

# Do b2b bloggers believe blogs? PR insights on blogger skepticism

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## Abstract

Research and practice have given a lot of attention to blogs which illustrates that it is increasingly becoming an important PR tool. When blogs comment on the activities, products, services and technologies of organisations it becomes an important communications tool. Blogs can be used as credible professional communication but it can also be subject to the same type of skepticism that traditional mass media encounters. This article presents the responses of 333 international active bloggers in the business-to-business (B2B) environment. The responses to blogging ethics as well as their skepticism towards blogging are discussed. We adapted a skepticism scale initially used to measure skepticism towards advertising to reflect skepticism towards blogging. We then relate skepticism towards blogging with the blogger's view on ethical issues. We also determine if skepticism varies among bloggers from different regions. The article concludes by identifying managerial implications and avenues for future research.

Keywords - Blogs, Public Relations, Business-to-Business, Skepticism

## Introduction

Blogs are an intriguing new tool in the PR professional's toolbox, combining as they do the customisation and addressability enabled by online technologies with the potential audience reach of traditional mass media. Blogs (short for "web logs") are websites, owned and written by individuals, who maintain regular commentaries and diaries that may include text, graphics and video, links to other blogs, and web pages, usually in reverse chronological order. While the great majority of blogs today serve merely as a way for individuals to record and report their thoughts and activities, a smaller number enable those with more expertise to commentate on advanced and specialized phenomena, subjects, industries, products, and services.

Blogs that comment on the activities of organisations, and evaluate their products, services and technologies may be associated with the type of credibility typically accredited to public relations activities, and indeed word-of-mouth communication in general. On the other hand, there is also the possibility that they can be subject to the same skepticism that most communication in mass media encounters: some audiences might tend to disbelieve blogs as they disbelieve many of the claims made in traditional advertising and mass marketing communication.

Thus far, the public relations (PR) community has been interested in the potential of new media technologies (cf. Croft, 2007; Hiebert, 2005) as PR devices, and the blogging phenomenon in particular has received attention. PR practitioners have been particularly concerned with the need to be cautious in using and responding to blogs (e.g. Marken, 2006a; Marken, 2006b), and have offered practical advice on the do's and don'ts of blogging (e.g. Schwartzman, 2005). More recently, Steyn, van Heerden, Pitt and Boshoff (2008) have provided insights into the activities of technical bloggers in the Asia-Pacific region, and in doing so, provide some answers to the general questions that lie behind the blogging phenomenon from a PR perspective. PR scholars have also investigated other aspects of blogging, including the use of blogs as relationship management tools during crises (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007); blogging and political processes (Sweetzer, 2007); and, the ethics of blogging (Smudde, 2005).

Kent's (2007) excellent overview of blogs as PR tools argues that blogs can be used more effectively by PR practitioners. He also claims that blogs are increasingly esteemed by members of the professional communication community as public relations tools. Yet there is little empirical evidence for this (cf. Xifra & Huertas, 2008). As far as we are aware, little research has thus far emerged as to the extent to which audiences believe what they read in blogs. Indeed, there is not even certainty about whether bloggers believe blogs. In short, to what extent are readers skeptical about the content of blogs? If general skepticism is low, then blogs are effective ways of communicating with broad

publics. If it is high, then PR professionals need to factor this into their use of blogs as tools of communication and persuasion. Another aspect referred to in this article is ethics. The ethical value associated with blogging is of importance. When bloggers doubt the ethical values of another blogger it will affect their level of skepticism towards the blogs. These are the issues we address in this paper.

We begin by considering the nature of skepticism toward advertising and marketing, and then outline the adaptation of a scale to measure skepticism for specific application to the measurement of the construct in blogging. Then we describe a study of skepticism using the amended scale among professional bloggers in a business-to-business (B2B) environment. The psychometric properties of the amended skepticism scale are addressed, and skepticism is tied to a number of other constructs and variables. We conclude by acknowledging the limitations of the research, the consequences for PR practice, and further research avenues suggested by the results.

### Skepticism toward advertising and toward blogging

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) have developed a scale to measure consumer skepticism toward advertising, which they view as a tendency towards disbelief of advertising claims. In line with Moore-Shay and Lutz (1988) they consider advertising skepticism as a stable, generalizable marketplace belief, constituting an important element of consumers' implicit theory of how the marketplace operates. Skepticism is not an absolute, but comes in degrees and can vary by individuals and groupings of individuals. It can also vary by situational elements. There is support for increased skepticism of advertising of experience (e.g. brand qualities that cannot be determined before purchased) versus search (e.g. brand qualities that can be determined before purchased by inspection) type goods (Ford, Smith & Swasy, 1990).

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) provide a model that indicates the nomological net that can be expected of this construct. In terms of antecedents they propose that certain personality traits like cynicism and personal self-esteem together with consumption experiences reflected in age and education are likely to have a direct effect on advertising skepticism. In turn skepticism is seen as influencing and being influenced by an individual's attitude toward marketing in general and advertising in particular. These elements are believed to influence a customer's advertising information processing and advertising appeal. A number of variables are proposed as moderating the link to consequences. These include both individual (such as e.g. knowledge/expertise /motivation/ involvement) and situational (such as e.g. product/claim type) factors.

It is clear that skepticism has a wider application context than just advertising. This study seeks to investigate the relevance of the advertising skepticism measure developed by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998), in the context of blogging, as a new media tool. Is it able to capture the attitude of

skepticism among bloggers, if the items are suitably amended to fit the context of blogging? Are relationships with certain variables in the expected direction? To confirm these issues we focus on:

- 1 The link between a blogger's skepticism and their ethical considerations of signaling to other bloggers the association the blogger might have to a particular organization or employer when posting a blog. In simple terms if a blogger is him/herself skeptical about blogging, and they received payment from a firm for posting positive product reviews on their blog, they would be less likely to signal this association on their blog.
- 2 Whether skepticism among bloggers varies among the different regions of the world. Here we expect no difference.

### Methodology

The research described here was part of a larger international study of bloggers in the B2B environment. These bloggers were all identified as contributing with reasonable regularity commenting, on products, services and technologies that were typically targeted at other organisations rather than consumers. A total of 800 bloggers from the database of a large global technology PR firm were selected for the survey. 400 of these were identified as coming from across the Asia Pacific region, and the other 400 were from North America and Western Europe. The individuals were contacted by means of email and invited to participate in a short survey. No monetary incentive was offered; however, a copy of the final survey findings was offered to those who completed the survey. Surveys were conducted in English in all countries. However in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Spain, and France respondents had the option to use the a locally translated survey.

Among the items included in the survey was an adaptation of the Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) skepticism scale, specifically reworded to reflect skepticism toward blogs (the amended items are shown in Table 1). These were scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = I disagree strongly through 7 = I agree strongly. Because of the interest in the PR community with regards to ethical issues and blogging (Smudde, 2005) we were also concerned with the ethical perceptions of bloggers on a number of issues, particularly regarding bloggers making positive posts in return for some sort of compensation. Our intention was to determine the extent to which respondents believed that bloggers should acknowledge corporate sponsorship for product reviews, advertorials, posts that support a blog's advertisers, or receiving incentives or gifts. These issues were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = I disagree strongly, through 5 = I agree strongly.

By the cutoff date, 333 usable responses had been received, for an effective response rate of 41.6%. All of these individuals were active bloggers who regularly commented on technology, products, services, news, and lifestyles; whose opinions were regarded as influential in these fields; and who were targeted as prominent commentators by PR firms and departments in these fields. This is not intended to be a representative sample of all B2B bloggers across these regions but to provide us with an initial understanding of this type of blogger. Responses by region of the world were as follows: Asia-Pacific, 178 (53.5%), and Europe-North America, 155 (46.5%).

## Results

In this section, we start by describing the respondents, and then summarizing their responses to the blogging ethics items. Then we provide descriptive statistics for the blogging skepticism items, proceed to test the psychometric properties of the proposed skepticism scale, and look at how blogger skepticism is related to the need to signal an interest when blogging and whether blogging varies by broad geographic region.

The responses to the blogging ethics items are summarized in Table 1 – the mean of responses on each item, as well as the standard deviation, are provided. As can be seen from Table 1, bloggers generally agreed that blogs should acknowledge support from companies about whom they wrote.

Table 1: Bloggers views on some ethical issues in pr – descriptive statistics (n=333)

Item (where 5 = I agree strongly)	Mean	Standard deviation
Bloggers should acknowledge corporate sponsorship for product reviews	4.12	1.14
Bloggers should acknowledge corporate sponsorship for advertorials	4.06	1.23
Bloggers should acknowledge corporate sponsorship for posts that support a blog's advertisers	4.07	1.18
Bloggers should acknowledge corporate sponsorship for gifts or incentives	3.92	1.34

The wording that makes up the blogger's skepticism construct together with descriptive statistics in terms of means and standard deviations derived from the sample under consideration are shown in Table 2. The highest scores obtained at 4.8 on a 7-point scale are for the question that states that the 'aim of blogging is to inform the reader' while the lowest score at 4.0 is for the statement that 'blogging is truth well told'.

Table 2: The blogging skepticism scale - descriptive statistics (n=333)

Item (where 7 = I agree strongly)	Mean	Standard deviation
1. One can depend on getting the truth in most technical and product review blogs	4.6	1.4
2. The aim of blogging is to inform the reader	4.8	1.6
3. I believe that most blogs are informative	4.2	1.5
4. Most blogs are generally truthful	4.5	1.4
5. Blogs are a reliable source of information about the quality and performance of products	4.8	1.4
6. Blogging is truth well told	4.0	1.5
7. In general, blogs present a true picture of the products and services they write about	4.5	1.5
8. A reader can feel accurately informed after reading most blogs	4.4	1.5
9. Most blogs provide readers and consumers with essential information	4.4	1.4

To test the dimensionality of the construct the covariance matrix for the nine items in the measure was computed and treated as input to a confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL. A model for a single dimension as proposed by the original authors was tested and provided a Chi Square of 68.25 with 27 degrees of freedom ( $p < .01$ ) compared to the null model that results in a Chi Square of 2793.32 with 36 degrees of freedom ( $p < .01$ ). A null model assumes no relationships among the items that make up the measure. While these results indicate a marked improvement of the proposed model to the null the best indices to further consider are the Normed Fit Index (NFI) and the Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) that are also based on a comparison of the proposed model with the null (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). The NFI is computed by relating the difference of the Chi Square value for a proposed model to the Chi Square value of the Null model. The NNFI is a variant that in addition takes into account the loss in degrees of freedom that result from a more complex model. A value of .98 was obtained for both these two indices. In addition the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) and Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) at .96 and .93 respectively indicate a good approximation to the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999). In addition computation of Average Variance Extracted and Reliability (Fornell & Lacker, 1981) at .83 and 0.85 respectively are above the recommended 0.5 level while Cronbach alpha stands at 0.89 which exceeds the 0.7 threshold and is therefore

acceptable (Nunnally, 1967). Taken together these results provide support for the dimensionality of the skepticism construct as a unidimensional concept, as it was in the case of advertising, in the original work of Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998). This means that all the item scores for an individual can be summed to represent that individual's level of skepticism toward blogging. The mean total score for blogging skepticism among respondents was 40.0 (sd 9.7).

To test the two questions raised above we start by running a correlation between the sum of the items that make up the blogger's skepticism measure with the single item measure for the extent to which respondents agree on the need to signal to other bloggers their association to a particular organization or employer when posting to a blog. Correlation analysis provides no statistically significant relationship when posting is of a generic nature ( $r = .048$ ;  $p > .05$ ). However, in line with expectations, when the specific question related to posts about product reviews ( $r = .17$ ;  $p < .01$ ), advertorials ( $r = .12$ ;  $p < .05$ ), posts that support a blog's advertisers ( $r = .12$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and incentives or gifts ( $r = .172$ ;  $p < .01$ ), all the correlations are significant.

The second question sought to determine whether blogging skepticism among respondents differed by geographical areas. The sum of the blogging skepticism items were used in an independent sample t-test made up of two categories Asia-pacific and Europe-north America. Results are as expected and there are no differences in blogging skepticism between the two geographical regions (mean - Asia pacific = 39.9; mean North America - Europe = 40.1;  $F = .485$ ,  $p > .05$ ;  $t = -.215$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

### Limitations

Like all studies, the research described here has a number of limitations. First, while the Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) skepticism scale performed well in its early development and in subsequent studies in advertising (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000; Obermiller, Spangenberg & MacLachlan, 2005), and while it demonstrated reliability, it should still be remembered that the scale was not specifically designed to measure skepticism toward blogging. More work is needed to develop a measure specifically for skepticism towards blogs. Second, while the scale demonstrates internal consistency (or reliability) in this study, the current work's design does not permit any rigorous establishment of its validity. Third, the current study measures the skepticism toward blogging of bloggers themselves, and not the targets of blogs – decision makers, managers, shareholders, suppliers and consumers, and customers – indeed a wide range of publics. Finally, the current study does not attempt to tie skepticism toward blogging to any other well defined multi-item constructs in a rigorous way, which would not only shed further light on the manifestations of the blogging skepticism issue, but also on its role in a broader context of behaviours.

## Conclusion

In summary, the results of the study reported here indicate the following: In this sample serious B2B bloggers from the Asia-Pacific and North America-Europe regions seem to have fairly high ethical standards. The respondents believe that bloggers should acknowledge corporate sponsorship for product reviews, advertorials, posts that support a blog's advertisers, and gifts or incentives. The Blogging Skepticism scale, adapted from the Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) advertising skepticism scale performed well, and seems to provide a reliable indication of the degree of skepticism a blogger holds toward the blogs of others. The scale is also unidimensional, which means that an individual's scores on the individual items that make up the scale can be summed to provide an overall measure of skepticism. In general, B2B bloggers are fairly skeptical of the blogs of others. Skepticism toward blogging is also positively related to a blogger's views on ethical issues: the more skeptical a blogger is about the blogs of others, the more they believe that bloggers should acknowledge corporate sponsorship for product reviews, advertorials, posts that support a blog's advertisers, and gifts or incentives. Finally, there are no significant differences in overall skepticism between bloggers in the Asia-Pacific and North-America-Europe.

The findings of the study have a number of implications for PR practitioners. The study provides practitioners with a usable measure of skepticism that can be applied across a wide range of situations – it can be used to measure skepticism of readers, customers, managers, employees and so forth. Second, the study suggests a reasonably high level of personal ethics among B2B bloggers, which PR firms and their client organisations should take cognizance of in dealing with and approaching bloggers to report content on their behalf. Third, there is a relationship between a blogger's level of skepticism and their perceptions of what is ethical in writing a blog and what is not. While we are not really able to argue the directionality of this relationship, both possibilities have interesting implications. If a blogger had high ethical values, it is possible that they are skeptical about the blogs of others, perhaps because they perceive the ethical values of other bloggers to be of a lower standard than their own. Alternatively, where bloggers view the blogs of others with high skepticism they may feel that their own higher ethical values make their own blogs more credible. Practitioners would do well to think about the possible consequences of these inter-relationships.

The findings of this study suggest a number of avenues for future research by PR scholars. First, further refinement of the blog skepticism scale might be both interesting and desirable as the context of blogging might be different to that of advertising. The current scale has been adapted directly from an existing measure designed for another context, and while it seems applicable for this context, it is possible that there are nuances to, and elements of, blogging



skepticism that have been missed. Second, and on a related point, it would be worthwhile to explore blogging skepticism by means of an in-depth, qualitative approach, in order to provide context on the phenomenon. Discussions with bloggers and the recipients of blogs could provide richness and insight that a survey such as this is unable to do. Third, with the exception of links to ethical issues, and a test of possible cultural/natural differences among bloggers, this study has not attempted to link blogging skepticism to any other constructs. It would be worthwhile to investigate the antecedents to blogging skepticism (what causes it), as well as its consequences.

PR academics (e.g. Hiebert, 2005) have noted the effects that new technologies such as the Internet have had on the scholarship and practice of PR in the recent past, and will have in the future. It is likely that new social media such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter will amplify these effects, and blogs will also continue to play a major role. Xifra and Huertas (2008) note this when they argue that in the rapid development of blogs there are still two areas that must be boosted: "Firstly, interactive resources in general should be further developed on blogs, and particularly their capacity to allow more external comments from users." (p. 275) They also note: "Secondly, the professional public relations sector, and specifically some firms in that sector, should lead the field in making the most of the communicative resources that blogs encompass and in fully developing their potential as a knowledge management tool in the practice of excellent public relations." (p.275) Blogs have the potential to change the face of PR; however, it is possible that the impact they have might be directly related to the levels of skepticism in which they are held.

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