Does Being Social Matter? Effects of Enabled Commenting on Credibility and Brand Attitude in Social Media

Rebecca A. Hayes
Caleb T. Carr
School of Communication, Illinois State University

Authors’ note: This is the pre-proof manuscript, accepted to the Journal of Promotion Management on 11 December, 2013. May be cited as:

Abstract

Public relations practitioners are actively building relationships with bloggers to obtain high-credibility brand mentions and reviews. Practitioners may request bloggers limit comments to maintain control over messages and constrain dissonant perspectives; but, the impact of limiting social features of blogs is unknown. Utilizing source credibility and warranting theory, this paper examines the relationship between enabled comments on blogs and brand attitudes, with the moderating variables of credibility and expertise, from both a public relations and consumer behavior perspective. Using an online experiment (N=527) we found that socialness increases perceptions of blogger expertise, brand attitudes, and purchase intention, but not credibility.

Keywords:
Social media, Warranting, Credibility, Public relations, Blogs
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Introduction

Blogs are an integral part of the Internet landscape, with nearly 181 million online as of 2011 (NeilsenWire, 2012). The public relations industry has recognized the value of blogs and bloggers in reaching out to target publics, and blogger relations has become an important part of many strategic communication plans. Public relations practitioners often work with bloggers to provide support for content and to garner product reviews, as the brand coverage and product discussion on blogs is considered by many practitioners to be more valuable in terms of credibility than other forms of more traditional promotion efforts (Smith, 2011). The bloggers with whom public relations practitioners are building relationships are considered social media influencers (SMIs), and represent an emerging type of independent third party endorser who influences audience attitudes through the use of social media (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Practitioners, with short-term public relations goals of increased engagement, loyalty, and involvement, seek these relationships in order to enable long term consumer behavior goals of increased brand attitudes and purchase intention.

In 2013 alone, the Public Relations Society of America awarded three of their prestigious Silver Anvil Awards to public relations campaigns that involved blogger relations as a way to reach out to the publics engaged with that blogger (PRSA, 2013). For example, Land O’ Lakes butter utilized noted “culinary influencer” Ree Drummond and her blog, thepioneerwoman.com, in a campaign aimed at increasing butter use among young moms. This largely advertising-free campaign was noted, and awarded, for its success at generating discussion online and sales offline.
Blogs are powerful dialogic social media, and are characterized by their ability to allow individuals to continuously publish their ideas and opinions on a hypertext-enabled website (Smudde, 2005). However, one characteristic of blogs that makes them dialogic, the ability to comment on a blogger’s post and interact with other users through textual reactions to blog content, may be changing. Organizations and PR practitioners, seeking to influence the content of blogs and bloggers, are attempting to limit trolls, individuals posting contrary or inflammatory information for solely malicious reasons (Constine, 2012; Smith, 2011), by reducing the interactive and social nature of the blog, including disabling user comments. Since blogs enabling reader comments are inherently interactive two-way communication, what does it mean for the blogger and the brands that are seeking high-credibility mentions when comments are not enabled? Moreover, the enabling of comments may have implications for perceptions of the blogger’s credibility and expertise. The ability of outside parties (such as commenters) to provide input about a topic may increase the perceived veracity of a claim by vetting or disconfirming information (Walther & Parks, 2002). However, do others users not only perceive the truthfulness of a message, but also make attributions regarding the message sender differently as a result of the mere presence of mechanisms to allow outside parties to vet bloggers claims?

This research addresses these issues through an online experiment examining the perceptions of credibility and expertise of a social and asocial blogger making a product review. This public relations and consumer behavior study, using the guiding theory of warranting and the concept of social credibility, further posits and tests a model of the moderation effect of credibility and expertise between channel socialness and product attitudes and purchase intention. These concepts are of particular interest to bloggers forming relationships with brands and the PR practitioners looking to develop those relationships on behalf of a brand. In addition,
answering recent calls for more theoretically-grounded research that investigates the effects of PR efforts online (Ye & Ki, 2012), the introduction and application of warranting theory into public relations research is of value to PR and consumer behavior theorists seeking to conceptualize online impression formation and effects of socialness on credibility and expertise.

**Literature Review**

**Blogs**

Herring, Scheidt, Wright, and Bonus (2005) define a blog as a frequently-edited webpage, the main utility of which is the chronological recording and display of individual articles. To “blog” is to “continually post one’s ideas, opinions, Internet links (including those for other blogs) and so on” (Smudde, 2005, p. 34). A critical element of blogging has traditionally been dialogue, with readers invited to participate in public conversations with the blogger and other readers through commenting (Smudde, 2005). This overt interactivity illustrates Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) assertion as to why two-way symmetrical communication as the most ethical form of public relations: The blogger is accountable to readers though comments, as dissenting readers are able to publically critique content. In short, the dialogue is transparent.

Kent (2008) notes “blogging [for PR purposes] is rapidly becoming as pervasive as the Internet” (p. 32), and describes blogs as a dialogic opportunity for engagement with interested groups. Relationship building with independent bloggers is becoming commonplace, with public relations practitioners also paying for placement, giving gifts or financial incentives to certain bloggers for favorable reviews or mentions (Fine, 2006). This relationship has developed to the point that the Federal Trade Commission has tried to regulate it (Federal Trade Commission, 2009) to varying degrees of success (Walden, Bortree, & DiStaso, 2013). Smith (2011)
describes the efforts of practitioners to engage with independent bloggers about their brands, and notes the effort to influence these bloggers toward positive product reviews or brand mentions.

In this type of public relations, the organization seeks to leverage some of the credibility or status the blogger, a social media influencer (SMI), has with his or her readers and get through the cognitive filters readers often apply with other marketing material (Freberg et al., 2011). Indeed, a driving force of blogs, as with many social media tools, is their user-generated, interactive nature.

**Socialness**

Within this research, we conceptualize *socialness* as a blog’s utilization of the interactive nature of social media and Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2005) by allowing readers to respond to the blogger and other readers via commenting on a blog post. Though the enabling of comments may not broadly encapsulate the concept of “socialness,” within the present research this conceptualization guides the discussion of the role of socialness in blogs and blogger reviews. Though many large brands now maintain blogs, some have made the decision not to allow comments, disabling a feature common to most blogs since the early days of blogging and a key feature in blogs’ dialogic value. Some independent bloggers are also choosing to limit comments, either because of paid placements or because of a desire to limit Internet trolls, who can take a discussion off-topic (Constine, 2012; Smith, 2011).

This lack of socialness, the ability of reader to respond in a transparent manner, violates the nature of PR as it has come to be understood – a blog without public comment is no longer two-way communication, but is rather a reversion to the one-way communication of earlier PR practice. Does it matter, though? Yang and Lim (2009) demonstrated that interactivity in blogs is important for a blogger’s credibility, but did not explore the implications of *asocialness*, or
Running head: IMPACT OF BLOG SOCIALNESS ON CREDIBILITY

bloggers posting without allowing comments, nor implications for attitude toward the brand and purchase intention. One way to respond to calls for greater integration of theory in PR and promotion management, (An & Cheng, 2007; Ye & Ki, 2012) is to draw from related fields such as consumer behavior and interpersonal communication. This research utilizes source credibility and a novel application of communication science’s warranting theory to predict perceptions of product reviewers and electronic word-of-mouth, as they inform theoretical explanations of how perceivers draw from online cues to form impressions of an entity’s offline persona.

Warranting theory. Warranting theory was forwarded to address how others use cues to ascertain the validity of an individual’s self-presentation online (Walther & Parks, 2002). Its tenets should effectively scale to aid in understanding how others use identity cues to ascertain the validity of any entity online, be it an individual author or an organization attempting to forward a self in a mediated environment. A warrant connects one’s true identity (and characteristics) with one’s self-presentation. Unlike in face-to-face interactions, where an individual presents a self via a range of verbal and nonverbal cues (Goffman, 1959), online a person’s identity is changeable and is impacted by a variety of cues absent in FtF interactions (Stone, 1996), thus allowing an individuals to articulate a self that may not be reflective of actual characteristics. For example, one may readily state in an online forum that she is extroverted, regardless of actual behavior. Walther and Parks’ (2002) warranting theory addresses how online information is assessed to influence a perceiver’s belief that a target actually possesses articulated characteristics, and posits information is weighted more heavily (i.e., perceived as more credible) when it is immune to a source’s influence. More trustworthy and authentic information is therefore said to be of greater warranting value, and integrated into a perceiver’s schema that a target possesses a professed characteristic or trait.
Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders (2010) noted the “authenticity dilemma” inherent to Web media—readers have few cues online to assess the validity of authors’ claims. However, warranting theory affords a theoretical explanation of why interactive media may increase perceptions of the credibility of online information through the concept of “warrants.” The socialness of an online resource may significantly influence how an audience perceives the source and the veracity of its claims. Returning to the earlier example, a friend stating the individual is extroverted has greater warranting value than a similar self-statement as it is a stronger cue that the individual actually possesses the espoused characteristic offline (Walther, Van der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009).

Social media not only afford information high in warranting value due to others’ statements; but in their very nature. Walther, et al. (2008) noted that a channel simply affording the ability of others to vet a claim could increase the warranting value of online self-presentation. Thus, information from social media may be considered to have greater warranting value because it can be validated or discredited through interaction with others. Willemsen, Neijens, and Bronner (2012) articulated peer reviews as a means of obtaining warranted information about products, and experimentally demonstrated greater levels of perceived expertise when expertise was conferred onto an online information source by others in a social medium.

Therefore, it seems a response to Metzger et al.’s (2010) authenticity dilemma is to ensure online media exhibit socialness. By allowing interactivity among readers and with the content creator, interactive content creation can allow users to vet or disconfirm a website’s content, thereby increasing the warranting value of content. As readers and publics are able to ascertain and confirm the veracity of information and address the impartiality of the information source, online information should increase its warranting value, ultimately influencing
perceptions of source expertise and credibility. Within the context of this research, blogs exhibiting socialness (i.e., affording users an opportunity to comment on blog content and interact with others) should have dual effects: The blogger should be perceived as more credible, and the blog’s information should be perceived as possessing greater expertise than a similar blogger’s asocial blog. Thus, regarding the effects of blog socialness, we hypothesize:

**H1:** Blogs that exhibit socialness are perceived of as more credible than blogs that do not.

**H2:** Blogs that exhibit socialness are perceived of as having more expertise than blogs that do not.

**Source credibility.** Whether or not a source is deemed credible is critical for its success, as people will not rely on sources not considered credible (Gaziano, 1988; Johnson & Kaye, 1998, 2000). Source credibility was developed to explain the relationship between a source’s trustworthiness and credibility and their ability to persuade (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Individuals are more likely to be persuaded if when a source is portrayed, or portrays itself, as credible (Hovland et al., 1953; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Flanigan and Metzger (2007) defined credibility as a perceptual variable addressing an information receiver’s perception of information, and comprised primarily of a receiver’s perceptions of the trustworthiness and expertise of a source. Credibility is also influenced by the source’s dynamism, composure, and sociability. Many studies indicate highly credible sources produce more favorable attitudes and behavior responses (e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, & Shulman, 1986; Ohanian, 1990; Chu & Kamal, 2008).

While different elements comprise a source’s credibility, perceived expertise is commonly cited as one of the critical factors of credibility (Hovland et al., 1953; Gilbert, Fiske,
Lindzey, & Gardner, 1998). Expertise refers to the perception of whether the source is making valid assessments of the material it is covering. In addition, expertise encompasses whether a source is both qualified and is presenting the pertinent and accurate facts needed to make an assertion (McCracken, 1989; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Research has indicated that higher levels of perceived expertise (and therefore credibility) have positive impacts on attitude change (Ohanian, 1990; Maddux & Rogers, 1980), something very important to practitioners seeking to influence consumers.

Users report blogs to be a generally credible source of information, and many users report trusting them more than they trust traditional media, while believing that they contain greater depth of information (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Bloggers have become opinion leaders in many circles, and can be highly influential sources of information to their readers (Mackiewicz, 2010; Freberg et al., 2011). Organizations engage in PR to strategically influence their publics, commonly for the desired outcomes of positively affecting attitudes toward their product (Miller, 1989). Strong relationships have been demonstrated between the credibility of an opinion leader (such as a blogger) and audiences’ product attitudes, so that favorable impressions of the blogger’s credibility result in more favorable product attitudes of blog readers (Bruning & Ralston, 2000; Schenk & Döbler, 2002). The link between a blog’s credibility and the blog’s readers’ attitudes is a valuable relationship to a PR practitioner seeking to positively influence product attitudes; however, the effects of the complex practitioner-blogger-reader relationships have not been consistently modeled in the literature. Thus, we propose:

*H3a: A blog’s credibility has a positive effect on the valence of attitude regarding the product being reviewed.*
H3b: A blogger’s expertise has a positive effect on the valence of attitude regarding the product being reviewed.

H4a: A blog’s credibility has a positive effect on purchase intention.

H4b: A blogger’s expertise has a positive effect on purchase intention.

The rapidly-growing role of blogs and bloggers as SMIs raises timely and important questions for regarding the effects of new promotion mechanisms and relationships. In an attempt to understand the implications for bloggers’ utilization of cornerstone features of social media, namely enabled public comment of blog posts, this article forwards a theoretically-guided set of hypotheses that model the multi-step relationship between socialness and product attitudes and purchase intention regarding a product being discussed on a blog, positing the moderating effect of credibility and expertise (Figure 1). Assessing the validity of these hypotheses will both enhance our understanding of the relationships between perceptual effects (i.e., credibility and expertise) and behavioral effects (i.e., brand attitude and purchase intention), and further contribute to theoretically-guided research that can be scaled to emergent media and future trends and applications. Establishing whether discouraging socialness in an effort to limit anti-organizational sentiment on blogs is counterproductive to PR efforts involving bloggers will aid assessing whether the practice of limiting the ability to comment on organizational blogs is doing more harm than good to the public’s opinion of and willingness to purchase a brand.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Method

Participants

A nationally-representative sample (N = 527) was recruited with the Qualtrics research firm to test these hypotheses as a part of a larger online experimental study. Qualtrics provided a
sampling frame of individuals from which a panel of respondents was drawn and compensated per their agreement with Qualtrics. Respondents (336 females, 64%) had a mean age of 23.62 ($SD = 26.57$) years with a negatively-skewed age distribution. Of participants who disclosed their ethnicity, the sample was composed of White (83%), African-American (6%), Asian or Asian-American (10%), and multiracial (2%) individuals, reflective of the US population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) save a slight oversampling of Asian-Americans, and were widely distributed geographically.

**Procedure**

Participants were asked to log on to a website where they were automatically and randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions, either a social or asocial blog review of a digital camera. These blog entries, modeled on reviews of digital cameras found on photography blogs, included active hyperlinks participants could follow to obtain more information about the product to increase the realism of the entry (Figure 2). A digital camera was chosen for the reviews due to its demonstrated value as a product category in consumer behavior research (Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & de Ridder, 2011). After reviewing the blog entry, participants completed a questionnaire containing study measures.

**Manipulating socialness.** Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: exposure to a social blog post or an asocial blog post. The socialness of the stimuli was manipulated by including a history of comments and dialogic exchange between the blogger and a reader, present in the social condition and absent in the asocial condition. In the social condition, the blogger had a brief exchange with user “PatSherry,” who posted a comment on the blog entry, “Some gorgeous shots here. It sounds like the trip was fun, but the pictures really bring some of the experience to life, and online the colours are vibrant and real. How were you
focusing a SLR camera so effectively?” which appeared below the main entry. This comment was then followed a few days later by a reply from the blogger, “PicPerceptions,” which read, “Pat, thanks so much. Yeah, the shots are amazing. I really love this camera--its shutter speed is amazing! The 3fps burst mode really helped shoot some of the action shots, but the shots above were just stills with the Canon's auto-focus. It was really fast and very intuitively selected what I was trying to line up in the frame.” In the asocial condition, no comments were posted and no comment field was available.

Measures

**Blog credibility.** Johnson and Kaye’s (2004) 5-item measure was used to assess credibility of the blog. Likert-type items asked participants to indicate their agreement with statements regarding how believable, fair, accurate, and in-depth they judged the blog to be using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (“Not At All”) to 5 (“Very”). Items were reliable ($\alpha = .93$) and a mean score of all five items was used to measure the perceived credibility of the blog, with higher scores reflecting increased levels of blog credibility.

**Blogger expertise.** blogger expertise was assessed using Ohanian’s (1990) 5-item semantic differential scale measuring the expertise dimension of source credibility. Differentials used 5-point scales with anchors including, “Expert/Not An Expert,” “Experienced/Inexperienced,” “Knowledgeable/Unknowledgeable,” “Qualified/Unqualified,” and “Skilled/Unskilled.” Scale items were reliable ($\alpha = .95$), and the scale mean was used to assess blogger expertise with greater scores reflecting greater perceived expertise.

**Brand attitude/Intent to purchase.** After reading the product review, participants were asked to reflect, based on the review they had read, their attitudes toward the product and willingness to buy or recommend the camera. Moreau, Markman, and Lehmann’s (2001) 12-
item, 5-point Likert-type scale asked participants to indicate their agreement with statements including, “I think this digital camera is an excellent product,” “I would use this camera at a sporting event,” and “I would recommend this camera to my friends,” and was used to assess attitude toward product. The product attitude scale demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = .97$). Purchasing intention was measured using three 7-point Likert-type items asking how likely participants would be to “purchase the product, given the information shown in the review,” “How probable it is that you would consider the use of this product,” and “How likely you would be to purchase this product.” The purchasing intention scale demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = .93$), and the means score was used to operationalize purchasing intention, with greater scores indicating greater intent to purchase.

**Results**

**Test of Hypotheses and Model**

The first two hypotheses predicted “social” blogs would be perceived as more credible and of greater expertise. The perceived credibility of the blogger did not significantly differ between the social condition ($n = 205, M = 3.74, SD = .93$) and the asocial condition ($n = 322, M = 3.63, SD = .98$), $t(525) = -1.245, p = .214$ (2-tailed), Cohen’s $d = .12$. However, an independent-samples $t$-test revealed a significant difference between perceived expertise based on the asocial/social treatment, so that bloggers were perceived as possessing more expertise in the social condition ($M = 4.97, SD = 1.31$) than in the asocial condition ($M = 4.72, SD = 1.40$), $t(525) = -1.245, p = .043$ (2-tailed), $d = .18$. Thus, while $H1$ was rejected, $H2$ was supported.

The concept of source credibility guided hypotheses 3 and 4, predicting credibility and expertise positively influence brand attitude and purchase intention. To test both sets of hypotheses, two multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted using blogger
credibility and expertise as the independent variables and brand attitude and purchase intention as the dependent variables. A MANOVA allowed for statistical control over potential covariance between the dependent variables. For H3a and H3b, the MANOVA indicated credibility was significantly and positively predicted both product attitude ($F[16, 510] = 20.053, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{attitude}} = .02$) and purchase intention ($F[16, 510] = 25.539, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{attitude}} = .03$), and that the causal effects predicted by H3 were substantial $R^2_{\text{Product Attitude}} = .39$ and $R^2_{\text{Purchase Intention}} = .45$. For H4a and H4b, the MANOVA indicated expertise significantly and positively predicted both product attitude ($F[23, 510] = 7.976, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{attitude}} = .01$) and purchase intention ($F[23, 510] = 9.568, p < .001, \eta^2_{\text{attitude}} = .02$), and that the causal effects predicted by H4 were substantial $R^2_{\text{Product Attitude}} = .27$ and $R^2_{\text{Purchase Intention}} = .30$. Thus, H3a, 3b, 4a, and 4b were all supported.

Finally, the overall path model was tested using a covariate analysis of variance (ANCOVA), using the dummy-coded a/social media condition (with social media coded as 1) as an independent variable, credibility and expertise as covariates, and brand attitude and purchasing intentions as the dependent variable. Results of the ANCOVA were significant for both brand attitude, $F(3, 523) = 98.565, p < .001, R^2 = .361$, and purchasing intention $F(3, 523) = 133.648, p < .001 R^2 = .434$. Thus, with the exception of the hypothesized relationship between socialness and credibility, the proposed model of the effects of socialness on product attitudes and behaviors was supported (Figure 3).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

**Discussion**

This study explored whether disabling comments on a blog (i.e., being asocial in a traditionally social media) has an impact on brand attitudes and purchase intention through the moderating variables of blogger credibility and expertise. Experimental results afford both
theoretical and practical implications for academics and practitioners. Theoretically, our findings have implication for the concepts of credibility and expertise, particularly as they relate and are altered by the integration of emergent, social media like blogs, Facebook, and Pinterest. Whereas previous research has sought to understand how a sender influences perceptions of the source (e.g., Metzger, Flanagan, & Medders, 2010), the present research extends the examination of credibility and expertise to understand how medium features—even those enabled by the source—and the ability for outside parties to co-create a dialogue about a message similarly influence credibility and expertise, particularly through the perceived veracity of claims. By introducing the warranting principle (Walther & Parks, 2002), this research identifies how medium attributions may intensify an audience’s belief a review is credible.

Practically, these findings can help inform public relations, advertising, and marketing practitioners as they continue to capitalize on emerging online media tools for brand management. As blogger relations and blog creation have become common tactics in public relations, the question of whether this matters is increasingly important, especially as some brands create corporate blogs with no option for comments, and some bloggers choose to limit commenting in response to requests from practitioners.

**Effect of Socialness on Credibility and Expertise**

As predicted, blogger expertise was positively impacted by enabled comments (H2); but, surprisingly, blogger credibility was not (H1). Most source credibility research has indicated that the two are strongly related, and that expertise is a factor of credibility (Hovland et al., 1957). However, the present findings reveal that socialness has a significant and positive influence on expertise, but not credibility. Although a post hoc test revealed that while expertise and credibility were correlated in the data ($r = .676, p < .001$), that this correlation did not
manifest in the analysis of H1 and H2 suggests the socialness variable may differentiate these two previously-associated variables. One explanation is that our study focused only on the subjective perception of the information presented. In the present work we conceptualized warranting as the effect of social comments of readers on observers' perceptions of the blogger. However, as stimuli did not address *ad hominem* characteristics of the blogger, perceptual effects may have been limited to those specifically influenced by the information presented, such as the accuracy or correctness of information provided by the blogger. Recalling Flanigan and Metzger's (2007) distinction that, "credibility judgments may be influenced by objective properties of the information," it may be that our stimuli only exposed participants to issues that did not alter the objective properties of the information about the camera, and as such did not alter participants' perceptions of the blogger's credibility. By focusing social comments on the blogger's product knowledge, stimuli may have only activated perceptions of blogger expertise and not blogger credibility, and variance observed in the credibility measure occurred naturally.

A second, yet related, explanation of the unexpected and complicated relationship between credibility and expertise may be found examining the measurement used in this research. Credibility, measured using Johnson and Kaye’s (2004) scale that assesses how accurate, in-depth, fair, and believable a blogger is, might not be impacted by an individual opening themselves to questioning (through enabled comments) as the content of the blog post did not change, and those measures are more salient to the content of the post. Expertise refers to the perception of whether the source is making valid assessments of the material it is covering, and its scale assessed how knowledgeable, skilled, experienced, and qualified a blogger was. These elements could understandably be more impacted by a blogger’s openness to being questioned. Thus, the way one measures credibility is important, and a different credibility scale
may have demonstrated different results here, and the inclusion of measurement of trust (discussed later), may have assessed these differences more effectively.

Even though the tests of H1 and H2 demonstrated mixed results, these findings indicate it is still in the blogger’s interest to enable comments given the positive impact on expertise. There seems to be no threat to blogger credibility by enabling the social functions of a blog; concurrently, the blogger may gain perceived expertise by doing the same, thereby indicating a potential gain without innate harm to the blog and blogger. Beyond this practical implication, the perceptual effects of a blog’s interactive features has implications for warranting theory in social media. Although previous work has clearly explicated medium features should influence the warranting value of information, the present research reflects an initial test and validation of this supposition. Given how much social media, often called Web 2.0, is reliant on social connections and interaction (O’Reilly, 2005), this finding has significant implications beyond blogs and to a wider array of media that promotions may strategically use. Publically-accessible fora that enable user-generation of comment and critique, such as blogs’ comment fields or Facebook walls, allow third parties to validate or discredit information presented by the content poster. As it is difficult for a poster to influence the comments of others, third-party comments are of high warranting value and can radically alter impressions of perceivers due to the strong link to the sender’s offline identity and characteristics (Walther, et al., 2009). Support for H2 implies the mere ability of others to comment and critique the factuality of a blogger’s statements may similarly increase the warranting value of the blogger’s expertise. Even if unused, a social element of a medium still allows others to correct or condemn erroneous claims, thereby increasing the warranting value of information in social (as compared to static) media.

**Brand Attitudes and Purchase Intention**
Most salient to practitioners seeking relationships with bloggers, and as expected, blog credibility and blogger expertise were able to significantly predict brand attitudes and purchase intention. Prior research has established the value of the credibility and expertise of the source (the blogger in this case) in brand evaluations (Petty et al., 1986; Ohanian, 1990; Chu & Kamal, 2008) and that relationship was reinforced here. As blogger relations as a PR tactic becomes even more common, this research demonstrates the value of relying on bloggers who have demonstrated credibility and expertise with their readership in the product category under consideration.

Keeping a blog social through enabled comments also has positive implications for the brand discussed, both through purchase intentions and brand attitudes and this study reinforces the research of Yang and Lim (2009), who argued that interactivity was essential to blog-mediated PR. Enabling comments also maintains the value of blogs as an ethical, dialogic communication tool, and reinforces blogger relations as a way to maintain two-way symmetrical communication. Blogs inviting interested publics to comment on, critique, or otherwise address claims of the organization may possess greater warranting value, even when influenced by public relations tactics, as a blog’s content is perceived as more immune to manipulation and therefore less biased, thus enabling the blog’s content to have greater influence on readers’ opinions, attitudes, and behaviors.

These social media influencers represent an emerging type of advocate who influences the attitudes of their followers (Freberg, et al., 2011). Moreover, bloggers’ involvement in PR campaigns, encouraged through either relationship building with the bloggers, or paid sponsorship or reviews, is valuable to the brand. Practitioners should take care, however, not to
encourage anything that may diminish the credibility and expertise of the blogger in the eyes of their followers, such as limiting comments or engaging in off-topic discussions.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

One of the main limitations of this study lies in the way socialness was implemented in the experimental materials. To maintain experimental control, participants exposed to the social condition were able to type into a text box to submit their own comments, but were not able to post comments to the blog itself. Thus, the full interactivity of a truly social condition was not enabled in the present research. Future research may seek to create a system fostering actual interactivity or utilize extant recommender services *in situ* to assess the naturalistic effects of engaging in virtual dialogue on participants’ impressions. Two additional limitations lie in the exposure and the variables measured. First, only a positive exchange between the blogger and a user was displayed. It would be interesting to explore these effects when the exchange is negative or exhibits trolling behavior, as that is ultimately what bloggers, organizations, and practitioners are trying to prevent in limiting commenting. Second, trust was not measured in this study. Measurement of trust would have added value to the discussion of effects as it may have aided in teasing out the differences between credibility and expertise, and may have helped establish what specifically was being warranted. This variable could understandably be more impacted by a blogger’s openness to being questioned.

Another direction for future research may address the ability for metasocialness, such as through enabling comments about others’ comments. Recent work has demonstrated that meta-reviews—reviews of product reviewers—can influence product attitudes (Walther, Liang, Ganster, Wohn, & Emington, 2012). Although the present work further aids in understanding the relationship between comments (or at least the ability to do so) and readers, the increasing
socialness demonstrated by social media presents an exciting rabbit hole that future research may enter. More robust and complete models of social online processes may be developed by exploring the causal relationship between media affordances related to socialness and effects.

**Conclusion**

By experimentally testing theoretically-guided hypotheses regarding the role of socialness in influencing perceptions of content creators and a product being reviewed, this paper responds to calls in the public relations literature for more theoretically-driven research into the effects on online PR efforts (e.g., Ye & Ki, 2012) and facilitates a greater understanding of the effects of Internet technologies as they are increasingly integrated into PR and consumer marketing. When considering the subtle goals of public relation practices even small effects remain important, and the effects demonstrated in this research are certainly factors to be considered by prudent public relations practitioners and theorists alike. Findings indicate that though social blogs provide a potential forum for trolls and negative attitudes regarding the brand, they also help resolve the authenticity dilemma by providing credibility assessments based on a “network of peers” (Metzger et al., 2010, p. 415).

Social media influencers are increasingly affecting the attitudes and behaviors of their followers, in large part because they are perceived as more credible than traditional media outlets (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). This credibility has been shown to positively impact brand intentions, and thus, bloggers and PR practitioners need to take care to maintain this credibility. As practitioners navigate tensions between limiting feedback from publics to maintain control over a brand identity online and allowing publics to interact with information sources to increase dialogic engagement with key stakeholders, the social/asocial dilemma has increasing implications for public relations efforts. Although organizations may want to limit the ability of
outsiders to generate content on social media like blogs and Facebook walls to reduce potential negative or inflammatory contributions, this concern must be tempered with concern for eliminating the benefits of social media engagement to begin with. Our findings suggest bloggers seeking to maximize their credibility, and practitioners looking to make use of this credibility to influence key publics’ brand attitudes, should embrace the socialness of new media to derive benefits in the attributions and warrants of others and the medium itself.
References


Figure 1

Proposed Model of the Mediated Relationship Between Blog Socialness and Brand Attitudes and Purchase Intention
Figure 2

*Stimuli Material*

**Pic Perceptions**
Documenting the world, one picture at a time

**Trip to Thailand**
December 27, 2011

We just got back from our Thailand, which was awesome. Terry enjoyed the food way too much (especially the green), and spent most of a perfectly good river cruise in a food-induced coma of happiness. It’s amazing to see a city not just built on a river, but integrated into it; the Chao Phraya River plays such a big role both geographically and culturally in Bangkok life.

Some of the temples we saw were unbelievable, with both enormous and detailed statues, intricate and ornate decoration, and a level of reverence you just don’t see Stateside.

I think my favorite part about the trip was the chance to check out my new camera, a *Canon XTi-D-SLR*. Particularly given the colorful wildlife and temples we saw, it was amazing at helping to capture the trip. It was nice the camera was so fast. I could turn it on and start shooting without waiting several seconds for it to load. The battery life was good, and I often spent the entire day shooting high-resolution photos and high-definition videos without needing to charge the battery. I was really impressed by the XT’s ability to focus on multiple elements in a shot without losing quality or blurring the photo. I’m so glad I had this rather than the point-and-shoot we used to travel with, and would definitely recommend it to anyone looking to preserve fond memories of a trip, sporting event, or family get-together.

I’ll be posting lots more pictures soon. We did a day-long excursion on elephant-back which was fantastic and managed to go see a *muay thai* boxing match, which was stunning both in its brutality and its grace. But I’m still jet-lagged and need to get through all the photos to find the select few of the hundreds we took while on vacation. However, once Terry and I have had a chance to rest up, we’ll be sure to post much more from our Thai adventures. Until then, it’s great to see new places, but it’s always nice to come home again.

“Disclaimer: All statements and opinions detailed in this review are my own. However, Canon apparently heard about my blog a while back and gave me a XT-D-SLR camera to use and talk about. Canon says me every time I plug their product and a percentage of their camera sales.”
Pic Perceptions
Documenting the world, one picture at a time.

Trip to Thailand
December 27, 2011

We just got back from Thailand, which was awesome. Tony enjoyed the best day ever much more than I did. We spent most of the
trip (except for the first day) in a very nice, clean, and
cheerful hotel. The only negative was that it was a bit
hot and humid, but overall, it was a great experience.

Some of the temples were very impressive, with large
buddhas and statues of deities. We also visited a
waterfall and a temple that was surrounded by
mountains.

I think the most memorable part of the trip was visiting
a small village in the countryside. The people were
very friendly and welcoming, and we got to try some
typical Thai food, which was delicious.

Overall, it was a fantastic trip that I would definitely
recommend to anyone interested in exploring new
places and experiencing different cultures.

Tags: travel, photography, family
Category: travel

12 comments

1. Daily

Great pictures, as usual!

2. Anonymous

Great photos, as usual. I especially love the ones of the
waterfall and the temple.

Leaves a Reply

Response

Great photos, as usual. I especially love the ones of the
waterfall and the temple.

Leaves a Reply

Post Comment
Figure 3

*Model of the Mediated Relationship Between Blog Socialness and Brand Attitudes and Purchase Intention with Product-Moment Correlations*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Wilks’ $\lambda = .774$, $F(2, 522) = 89.656$, $p < .001$