

## Sharing Fear via Facebook: A Lesson in Political Public Relations

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Our study compared the use of fear messages on Facebook by Barack Obama and Mitt Romney during the 2012 U.S. presidential elections. Results show that written fear messages embedded in photographs posted on Facebook by both candidates affected the degree to which those photographs were shared. More specifically, photographs containing written fear messages were shared more often than photographs not containing written fear messages. Furthermore, while the challenging candidate, Mitt Romney, used more photographs containing fear messages, the increase in shares was consistent across candidates. Implications regarding information distribution within communities, public relations practitioners specializing in political campaigning and society as a whole are discussed.

**Keywords:** Content analysis, social media, 2012 election, protection, motivation theory

An informed public is essential for a democracy to function, particularly when the citizenry believes that the information they are consuming is accurate. Traditionally, citizens have acquired the information required to make informed decisions about political candidates, current issues and the policies they may support from traditional media (Althaus, 1998; Bartels, 1996). However, today, citizens are increasingly turning to social media (Olmstead, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2011). Americans spend more time on social networks and blogs than on any other type of website (Nielsen, 2012).

The emergence of social networking sites, such as Facebook, has not only allowed the public to encounter and discuss political information in a novel way, but has also made it easier for public relations practitioners, especially those specializing in politics, to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers and disseminate their candidate's messages directly to the audiences they want to influence. The ability to deliver uncensored messages directly to their desired audiences allows public relations practitioners to spread messages on behalf of their candidates unhindered. One particularly potent public relations strategy is the use of already established communities on Facebook to inspire fear through photographs. This is of particular interest as Facebook can act as a multiplier by reaching not only the audience that was already following the audience that was already following the candidates, but also their friends that previously remained unreached. A potential consequence of using Facebook to

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disseminate and promote fear messages throughout receivers' communities is that even more people will vote for the candidate with the most convincing fear message rather than the candidate with the soundest policies.

To better understand the potential effects of this strategy, we analyzed photographs from the Facebook pages of both U.S. presidential candidates, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, during the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign to determine how photographs containing written fear messages regarding a potential threat from the opposing candidate's policies were shared on Facebook. The results of the present study have wide ranging implications for theory and practice. The results may help to explain why some messages travel through social networks more widely than others. Furthermore, this study is of high practical value for public relations practitioners seeking effective strategies to spread messages on behalf of their clients and can also be used by communication and political science researchers as a base from which to measure the ability of other campaigns to deliver their messages to potential voters. Results of the present study can also be replicated in other fields such as health communication, advertising, and journalism as they relate to the perceptions and behavior changes due to the distribution of content through social media.

### Theoretical Framework

When explaining Protection Motivation Theory (PMT) Rogers (1975) asserts that when faced with a fearful message, people will assess the probability that the threat of not acting will have on their lives and therefore try to protect them by taking actions to prevent the potential threat from becoming reality. The principles of PMT have been utilized in various types of campaigns ranging from the environment (Neuwirth, Dunwoody, & Griffin, 2000; Rogers & Prentice-Dunn, 1997) and nuclear disarmament activism (Neuwirth, Dunwoody, & Griffin, 2000; Axelrod & Newton, 1991) to condom use (Neuwirth, Dunwoody, & Griffin, 2000; Tanner, Hunt, & Eppright, 1991; Eppright, Tanner, & Hunt, 1994) and physical exercise (Neuwirth, Dunwoody, & Griffin, 2000; Stanley & Maddux, 1986; Fruin, Pratt, & Owen, 1992), as well as computer and Internet security (Anderson & Agarwal, 2010). Typically, messages following PMT not only portray a particular threat, but also a particular way of action that the receiver could take in order to prevent the threat. Floyd, Prentice-Dunn, and Rogers (2000) conclude that facilitating PMT is an effective strategy because of its ability to arouse and direct the receiver of a message toward a particular activity.

This makes the strategic use of PMT very appealing for public relations practitioners. They can employ PMT to effectively direct attention toward a particular topic while at the same time suggesting to the message receiver what he or she needs to do in order to intervene and prevent the perceived threat from becoming reality. In the context of the present study, the ability to create a message fearful enough to arouse an individual to share it with their own Facebook communities is key for public relations practitioners who are looking for assistance from other interested parties in spreading messages for their political candidate clients. However, while it has long been recognized that political campaigns are designed to prey on voters' emotions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1965), researchers have only recently found support for the notion that fear messages affect behaviors. Cueing fear does not only facilitate persuasion (Brader, 2005), but "fear-inducing charges made by a credible

source also reduce the attacked candidate's actual vote count" (Calantone & Warshaw, 1985, p. 627). In a meta-analytic review of negative political campaigns, which often include fear appeals, Lau, Sigelman and Brown Rovner (2007) found that, despite some inconsistencies, in more than two out of every three studies on this topic, a decline in affect for the target candidate of a negative campaign occurred. Furthermore, negative campaigns have been found "to be more memorable and stimulative of knowledge about the campaign" (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007, p. 1176). However, Lloyd (2008) concluded that political brands' use of negative campaigning and fear appeals generally offers only short-term gains.

### *Fear Messages, Photographs and Social Media*

Despite the wide-ranging uses of PMT and the broad adoption of social networking sites among both the public and the political realm, researchers have yet to investigate how fear messages might be used by political campaigns on social networking sites such as Facebook. This is especially true when it comes to written fear messages within photographs. Generally, individuals believe that the events portrayed in a photograph are an accurate representation of reality (Brosius, Donsbach, & Birk, 1996) and this belief allows them to imagine that they, on some level, are experiencing the event occurring in the picture (Harriman & Lucaites, 2002). If the stimuli (e.g. photographs) are emotional enough, the message recipient may feel compelled to take all possible steps to alleviate the fear from becoming a reality. In this case one step would be to share the message with their communities or people they associate with in an effort to convince them to vote for their preferred candidate.

The likelihood of this occurring is greater when the power of text is combined with images. According to Hallahan (1999) the combination of words and photographs helps make a complicated idea easier to understand. This combination also makes it easier to remember the words associated with the pictures (Kulhavy et al., 1993), which in this case is the threat. Therefore, including a written fear message within a photograph is a more powerful tool in terms of inducing fear, and may be more successful in encouraging message recipients to share the threatening message.

### **Hypothesis**

H1: Photographs from both Barak Obama and Mitt Romney's Facebook pages that contain written fear messages will be shared more often than photographs from both Barak Obama and Mitt Romney's Facebook pages without written fear messages.

### **Definitions**

Generally speaking, "fear is a negatively valenced emotion, accompanied by a high level of arousal, and is elicited by a threat that is perceived to be significant and personally relevant" (Witte 1992; Easterling & Leventhal, 1989; Lang, 1984; Ortony & Turner, 1990). Threats can include the impeding danger of actual harm to our general lifestyles and freedoms (Cialdini, 2001). In this study, the stimuli, a photograph containing a fear message, is presented in a threatening "this-can-happen-to-you" manner (Ray & Wilkie, 1970) and tries to make the threat applicable to the respondent (Witte, 1992). Furthermore, fear messages in the PMT framework should suggest a specific response, such as engaging in a specific behavior to prevent the threat from becoming reality. Neuwirth, Dunwoody, and Griffin (2000) concluded

that a fear message must be instructive, meaning the recipient of the message must be able to conclude that the probability of the threat occurring is high and, in order to avoid the potential consequences, they must act on the advice given or implied by the messenger. In our study, the fear message implied that sharing the picture to encourage others to vote for the non-threatening candidate was a potential way of avoiding the danger stated in the message/ the opposing candidate to reach power.

In sum, this study identified a fear message as any photograph containing a message that suggests unfavorable consequences for the individual viewing the photograph if the opposing candidate is elected. More specifically, fear messages in the present study suggested that a vote for the opposing candidate would lead to him enacting policies suggested in the photograph's text. This should motivate the individual to share the photograph with their communities to help spread the word in an effort to avoid the fearful consequence.

### **Method**

Content analysis was used for this study because it allowed for the entire population of photographs containing written fear messages on both Mitt Romney and Barack Obama's Facebook pages to be completely scrutinized. Content analysis enabled us to objectively examine the population of photographs and determine which pictures embedded with text contained fear messages. Content analysis was also appropriate because it was the only method to determine if messages are consistent with the definitions derived from PMT, which states that fear messages should contain an actionable solution suggested in the message to avoid the fear-inducing object or action from occurring. The main limitation of this design is that it cannot predict whether or not these fear messages actually resulted in altered perceptions about the candidates and ultimately reader's voting behavior. Such changes in voting behavior could include for these partisans, not only a greater likelihood to vote themselves, but also a greater likelihood of trying to persuade neutral parties to their point of view in order to change their voting behavior as well.

Data analyzed in the present study consisted of a total of 395 photographs from Mitt Romney's and Barack Obama's Facebook pages that contained words. The photographs selected for Mitt Romney were posted on his campaign's Facebook page from August 27, 2012 (the official start date of the Republican National Convention) through November 5, 2012 (the day before election day). The photographs selected for Barack Obama were posted on his campaign's Facebook page from September 4, 2012 (the official start of the Democratic National Convention) through November 5, 2012. The start dates of the conventions were chosen because that was when both men officially became their party's presidential candidate. The end date of November 5, 2012 was chosen because it was the last official day of the campaign as Election Day was November 6, 2012<sup>i</sup>.

### *Reliability*

An inter-coder reliability test was conducted on the entire population of 395 photographs for whether or not they had a written fear message. The population consisted of 109 photographs from Barack Obama's Facebook page and 286 photographs from Mitt Romney's Facebook page. Both Scott's pi tests correcting for chance agreement and percentage of agreement were conducted. The Scott's pi score was .96. The percentage agreement was 98 per cent.

### *Validity*

One question that arises from the study is whether the words and topics making up the fear messages within the photographs were fear inducing. While the present study could not assess whether individuals who viewed photographs embedded with written fear messages actually experienced fear, prior research suggests that in order to be fear inducing, a message doesn't have to contain gruesome content (O'Keefe, 1990), but rather must speak to a critical issue apparent during the time and the environment in which the message is presented.

Zaluzec (2010) found that campaign advertisements in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections did exactly that by using appeals that reflected the main issues of their respective time periods. In the case of the present study, the messages used by both political candidates included threats such as "unemployment will rise", "jobs will not be created", and "freedoms will be lost" if the opposing candidate won the election. All of these topics were highly relevant to the American people during the time of the election. A USA-Today/Gallup poll (USA-Today/Gallup, 2012) conducted during this period of time found that Americans were most worried about unemployment and federal budget deficits, and viewed the economic crisis as the most important problem facing the country. More specifically, in the months prior to the 2012 presidential election, 72 percent of Americans named an economic issue when asked about America's biggest challenges (USA-Today/Gallup, 2012). Therefore, it's reasonable to assume that a message emphasizing the prevalent worries of Americans will lead to an increased perception of significance and personal relevance of the issue under question and therefore will induce fear. The higher the perceived threat, the greater the fear experience (Witte & Allen, 2000) and in turn the greater the motivation of individuals to act in order to protect themselves (Rimal & Real, 2003).

In addition, the Facebook environment is a particularly good fit to induce fear reactions. Ray and Wilkie (1970) state that the impact of a fear message is greatest, when the environment in which it is presented is supportive of the message's recommendation (in this case, sharing the photograph to persuade others to vote), if the action is not too difficult to undertake and if there is little time delay between the message's recommendation and the according action. All those characteristics apply to Facebook. Finally, studies have shown that political advertisements, when they appeal to the emotions of the viewer, can "change the way citizens get involved and make choices" (Brader, 2005, p. 388). Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that (i) the messages identified as fear messages in the present study actually induced fear, and (ii) that those messages have a better chance of being shared.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study examined the entire population of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney's Facebook photographs containing words either written within the photograph, on a poster, body part, food item, or nature from August 27, 2012 through November 5, 2012 for Mitt Romney and from September 4, 2012 through November 5, 2012 for Barack Obama. The population of content consists of 395 photographs containing written messages. 109 of the photographs come from Barack Obama (42 of them were coded as containing a fear message) and 286 come from Mitt Romney (including 144 fear messages). The dependent variable for the present study is the total number of Facebook shares associated with each photograph as it

is displayed with the photograph on Facebook.

During data collection, photographs were stored as screen shots just as they appeared if a person had seen them on Facebook, including the number of shares associated with each posted photograph. Each photograph was saved on a secure hard drive in two separate groups entitled, “Mitt Romney Facebook Photographs” and “Barack Obama Facebook Photographs.” Each photograph was then saved and labeled with its own unique number and identifier, until all photographs were assigned an identification number, allowing for any disagreement to be easily traced.

The hypothesis of the present study was assessed by comparing the mean of shares for both fear and non-fear messages. However, the study also assessed the size of the effect that fear messages had on the average number of shares. To assess the size of this effect, the number of shares of no-fear messages was used as a standard for comparison, then the percentage increase or decrease in the average number of shares was computed based on the average amount of shares associated with fear messages (Zeldes & Fico, 2010). For example, if the average number of shares for a photograph without a written fear message was 20, and the average number of shares for a photograph containing a written fear message was 30, then the photograph containing the written fear message got a 50% boost in the average number of shares.

$$\text{Example of effect size calculation } \frac{30 - 20}{20} = \frac{10}{20} = 50\%$$

These assessments were first performed for all photographs and then separately for each of the candidates’ photographs to illuminate any differences. In addition, the mean of shares for both fear and non-fear messages was calculated for both candidates individually and then compared. Because the study used the total population of relevant pictures, inferential statistics were unnecessary.

## Results

The first goal of this study was to determine whether or not photographs containing written fear messages were shared more often than those without written fear messages. Results show that the mean of the shares for photographs from both candidates’ Facebook pages with written fear messages (11,370) is higher than the mean of shares for photographs from both candidates’ Facebook pages without written fear messages (8,487). More specifically, photographs containing fear messages were shared 34% more than photographs without a fear message. These results lend support for the main hypothesis of this research.

Table 1. Mean of shares across candidates

	Fear Message	No Fear Message
Mean Shares	11,370	8,487
N (Messages)	186	209

When looking at the individual candidates separately, it became evident that there were considerable differences in terms of how frequently both candidates used photographs containing written fear messages on their Facebook pages. The present study finds that while the incumbent, Barack Obama, used fear messages in 38.5 per cent of the posted photographs, the challenger, Mitt Romney, used fear messages in 54.4 per cent of the analyzed photographs. Interestingly though, the effect on sharing was consistent across candidates. Taking the varying audience sizes of both candidates into account<sup>1</sup>, photographs containing a fear message were consistently shared more often than photographs without a fear message. More specifically, photographs containing written fear messages were almost equally more shared among both candidates' communities. The effect size for Romney's photographs with fear messages was on average shared 61.2% more often than those without fear messages, while the effect size for photographs with written fear messages on Obama's Facebook page was shared 59.4 per cent more often than photographs without a written fear message.

Table 2. Shares per 10,000 Facebook fans

	Obama	Romney
Fear, M (SD)	8.5 (5.5)	5.3 (9.3)
No Fear, M (SD)	5.4 (13)	3.3 (5.8)
N (Fear, No Fear)	109 (42, 67)	285 (144, 141)

### **Discussion and Future Research**

The results of the study lend further support for Protection Motivation Theory, specifically, the applicability of PMT to the realm of political campaigns' use of photographs within social media, and especially Facebook. This not only broadens the range of this established theory, but also potentially helps improve the understanding of human behavior in general. Testing the applicability of established theories from other domains (e.g. interpersonal communication, advertising) in a new environment is an important step in understanding the dynamics that drive human behavior within a world of social media. Essentially, the present study demonstrates that a visual fear message can have a significant effect in social media communities in terms of sharing the message, thus allowing for the message to spread farther among members of the community and potentially beyond.

Even more intriguing, this effect seems to be universal among different communities. Despite a considerable difference in the amount of fear messages used by each candidate (38.5 per cent for Obama, 54.4 per cent for Romney), the effect sizes were nearly identical for both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. This indicates that visual fear messages resonate equally well with both the democratic and republican communities - and that they might be general for even broader parts of the population. Therefore, this finding might help explain why some messages spread through a social media environment much more quickly and farther than others. It shows that some messages have more potential to "go viral" due to certain characteristics inherent to the message, and that one of those characteristics can be the presence of a visual fear message. Finally, the universality of these results contradicts prior research that suggested "negative campaigning should be relatively effective for

challengers, while positive campaigning is more effective for incumbents" (Lau & Pomper, 2002, p. 74).

However, while the results of the present study show a significant increase in shares for photographs containing a fear message and therefore provide support for Protection Motivation Theory, the limitations inherent in the use of content analysis apply. More specifically, the conducted research cannot determine whether individuals who viewed fear messages actually experienced fear. In order to shed more light on this phenomenon, future studies could start with analyzing the comments associated with the visual fear messages to test whether they contain linguistic indicators of fear. This would provide further support for PMT.

### **Implications for Public Relations**

From a strategic perspective, any future political candidate who wants to broadly disseminate his or her message would be wise to do so with a visual fear message because, as results indicate, there is a higher probability of that message being spread (e.g. shared) to other Facebook communities. This allows the candidate not only to be more memorable (Lau et al., 2007), but also to have his or her position on an issue seen by more people than the intended target audience. Additionally, public relations practitioners can utilize visual fear messages in the same manner in order to influence their intended audiences, as well as to enlist community members to help spread their messages. The presence of a written fear message in a photograph seemed to play a role in peoples' decisions to share that photograph with their friends allowing the message to be seen by significantly more individuals. More specifically, photographs that contained written fear messages were shared far more frequently than those without a written fear message. The conclusion is that fear messaging via Facebook works and is a very powerful tool, especially when combined with a photograph.

The results of this study necessitates further study regarding the role photographs play in the persuasion process and whether or not it is the written message or the image itself that plays a greater role. Experiments could expose individuals to different message/photograph combinations and see whether it is certain properties of the picture itself, the written fear message, or the combination of both that promotes sharing. This could ultimately help public relations practitioners to develop a more focused and cogent strategy for future political campaigns. Another limitation of the present study is that content analysis cannot predict the behaviors of individuals that took place outside of the manifest content analyzed in the present study. In this case, it remains unclear whether being exposed to a fear message on Facebook ultimately led to a change in voting behavior. Future research could employ survey methodology to access whether a change in individuals' intended voting behavior occurred.

Finally, while this study has shown that in a presidential campaign, photographs containing written fear messages will be shared more often than photographs without written fear messages, more studies need to be done to determine if this is the case with other political, social advocacy and public relations campaigns. Additionally, it would be interesting to determine if the increased sharing is a result of American culture or if this is a human behavioral phenomenon.

### Notes

- <sup>i</sup> A discrepancy was discovered with ten Obama photographs collected by both researchers that may have been the result of where the data was collected. One researcher downloaded photographs while in Michigan and the other in Minnesota. It either means that each state was targeted with different photographs and written messages or that this was simply a mechanical error in downloading pictures. However, the amount of shares was minimal and had very little impact on the results. There were no discrepancies with any of the Romney photographs.
- <sup>ii</sup> The Facebook pages of both candidates displayed a different amount of users who clicked the “LIKE” button on the main Facebook page of the candidates. While Barack Obama’s Facebook page had 33,393,795 fans by the end of the sampling period, the page of Mitt Romney indicated 12,006,137 fans. Since only those Facebook users who are fans of a particular page are able to see the candidate’s posts in their personal news feed, the potential audiences for both candidates - and subsequently the number of people who have the ability to share a candidates’ message - differ between Obama and Romney. In order to enable comparisons across candidates, the ratio of people who actually shared a photograph was calculated from the potential audience by dividing the number of people who shared a photograph by the number of people that are fans of that candidate’s page.

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