Does the Credibility of the Presenter Influence Acceptance of Content in the Classroom

Emmett Dulaney
Falls School of Business
Anderson University
1303 E. 5th Street
Anderson, IN 46012, USA.

Abstract

Popular belief is that first impressions affect and influence most of the interactions had with that individual from that point on. When it comes to education, the question arises as to how much the first impression of a person presenting content can shape a student's perception of the credibility of the content they present. In an attempt to quantify this, a series of videos were created and shown to students in multiple MBA cohorts with the only difference between them being the opening moments of the first video and the introduction of the presenter used. Reactions to the videos were then surveyed to measure the differences in believability and persuasiveness and whether that difference would dissipate over time. The study found no statistically significant difference in the beginning, but one that did develop over time.

Keywords: credibility, credibility theory, first impression, education, persuasion, believability, persuasiveness

Introduction

Does the credibility of the speaker influence a student's interpretation of the message being conveyed? When an adjunct faculty member greets a class for the first time and says they have never taught that particular subject before, could that skew the students' opinions of the content that follows? Would the content be viewed differently if the introduction focused not on a weakness, but rather on strength: stating that they are a former CEO, a successful entrepreneur in the field, a technology savant, and so on? Popular culture tells us that this is so. Malcolm Gladwell's assertion in *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* is that we make snap judgments and decisions all the time. We are constantly bombarded with input that we unconsciously assimilate and act upon (Gladwell, 2005). Within the social sciences, credibility theory is based on persuasive communications theory (Kalafatis, et al, 2012) and implies that persuasiveness and believability are tied to credibility.

How does that translate to the classroom? In an attempt to quantitatively measure what effect an introduction might have – and any possibility of overcoming a bad one - a three-part series of videos was created walking through different ways of evaluating an ethical dilemma: Amazon.com not collecting sales tax in Indiana. An MBA student narrated the videos and each of the three segments is approximately five minutes long. While there is only one version of the second and third videos, two versions of the first video were used that included different introductions.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Credibility theory studies suggest that a communicator is more successful when using a message capable of influencing the psychological functioning of an individual's mind (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). Studies have been done on the wording of a cover letter accompanying a survey and the reaction it has on the response rate (Scott, 1961; Blumberg et all, 1974; Linsky, 1975; Harvey, 1987; Yammarino, et al, 1991). In a study done by Angur, Nataraajan, and Chawla, it was found that "a significantly higher response rate" was generated from a combination of (perceived) high researcher credibility and personal appeal (Angur, et al, 1994), while others found that those with low credibility can sometimes be more persuasive (Dholakia & Sternthal, 1977; Sternthal, et al, 1978). These discrepancies often arise based on differences within the materials the subject receives (postage-paid envelopes, colored paper, etc.).

Outside of the realm of survey responses (where so much interest has been given), perceived credibility has also been examined in a number of other areas across the spectrum. It has been studied in relation to eyewitnesses who are police officers and how their testimony is accepted more by judges/juries (Yarney, 1986) and advocacy advertising (Ballentine, 2007). In the latter study, respondents were asked to assess the credibility of three potential advertisement sponsors to identify the one most appropriate sponsor for an anti-importation campaign.

One of the examinations most relevant to the current study was done by Lightstone, et al (2011) in which they looked for a relationship between faculty style of dress and students' perception of instructor credibility. They found that professors in formal attire are perceived as being more credible than those dressed less formally. Neither this study, nor others discovered, looked at the how the credibility of content in the classroom can be correlated to the introduction of the speaker. The purpose of this study is to fill that gap and look for a relationship between the introduction of the speaker and the perception of credibility bestowed on the content.

The first hypothesis was that those who saw the No-Experience (1A) version would score believability and persuasiveness of the content statistically lower than those who saw the Experienced-in-the-Field (1B) version on that first video viewed. The introduction, it is believed, would influence them and if they were to learn that the speaker was a fellow student, they would think differently of the content than if they were told the speaker was an expert in the field of study.

The first hypothesis thus is:

H_1: The introduction of the speaker will be a significant determinant in the believability and persuasiveness scores for the content relayed in the first video.

The second hypothesis was that there would be no statistical difference when it came to evaluations of the third video – the reasoning being that by that time, the content (combined with other discussions in class) would outweigh the difference in introductions done two class sessions previously. The second hypothesis thus is:

H_2: The introduction of the speaker used in the first video will not be a significant determinant in the believability and persuasiveness scores for the content relayed in the third video.

No hypothesis existed for differences in scoring related to the second video – some could begin to value the content more, while others clung to an effect from the introduction.

Methods

A series of videos was created, and in the opening nineteen seconds of the first version (referenced as "1A"), the narrator - Chelsea Petersen - tells those to whom she is presenting that she has "no real world experience", and that "…just a year ago, I was sitting where you are…" while a caption appears on the video identifying that she is a student in the MBA program. In the second version of the video (referenced as "1B"), the opening sequence leaves out those items and she instead tells the viewer that she is "fascinated by ethics", and "pursuing a business venture based on extensive research" in ethics. The caption on the video identifies her not as a student, but as an "Ethicist".

The videos used in this experiment can be found online. The "no experience" version of the first video (1A) can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoH5cKbXgJo, while the "experienced" version (1B) can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFRxfQPZPkI.The second video in the series is at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIshS56X_8c while the 3rd can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLM0n4jJy44.

The Anderson University Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program is offered as a "Professional" program for working adults. It is a twenty-two month program intended for working professionals (non-traditional students) who can attend one night a week at various locations. A number of new cohorts started the BSNS 6010 course through Anderson University in 2011 - all were at different locations in the Anderson and Indianapolis, Indiana area. BSNS 6010: *Business and Society* is traditionally the first course students beginning the MBA program at Anderson University are enrolled in.

The faculty of four of the sites were given CDs containing either the 1A or 1B version (two sites per version) as well as the other two videos and agreed to participate in the experiment. The videos were shown at the sequence of one video during each of the first three class meetings.

Half of the cohorts (approximately 15-20 students in each cohort) saw the 1A version of the video the first night, followed by the 2nd and 3rd videos on respective nights. The other cohorts watched the 1B version of the video the first night, followed by the exact same 2nd and 3rd videos on respective nights. Figure 1 shows the average age of the respondents: the range was between 22 and 53, 47% of the students were male and 53% were female. Figure 2 shows the self-identified race of each group, while Figure 3 shows the self-identified marital status of the students.

Immediately after watching each of the three videos, students filled out a short survey evaluating what they had just seen. On the survey were four seven-point Likert-type scale items on the believability of the content, followed by four seven-point Likert-type scale items on the persuasiveness of the content. The scales were used by Elliott and Speck (1998), and based on those created by Gürhan-Canli and Maheswaran (2000). Reliability of both had alphas ranging from .82 to .93 in previous studies. The following section discusses the results of surveying these groups.

Analysis

Hypothesis 1 was that there would be a statistically significant difference found on the first night between those who watched the version of the video in which the speaker claimed to have no experience with the subject matter and the version in which the speaker claimed to be an expert in the field. No such statistical significance was found, however, using independent-sample t-tests for either the believability or persuasiveness scales. Table 1 shows the believability results between the two groups. Table 2 shows the persuasiveness results between the two groups.

The first hypothesis, therefore, is rejected. No statistical significance in the perception of the first video's credibility of content was identified based on the difference in introductions. Not only was there no statistically significant difference found on the first night, but – as would be expected - the same held true for the second as well. Table 3 shows the results for night two/second video. Hypothesis 2 was that any statistically significant difference found on the first night between those who watched the version of the video in which the speaker claimed to have no experience with the subject matter and the version in which the speaker claimed to be an expert in the field would diminish by the third video. For the third video, however, statistical significance was found for five of the eight scale items using independent-sample t-test.

Table 4 shows the results for night three/third video (highlights have been added to Table 4 to draw attention to those items found to have differences that are statistically significant). Of note is that the group watching the no-experience videos went up in median scores every week with five of the eight items (including three of the items in which a statistical significance was found on the third night), and did not finish lower on the third night than they were on the first night on any single item. By contrast, the group watching the experienced videos went down in median scores every week with three of the eight items (including two of the items in which a statistical significance was found on the third night), and finished higher on the third night than they were on the first night on only one item. Figure 4 shows an aggregate of the means for each night for each group.

Discussion and Future Studies

There was no statistically significant difference in believability or persuasiveness found for the third video between the students who watched the sequence starting with video 1A or 1B. Likewise, there was no statistically significant difference found for the second video between the two sets of students for believability or persuasiveness. The differences in the introductions, in this case, were not significant enough for the credibility of the content to be affected. Surprisingly, while there was much more variation in evaluation of persuasiveness as opposed to believability, there was not a statistically significant difference in either for the two groups related to the first video.

It did not matter which introduction students viewed, they evaluated the content similarly. It is conceivable that the students' thought the content must be both believable and persuasive or else the instructor would not have chosen to show it in class and the very presence of it elevated its importance enough to skew the results. It is also possible – though quite unlikely – that the content was good enough to lopsidedly outweigh the introduction with even the first video. A final possibility is that the topic of Amazon not collecting sales tax in the state had been in the news so much that students were aware of the issue before seeing the presentations.

The discovery of a difference with the third video implies that over time the students come to accept the content as important, possibly through repetition, and they may compensate for initial lower opinions by valuing it higher the more it is shown. In the normal classroom, there is a great quantity of content that is disseminated and shared and repetition is common: the more the students hear the message, the more all groups may come to evaluate it the same

Conclusions and Future Research

This study contributes to the literature by examining the relationship between credibility of content and the introduction of the presenter of that content. There are a number of areas where further/future research is warranted. Many possibilities were uncovered during the course of this project; however, due to design they could not be analyzed further.

Limitations of the Study

There were a number of limitations to the study. Results can be stated only as they apply to the videos and respondents studied. If the differences between the introductions, or even between the videos themselves (setting, lighting, clothing, etc.), had been more pronounced, it is possible that statistically significant differences may have been found.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Please describe your perceptions of the information provided to you by answering each of the following questions. For each question please circle on number on each scale that describes your perceptions.

In your opinion the claim made was:

|								
not at all believable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	highly believable
not at all true	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	absolutely true
not at all acceptable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	totally acceptable
not at all credible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very credible

Please describe your perceptions about the strength of the arguments presented in the message.

In your opinion the message arguments were:

very weak	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very strong
not very convincing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very convincing
not very powerful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very powerful
not very persuasive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	very persuasive

Thank you!

Figure 1 (Average age of students)
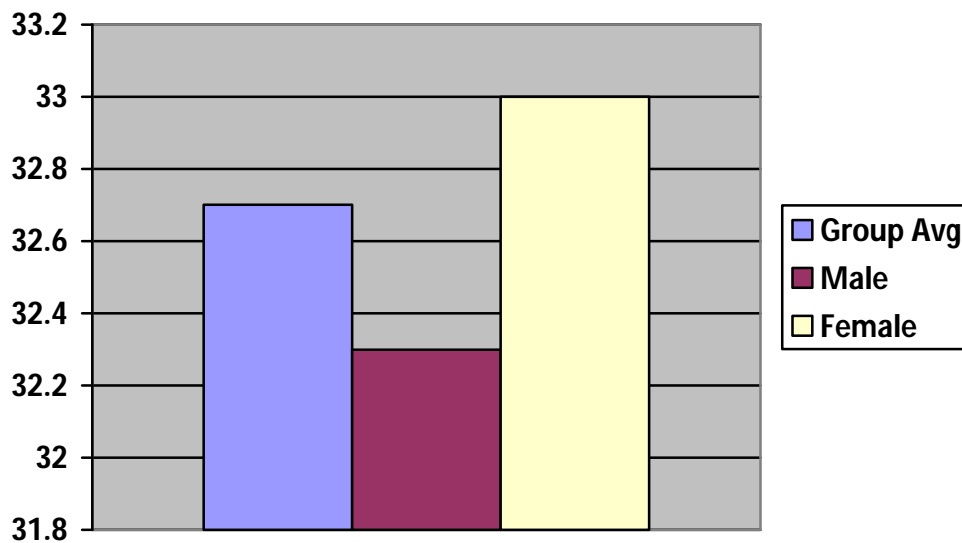
Table 1 (Believability results for night one)

Scale	Group	M	SD	t(62)	P
not at all believable/highly believable	No Experience	5.64	1.06	.156	.876
	Experience	5.60	.96		
not at all true/absolutely true	No Experience	5.36	1.04	.273	.786
	Experience	5.44	1.33		
not at all acceptable/totally acceptable	No Experience	4.88	1.28	1.44	.154
	Experience	5.36	1.38		
not at all credible/very credible	No Experience	5.21	1.13	1.35	.181
	Experience	5.60	1.15		

Table 2 (Persuasiveness results for night one)

Scale	Group	M	SD	t(81)	P
very weak/very strong	No Experience	5.41	1.16	.592	.556
	Experience	5.24	1.05		
not very convincing/very convincing	No Experience	5.38	1.23	.350	.727
	Experience	5.28	1.06		
not very powerful/very powerful	No Experience	4.82	1.25	.063	.950
	Experience	4.84	1.14		
not very persuasive/very persuasive	No Experience	5.15	1.20	1.15	.909
	Experience	5.12	1.05		

Table 3 (Believability/Persuasiveness results for night two)

Scale	Group	M	SD	t(62)	P
not at all believable/highly believable	No Experience	5.61	1.07	.927	.358
	Experience	5.35	1.11		
not at all true/absolutely true	No Experience	5.49	1.23	.171	.865
	Experience	5.44	1.04		
not at all acceptable/totally acceptable	No Experience	5.46	1.21	.096	.924
	Experience	5.44	1.04		
not at all credible/very credible	No Experience	5.61	1.22	.147	.883
	Experience	5.57	1.04		
very weak/very strong	No Experience	5.27	1.27	.157	.877
	Experience	5.22	1.20		
not very convincing/very convincing	No Experience	5.34	1.30	.147	.883
	Experience	5.39	1.31		
not very powerful/very powerful	No Experience	4.95	1.34	.015	.988
	Experience	4.96	1.33		
not very persuasive/very persuasive	No Experience	5.24	1.32	.435	.665
	Experience	5.39	1.27		

Table 4 (Believability/Persuasiveness results for night three)

| Scale	Group	M	SD	t(58)	P
not at all believable/highly believable	No Experience	5.81	.938	2.22	.030
	Experience	5.09	1.59		
not at all true/absolutely true	No Experience	5.54	1.07	.059	.953
	Experience	5.52	1.38		
not at all acceptable/totally acceptable	No Experience	5.68	1.08	2.30	.025
	Experience	4.87	1.63		
not at all credible/very credible	No Experience	5.64	1.06	1.30	.199
	Experience	5.17	1.77		
very weak/very strong	No Experience	5.54	1.07	3.09	.003
	Experience	4.48	1.59		
not very convincing/very convincing	No Experience	5.38	1.11	1.78	.081
	Experience	4.70	1.87		
not very powerful/very powerful	No Experience	5.21	1.16	2.12	.039
	Experience	4.48	1.53		
not very persuasive/very persuasive	No Experience	5.32	1.20	2.31	.024
	Experience	4.43	1.78		

Figure 2 (Race composition)
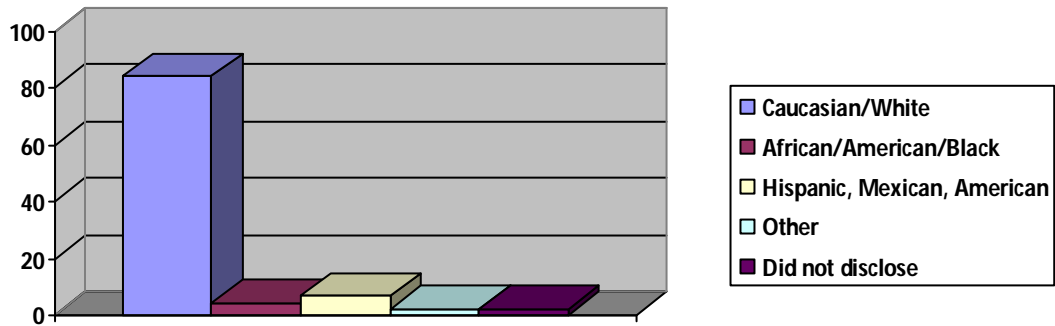
Figure 3 (Marital status)
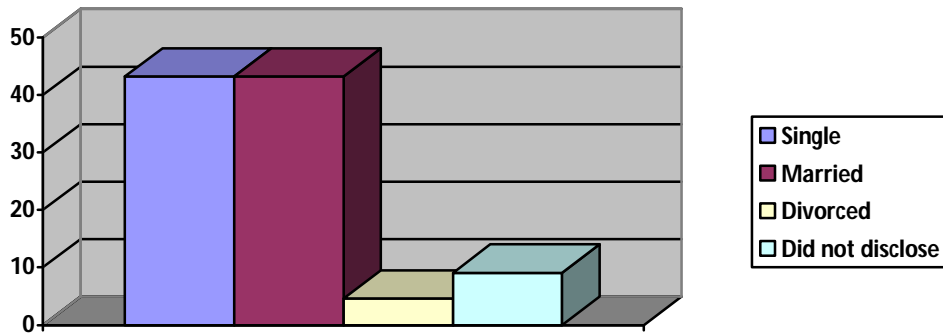
Figure 4 (Mean scores for each video)