Engaging vs. Plausible:
Headline Features that Predict News Sharing Decisions on Social Media

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Abstract

- Across two studies with about 5000 participants, **we investigate how features of news headlines predict social media sharing intentions.**
- We find that sharing is predicted by two key factors: an **"engaging"** factor mainly involving the headline's perceived importance and emotional arousal, and a **"plausible"** factor mainly involving the headline's perceived accuracy, familiarity, and political concordance.
- We also find substantial variation across individuals in the weight put on the two factors and this heterogeneity is correlated with various individual differences, such as cognitive reflection.

Results - Factor Analyses

- Explanatory factor analyses on the content dimensions:
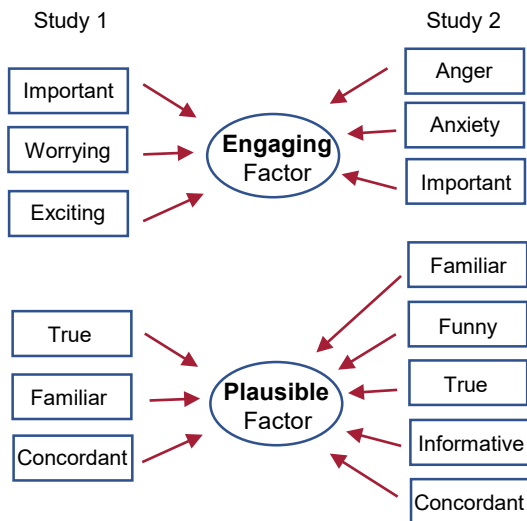
Results - Regressions

- OLS regressions with standardized coefficients and SEs clustered on subject:

	Dependent variable: Share	
	Study 1	Study2
Engaging Factor	0.460*** (0.007)	0.385*** (0.010)
Plausible Factor	0.287*** (0.006)	0.555*** (0.011)
Engaging × Plausible	0.120*** (0.005)	0.046*** (0.011)
(Intercept)	-0.021*** (0.009)	-0.007*** (0.014)
Observations	39,635	18,162
R²	0.366	0.540
Adjusted R2	0.366	0.540

Note. All variables have been standardized.
*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

- Estimate coefficients for each subject using Bayesian multilevel model; then predict subjects' coefficients using individual differences:

	Dependent variable:			
	Coefficient for Engaging Factor		Coefficient for Plausible Factor	
	Study 1	Study 2	Study 1	Study 2
Age	-0.0286 (0.019)	0.0442 (0.037)	-0.0496* (0.020)	0.0062 (0.037)
Gender	-0.0864*** (0.018)	-0.0241 (0.036)	-0.0263 (0.019)	0.0278 (0.036)
Education	-0.0288 (0.019)	-0.0597 (0.038)	0.0497* (0.020)	0.0118 (0.038)
Income	0.0076 (0.019)	-0.0421 (0.037)	-0.0465* (0.020)	-0.0506 (0.037)
CRT	-0.1914*** (0.020)	-0.1128** (0.043)	-0.0119 (0.021)	0.0832 (0.043)
Political Knowledge	-0.1314*** (0.020)	-0.0136 (0.045)	-0.0067 (0.021)	0.1678*** (0.045)
Conservatism	0.0630** (0.018)	0.1000* (0.039)	0.0901*** (0.019)	0.0605 (0.039)
Social Media Frequency	0.0004 (0.018)	-0.0039 (0.036)	0.0222 (0.019)	0.0434 (0.037)
(Intercept)	0.0000 (0.018)	0.0000 (0.036)	0.0000 (0.018)	0.000 (0.036)
Observations	2,892	767	2,892	767
R²	0.090	0.033	0.013	0.049
Adjusted R²	0.087	0.023	0.011	0.039

Note. All variables have been standardized. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Discussion

- Although one might assume that people share news they believe to be true, in fact empirical evidence suggests that false content may spread as much[1] or more[2] widely than true content. In addition, experimental evidence demonstrates a disconnect between accuracy judgments and sharing intentions[3] [4] .
- **Our results demonstrate the existence of two separate factors of headline features –**
  - **how engaging the news is**
  - **how plausible the news is**
  – that are both independent positive predictors of news sharing on social media.
- Based on the Bayesian multilevel models regressing sharing intention on the two factors for each subject, we provide evidence of substantial individual heterogeneity in the weight placed on these two factors, as well as predictors of that heterogeneity.
- We found evidence that **people with less cognitive reflection placed more weight on the engaging factor**, consistent with prior findings that reflection predicts sharing discernment[5].

References

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