, a combination of a real person profile image and high popularity data condition resulted in the highest PSC.

Theoretical Framework

Perceived Source Credibility (PSC)

- PSC refers to “the judgments made by a perceiver (e.g., a message recipient) concerning the believability of a communicator” (O’Keefe, 2002, p. 181). Two core components of PSC are expertise and trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990).

Heuristics, Social Cues, and Their Impact on PSC

- Social media automatically collect and display information about what others are doing and thinking about given messages, resulting in “other users” collaboratively filtering information (Knobloch-Westerwick, et al., 2005; Sundar, 2008). Since people “assume that the support of others is likely to predict personal relevance and utility” (Messing & Westwood, 2014, p. 1047), users are more likely to trust news stories with high ratings. Sundar (2008) named the above psychological process as the bandwagon heuristic, in which individuals judge the credibility of a piece of information by others’ judgements.
- On social media, the bandwagon heuristic is usually triggered by social endorsement cues (Messing & Westwood, 2014). Social endorsements may come from celebrities (Winterich et al., 2018), influencers, opinion leaders (Schouten et al., 2020), and peer users (Messing & Westwood, 2014).

Results

- H1. Higher PSC results in higher PME.
- H2. Higher PSC results in stronger intentions to retweet a corrective message.

Both hypotheses are supported. Individuals are more likely to perceive a corrective message as effective and develop stronger intentions to retweet it if they find the message source to be credible.

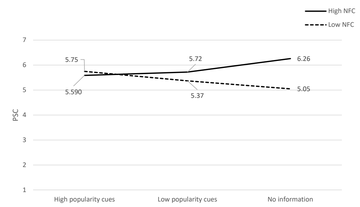
- RQ1. How does tweet popularity data (i.e., number of “likes” and “retweets”) affect PSC?

High popularity tweets result in the highest PSC (M = 5.66, SD = 1.23), followed by no information about tweet popularity (M = 5.21, SD = 1.21), and low popularity tweets result in the lowest PSC (M = 5.02, SD = 1.20).

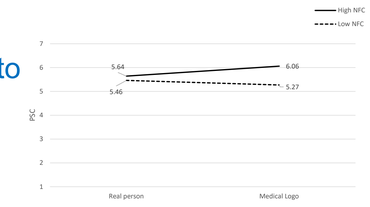
- RQ2. What is more likely to result in higher PSC, a real-person profile image or a medical logo profile image?
- RQ3. How do tweet popularity data and profile image type interact to affect PSC?

No statistically significant differences are identified between a real-person and a medical logo profile image on PSC. There is no statistically significant interaction effect on PSC between profile image type and tweet popularity data either.

- RQ4. How do NFC and tweet popularity data interact to influence PSC?



- RQ5. How do NFC and profile image type interact to influence PSC?



Discussion and Conclusion

- Tweet popularity data generated a negative impact on PSC among high NFC individuals only: tweets with high popularity data scored lower than those with low popularity data.
- Low NFC individuals, displayed stronger preferences for tweets with high popularity data. Tweets without popularity data received the lowest PSC ratings. Low NFC individuals tend to rely on the peripheral route to process information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In peripheral route information processing, factors other than message content, such as agency and social endorsement cues (Messing & Westwood, 2014), largely determine source credibility (Metzger, 2007; Sundar, 2008). The findings of this study show that the trend has been extended to misinformation correction. Since higher social endorsement results in higher PSC among low NFC individuals, health educators may consider adopting social marketing approaches such as inviting celebrities to help spread health messages in their campaigns targeting the low NFC audience segment.

Method

- A 3 (social endorsement cues: high, low, and no information) x 2 (tweet author profile image: real person and medical logo) online experiment.
- 305 valid responses from adults between the ages of 18 and 65.

Experimental stimulus examples