Managing Followers' Impressions through Social Media: The social contagion effect

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Leaders are public figures. Whether or not a leader is deemed to be effective depends partly on others' views about the leader's capability (Yukl, 2013). Stakeholders' impression about a leader is especially important if they play a vital role in granting desired outcomes to those who impress them positively (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Basically, leaders need to impression manage to create perceptions of leadership effectiveness.

Leaders today are expected to view social media as a personal toolbox for refining their practice of leadership (Samuel, 2012). Social media allows a social presence that enables the forming of impressions of others about the user (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and reinforces the integrity of a leader in managing his or her followers (Ann, 2012). Such opportunities have encouraged leaders to open up towards the possibility of using social media to manage follower impressions about them. Fundamentally, it is posited that leaders can enhance their leadership by embracing connectivity through social media (Balas, et al. 2011; Samuel, 2012).

However, leaders should realise that impression management (IM) through social media may not work in a similar manner as when used in a more conventional context (Lim, Chidambaram, & Carte, 2008). We posit that IM through social media may be especially perplexing due to the "social contagion" effect. This effect mirrors the act of subconsciously imitating the behaviour of others (Vishwanath 2014). Followers' response towards leader's social media posting has the power to influence others to share similar sentiments. This contagion effect may thwart the attempt of leaders to depict a particular image through social media.

We are not aware of any study that has explored implication of IM through social media on perceived leader effectiveness. Hence, this study intends to address this gap. The objective of this study is two-fold: (1) To investigate the influence of IM tactics (ingratiation, enhancement, exemplification, and supplication) on followers' perception of leader effectiveness (trust towards leader, leaders' network building skills and interpersonal influence); (2) To determine the moderating influence of the social contagion effect on the above mentioned relationship.

Method

This study used an experimental design to evaluate the effect of IM tactics employed by leaders through social media on followers' impression about leaders' effectiveness. Before developing the experimental sites, we explored the sites of prominent corporate and political leaders. We categorized the postings in accordance with the Jones and Pittman (1982) model of impression management and used this initial finding to facilitate the development of mock Facebook pages for made-up leaders.

Each page included leader-generated contents which incorporated specific IM tactics and other user's responses to the content generated by the leader (to test for the social contagion effect). This resulted in a 2 (type of leader: Business; Political) X 4 (impression management tactic: Ingratiation; Enhancement; Exemplification; Supplication) X 2 (nature of comment: Positive; Negative) between participants full factorial design. Respondents were asked to view the mock Facebook sites for a fictitious leader before responding to the survey which included manipulation check items and measures of leader effectiveness.

Results and Discussion

Prior to testing hypotheses, a manipulation check was conducted. Apart from the Ingratiation-Political Leader scenario, the experimental manipulation was a success in all other scenarios with the mean value for the specific tactic being significantly higher for the respective site (see Table 1). Hence, the data for the Ingratiation-Political Leader scenario was excluded from subsequent analyses.

We tested our hypotheses by implementing a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Surprisingly, we found that direct effect of IM tactics on leader effectiveness was not significant. Instead, we found (1) leader type; (2) the nature of followers' comment; (3) the interaction between leader type and IM tactic; and (4) the interaction between IM tactic and nature of comment to significantly influence perceived leader effectiveness.

Given the statistically significant results from the MANOVA, we proceeded to conduct Univariate ANOVAs (see Table 3). The results indicated that regardless of the IM tactic employed by the leader, respondents tend to rely on comments posted by other followers to evaluate the fictitious leader. Higher ratings for effectiveness were given when the comments posted were positive and *vice versa.*

Next, the interaction between IM tactics employed by leaders and nature of comments posted was found to significantly influence trust towards leader and perceived interpersonal influence. Even when the exact same tactics were employed, the respondents rated leaders with negative comments much lower than leaders with positive comments (see Figures 1 and 2). Basically, the attribution of trust and perceived influence was made based on other followers' response to leader's claims.

We also observed that the type of leader interacted with IM tactics in the case of leaders' perceived network building skills (see Figure 3). Business leaders' network building skills were rated much lower compared to their political counterparts when they used enhancement tactics. In contrast, they were rated much higher than their political counterparts when they employed the supplication tactic. This finding appears to indicate that followers believe business leaders will engage in network building to seek assistance from other business counterparts when they highlight their weaknesses compared to when they are fairly successful. In contrast, we believe followers did not apply the same logic to political leaders. Perhaps political leaders were expected to be well connected if they were successful compared to when they represent themselves as weak.

Succinctly, leadership and IM work hand in hand to develop perceptions of leadership effectiveness. However, leaders' attempts to impression manage through social media is influenced by the social contagion effect. We found that feedback of other followers in response to a leader's posting influences respondents to make their judgement about the leader's effectiveness. The nature of comments posted by majority of the followers sets the tone at the social media site and influences others to share similar sentiments. This was especially evident in affective outcomes such as trust towards the leader. As expected, the

social contagion effect is more prevalent via social media and has created an interesting twist to the effectiveness of IM tactics.

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Table 1

Manipulation check for Impression Management tactics reflected in the experimental

IM tactic reflected in the mock site	Manipulation check items	Type of leader							
		Business leaders				Political leaders			
		N	**M**	**SD**	**F**	**N**	**M**	**SD**	**F**
Ingratiation	Ingratiation	61	**4.78**	**1.17**	3.62*	61	**3.45**	**1.21**	11.49**
	Enhancement	73	4.19	1.14		61	4.74	0.87	
	Exemplification	60	4.20	1.26		62	4.80	1.07	
	Supplication	61	4.34	1.03		63	4.28	0.98	
Enhancement	Ingratiation	61	4.82	1.31	3.98*	61	3.53	1.33	22.92**
	Enhancement	73	**5.43**	**0.97**		61	**5.17**	**1.28**	
	Exemplification	60	5.25	1.10		62	4.89	1.10	
	Supplication	61	4.91	1.08		63	4.58	1.11	
Exemplification	Ingratiation	61	4.04	1.23	10.96**	61	3.37	1.20	16.23**
	Enhancement	73	4.26	0.85		61	4.31	0.99	
	Exemplification	60	**5.10**	**1.27**		62	**4.71**	**1.19**	
	Supplication	61	4.32	1.03		63	3.99	1.01	
Supplication	Ingratiation	61	3.53	1.19	12.43**	61	3.73	0.89	5.24*
	Enhancement	73	3.86	0.98		61	3.96	0.93	
	Exemplification	60	3.93	1.35		62	4.11	1.08	
	Supplication	61	**4.71**	**0.89**		63	**4.38**	**0.84**	

social media site

Table 2

Summary of Multivariate Analysis of Variance: Leader effectiveness as a Function of Leader Type, Impression Management tactic employed through social media and Nature of comments from followers

Source of Variation	df	Wilks' Lambda	F	Partial Eta Squared
Leader Type (LT)	1	.970	4.39*	.030
Impression Management Tactics (IM)	3	.966	1.67	.012
Nature of comments (COM)	1	.807	33.79**	.193
LT x IM	2	.946	4.01*	.028
LT x COM	1	.996	.621	.004
IM x COM	3	.949	2.52*	.017
IM x LT x COM	2	.983	1.19	.008
Error	427			

Note: *p < .01; **p < .001;

Table 3

Summary of Analysis of Variance: Leader effectiveness as a Function of Leader Type, Impression Management tactic employed through social media and Nature of comments from followers

Source of Variation	df	F	Partial Eta Squared
Trust in leader			
Leader Type (LT)	1	0.121	.000
Impression Management Tactics (IM)	3	1.019	.007
Nature of comments (COM)	1	57.196***	.118
LT x IM	2	0.779	.004
LT x COM	1	0.797	.002
IM x COM	3	4.427*	.030
IM x LT x COM	2	.949	.004
Error	427		
Total	441		
Network building			
Leader Type (LT)	1	0.411	.001
Impression Management Tactics (IM)	3	1.635	.011

Nature of comments (COM)	1	11.810**	.027

Table 3 (continued)

LT x IM	2	4.295*	.020
LT x COM	1	1.750	.004
IM x COM	3	1.980	.014
IM x LT x COM	2	0.787	.004
Error	427		
Total	441		

Interpersonal influence

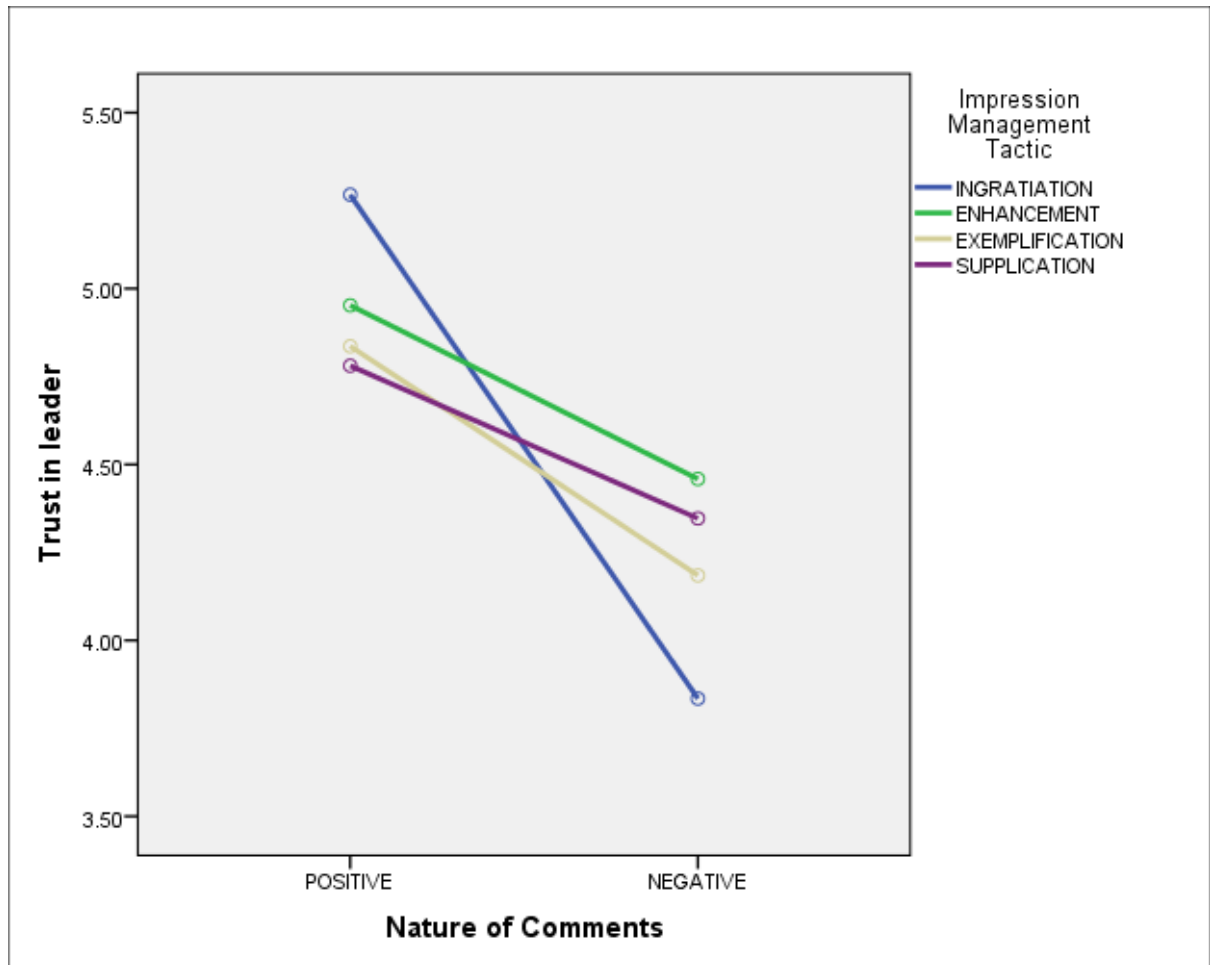|			
Leader Type (LT)	1	6.111*	.014
Impression Management Tactics (IM)	3	1.551	.011
Nature of comments (COM)	1	91.130***	.176
LT x IM	2	2.357	.011
LT x COM	1	.466	.001
IM x COM	3	5.096*	.035
IM x LT x COM	2	2.333	.011
Error	427		
Total	441		

Note. *$p < .05$; **$p < .005$; *** $p < .001$

Figure 1: The interaction between nature of followers comments and impression management tactics and its implication on trust in leader.
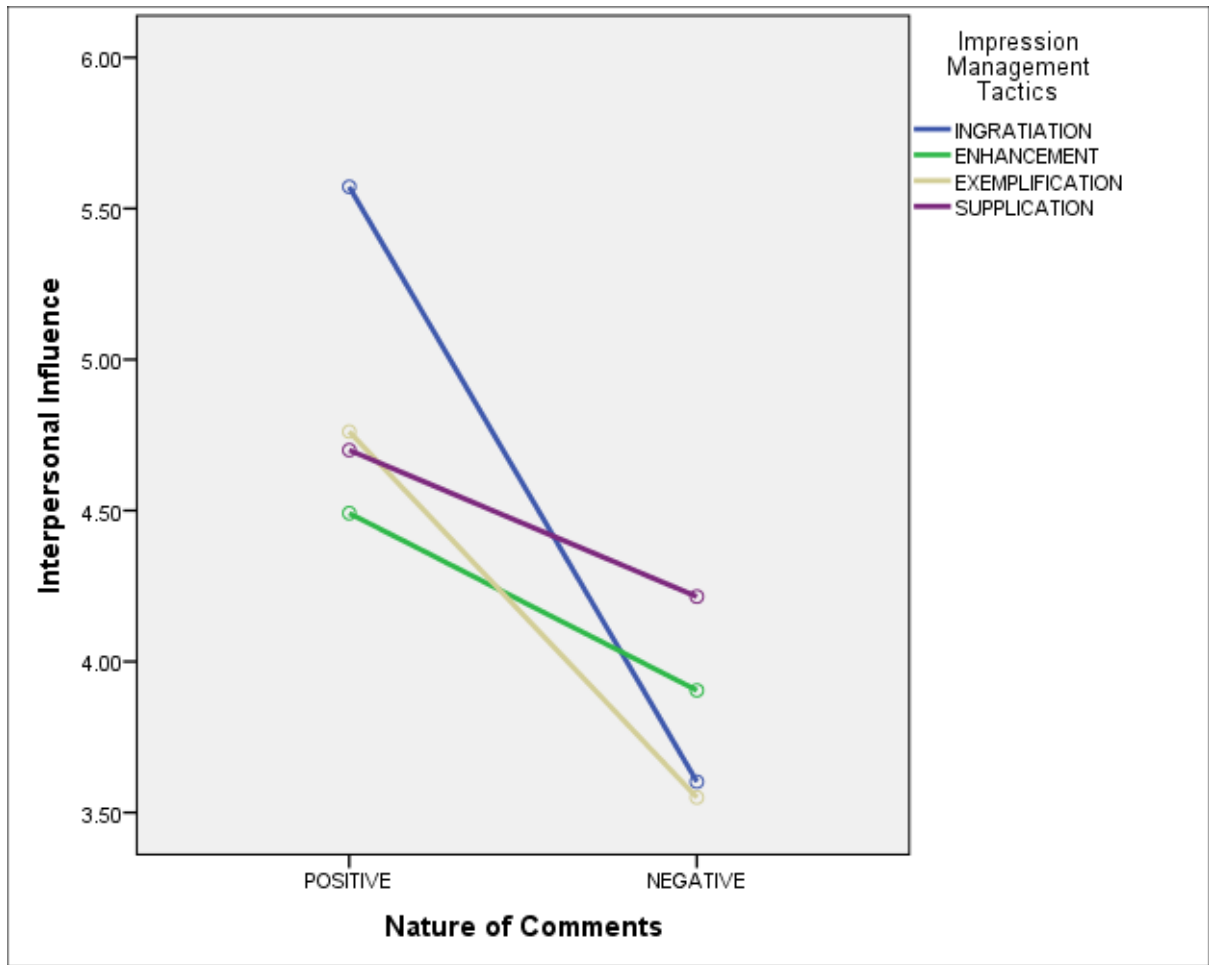
Figure 2: The interaction between nature of followers comments and impression management tactics and its implication on leaders' perceived interpersonal influence.
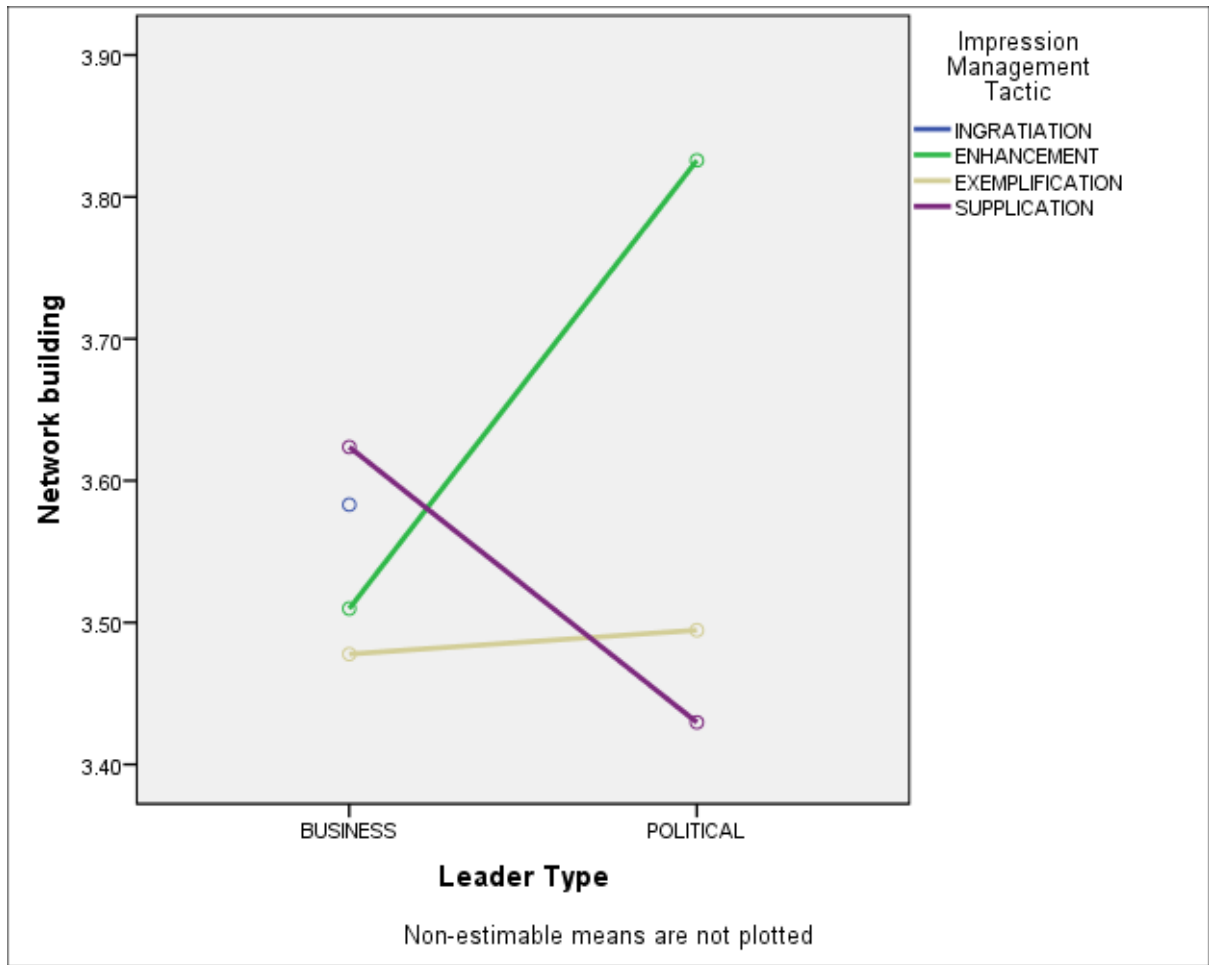
Figure 3: The interaction between Leader Type and Impression management tactics and its implication on leaders' perceived network building skills