

Credibility as a Differentiation and Relational Strategy: A Functional Analysis of CNN’s Unprecedented Democratic Climate Crisis Town Hall Forum

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Extending Benoit’s functional theory of campaign communication and drawing on public relations research, this content analysis positions source credibility—trustworthiness, expertise, relatability, and evidence—as a useful differentiation and relational strategy during primary campaigns. Results from analyzing CNN’s unprecedented 2019 climate change town hall forum indicate that the Democratic candidates favored relatability appeals and were more likely to reference their credibility when asked questions from the audience. Female politicians were more likely to reference their trustworthiness and include more than one credibility tactic in their responses. And, candidates ranked lower in the polls were more likely to reference their relatability. The implications for political public relations are discussed.

Keywords: credibility, political public relations, functional campaign communication, primary campaigns, issue ownership

The two candidates vying for the U.S. presidency during the 2020 election could not have been more different. Incumbent and Republican President Donald Trump promoted his “America First” agenda (Kelemen, 2019), dismissed the COVID-19 crisis (Summers, 2020; Zulli & Coe, 2021), and embraced a hypermasculine governance and behavioral style (Duerst-Lahti & Oakley, 2018; Kurtzleben, 2020). Challenger and Democrat Joe Biden advocated for inclusivity and equality, took COVID-19 seriously (Strauss, 2020), and had a much more measured rhetorical style (Pew Research Center, 2020). For most voters, differentiating between Trump and Biden personally and politically was simple. And, because party loyalty significantly predicts voting behavior (Bartels, 2000; Weinschenk, 2013), voters likely also knew whom they were supporting—Trump or Biden—at the onset of the general election.

Whereas the differences between general election candidates in the United States are quite obvious (i.e., Republican vs. Democrat), differentiating between candidates during the primary campaign is not as

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easy. Primaries are characterized by intraparty competition where candidates generally advocate for similar policy positions (Benoit, Glantz, et al., 2011; Petrocik, 1996). In these early campaign stages, primary candidates cannot solely rely on partisan heuristics to garner support for their candidacies as general election candidates often can. Instead, primary candidates must use other resources beyond or in addition to policy positions, such as their expertise, character, or demeanor, to demonstrate their preferability over the many other (similar) candidates. The field of primary candidates has also expanded in recent years. In 2016, 17 candidates competed for the Republican presidential nomination. In 2020, 29 Democratic candidates declared primary candidacy. Although having more candidates can certainly be beneficial—more candidate options, greater diversity, a wider range of platforms—publics may have a harder time sorting through the candidates in the current political environment and opt to disengage until the primary field has narrowed (Gerber, Huber, Biggers, & Hendry, 2017).

To this end, Benoit's (1999, 2014) functional theory of campaign communication provides a useful lens for considering the different rhetorical strategies that candidates can adopt to demonstrate their difference from and preferability over their opponents during a competitive primary season. Benoit (2017) argues that campaign communication is a functional act, a "means to an end" (p. 196). To be elected, candidates must contrast themselves with their opponents and can do so through acclaiming, attacking, and defending. Research has consistently demonstrated the prominence of acclaims or self-praise during political campaigns (Benoit, 2017; Benoit, McHale, Hansen, McGuire, & Pier, 2003; Benoit & Sheafer, 2006), but especially in the primary campaign context (Benoit, Henson, & Sudbrock, 2011; Benoit, Pier, & Brazeal, 2002). However, beyond a general understanding of which strategy is most often deployed (i.e., acclaims), there is little understanding of *how* candidates attempt to differentiate themselves and the message features that work in service of these acclaims/self-praise during the primary season (see Benoit, 2017).

Therefore, using Benoit's theory of functional campaign communication and drawing from political communication and public relations research, this study focuses on *source credibility* as a differentiation and relational tactic for politicians in the primary campaign context. Source credibility pertains to a speaker's ability to communicate their knowledge and expertise (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003) and is increasingly recognized as an important dimension to maintaining positive relationships with publics (Coombs, 1992; Ledingham, 2003; Painter, 2015; Pressgrove & Kim, 2018; Sweetser & Browning, 2017). Emphasizing credibility could be particularly advantageous for primary candidates whose goal is not only to establish a contrast between them and their opponents, but also to cultivate public feelings of liking and trust, which can be leveraged into electoral support.

The context in which we explore source credibility as a differentiation and relational tactic is the 2019 CNN climate crisis town hall forum, a new campaign format unique to the 2020 presidential election. This new town hall format created both opportunities and challenges for the politicians who participated. The climate crisis town hall enabled the top Democratic candidates to speak uninterrupted for 40 minutes about a key voting issue on prime-time television during an impressionable time in the campaign cycle. Members of the public were also able to directly interact with each candidate during this forum, asking and getting answers to questions about the candidates' climate crisis plans. However, the sole focus on climate change, a traditionally Democratic issue, limited the candidates' opportunity to differentiate

themselves (Benoit, Glantz, et al., 2011; Petrocik, 1996). We thus consider, given how this town hall forum centered on the singular issue of climate change and facilitated direct interaction with the public, (1) whether and to what extent the political candidates used credibility to differentiate themselves from the other candidates who "owned" the same political issue of climate change, and (2) other potential factors that contributed to source credibility variance, such as the questioner source, gender, and poll rankings. In doing so, this study explores the new town hall format that was decidedly public-centered and extends the theory of functional campaign communication by considering source credibility as a differentiation and relationship-building strategy.

A Functional Approach to Campaign Communication

Political elections are a cornerstone of democratic government, and campaign communication serves as a critical means of informing the electorate. Benoit and colleagues explain the utility of campaign communication through their widely cited functional theory of political campaigns framework (Benoit, 1999, 2014, 2017; Benoit et al., 2002, 2003). This framework suggests that campaign utterances are useful because they help candidates distinguish themselves from and establish their preferability over opponents. Candidates demonstrate their preferability through acclaiming, attacking, and defending. In some campaign contexts, candidates may choose to highlight their strengths as potential leaders (acclaims), attack opponents on the basis of character or policy (attacks), or respond to a critique leveled against them (defenses).

Although candidates engage in these rhetorical strategies throughout political campaigns, these functions of campaign communication are particularly consequential in the primary campaign context. First, scholars have long demonstrated how primary campaign communication induces more change in voter preference than general election communication (see McKinney & Warner, 2013). Such change is expected because "the very early [campaign] phase is characterized by widespread lack of information among those who are not following the campaign closely, and uncertainty among those who are" (Kenamer & Chaffee, 1982, p. 647). Acclaims, attacks, and defenses can thus help publics make sense of political issues and candidates during these early and impressionable campaign stages, having a greater impact than during a general election.

Second, despite candidates' ability to uniquely educate the public and influence vote preference during primary campaigns, the intraparty competition of primaries makes it more challenging for candidates to differentiate themselves from their opponents. This is due, in large part, to issue ownership and the historic association between party politics and prominent voting issues (Benoit, Glantz, et al., 2011; Petrocik, 1996). The Democratic Party typically claims issues related to education, jobs, health care, and the environment. The Republican Party, in contrast, claims issues related to crime, national security, family values, and abortion (Benoit, Glantz, et al., 2011). Extant literature confirms the tendency for candidates to emphasize their party's issues during both primary and general campaigns (Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003). Candidates who focus campaign messages on their party's issues do have a competitive edge over candidates who deviate from these patterned expectations (Petrocik, 1996). However, such similarity between candidates may make it more challenging for any one candidate to obtain

widespread support. As such, the use of acclaims, attacks, and defenses becomes all the more necessary in the primary context.

Although acclaims, attacks, and defenses may have a greater impact during primary campaigns, primary candidates must be mindful of how these strategies can inadvertently hinder party cohesion and potentially depress support during the general election, particularly the attack strategy. Indeed, some research suggests that divisiveness or attacks during primaries can result in lower voter turnout in the general election (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, 1994; Djupe & Peterson, 2002). Primary competitors may also end up on a general election ticket together, in which case they must rectify their previous criticism with their current support. Such was the case during the 2020 election. Kamala Harris regularly criticized Joe Biden's lack of support for busing in the 1970s during the primary campaign (Rizzo, 2019). Biden and Harris were then forced to address these differences and her previous attacks when they joined together on the general ticket (Blake, 2020). Given this conundrum, it is unsurprising that primary candidates typically opt for positive differentiation strategies, such as acclaims (Benoit, Henson, & Sudbrock, 2011; Benoit et al., 2002).

The primary election context presents unique challenges to candidates hoping to secure favorable public opinion and, ultimately, their party's presidential nomination. The functional theory of campaign communication outlines common rhetorical strategies for doing so. However, this theory stops short of providing insight into the specific message features that might be deployed as part of an overall communication and differentiation strategy (see Benoit, 2017). This study attempts to address this gap by interrogating if and to what extent source credibility is used to demonstrate candidate difference and preferability in the primary context. Focusing on a more positive message feature, such as source credibility, is appropriate given previous research showing a preponderance of acclaims during the primaries (Benoit, Henson, & Sudbrock, 2011; Benoit et al., 2002). Importantly, public relations scholars have found that source credibility functions as a relationship management tool (e.g., Coombs, 1992; Ledingham, 2003; Pressgrove & Kim, 2018). Exploring source credibility as a differentiation tactic thus extends the functional theory of campaign communication into the public relations realm.

Source Credibility as a Differentiation and Relational Tactic

Credibility is one of the most researched concepts in the communication discipline (Kiousis, 2001; McCroskey, 1966; McCroskey & Young, 1981) and is traditionally defined as a "set of perceptions that receivers hold toward a particular source, medium or message" (Pressgrove & Kim, 2018, p. 249). The importance of source credibility dates back to Aristotle's contention that *ethos*—or a speaker's intelligence, character, and goodwill—is a central means of persuasion (McCroskey & Young, 1981). As Berlo and colleagues (1969) further explain, "An individual's acceptance of information and ideas is based in part on 'who said it'" (p. 564). From this perspective, characteristics like trustworthiness and expertise are central to the persuasive process (Metzger et al., 2003). Expertise includes a speaker's qualifications or ability to *know* the truth about an issue. Trustworthiness is the perception that a speaker *is* telling the truth about an issue (Hovland et al., 1953; Metzger et al., 2003). These dimensions of source credibility, in addition to perceived caring or the ability to relate to the public (see Teven & Hanson, 2004), function as key heuristics that can motivate attitudinal and behavior change (Druckman, 2001; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993); publics may

be more willing to accept information, and ultimately vote for a candidate, if they feel the politician possesses expert knowledge (through personal or professional experience or with evidence) and is trustworthy (is telling the truth and can relate to the public). Source credibility can be communicated both discursively (e.g., a verbal message that emphasizes experience) and nonverbally (e.g., physical attractiveness; similarity between speaker and audience) (Kiousis, 2001; Pornpitakpan, 2004). From a functional perspective, then, emphasizing credibility might be a particularly expedient, persuasive, and positive means of establishing difference and preferability, which is needed in the primary campaign context.

Importantly, research points to source credibility as a key dimension to maintaining positive relationships and trust with publics, both in and out of the political context (Kim, Kiousis, & Molleda, 2015; Painter, 2015; Sweetser & Browning, 2017). In a theoretical discussion of the relationship management approach to public relations, Ledingham (2003) identified source credibility and trustworthiness as indicators of and contributors to enhanced relational states. Coombs (1992) similarly suggested that public relations practitioners (and their proposed policies) must be perceived as *legitimate* to be effective issue managers. Two components of this legitimacy are credibility and rationality, which include the use of empirical, logical, and verifiable evidence. Moreover, Painter (2015) suggested that trust, a central dimension of credibility (see Metzger et al., 2003), is similarly conceptualized and obtained in both the political and relational realms. During the 2016 election, Pressgrove and Kim (2018) found that presidential and congressional candidates often highlighted elements of their expertise and trustworthiness on their campaign websites as a relationship maintenance strategy (e.g., linking expert knowledge to why voters should trust and elect them to office). Pressgrove and Kim concluded that, because credibility is linked to trustworthiness, and trustworthiness is linked to relational development and maintenance, source credibility should be approached as a relational strategy in addition to a persuasive technique.

Collectively, the mentioned literature demonstrates that campaign communication is functional, particularly during primary campaigns, in which candidates need to differentiate themselves from other candidates who "own" the same issues. Because primary candidates may seek to be less divisive for fear of diminishing general election support, they may opt for more acclaim strategies instead of attacks. Candidates can establish this preferability and work to establish relationships with their publics by highlighting their credibility. These considerations thus lead us to the following research question:

RQ1: How, and to what extent, do political candidates use credibility to differentiate themselves from other candidates who "own" the same political issues?

Explanatory Factors and Source Credibility Variance

As one means of understanding how and why calls to credibility might vary between candidates, we consider three explanatory factors: question source, candidate gender, and poll rankings. The first factor we consider is the *question source*, or whom candidates are responding to during campaign events. The functional theory of campaign communication has primarily been studied in political debates (Benoit, Henson, & Sudbrock, 2011; Benoit et al., 2002) or advertising spots (e.g., Benoit, 1999, 2001). In these campaign events, candidates are typically responding to their opponents (debates) or delivering one-way communication (advertisements), which may explain why certain rhetorical strategies are deployed (e.g., a

defense when responding to an attack during a debate). These rhetorical approaches may change if candidates are responding to members of the public, as is the case during a town hall event (see Zulli & McKasy, 2020). Because source credibility is a multifaceted construct—meaning that there are multiple ways of establishing credibility (see previous section)—it may be the case that candidates will tailor their differentiation strategies to their message target. As such, we offer the following research question:

RQ2: What is the relationship between question source and how source credibility is communicated?

We also consider the *gender* of the candidates who participated in the CNN town hall. Political campaigning is about demonstrating fit for political office in addition to differentiating one's self from other candidates (Duerst-Lahti & Oakley, 2018). Politics is an inherently masculine domain, and, despite the impressive and worthy strides of female politicians in recent years, a woman has yet to be elected president. Accordingly, female politicians may feel it is more necessary to emphasize their credibility during campaign events because their "presidential timber" is not assumed (Duerst-Lahti & Oakley, 2018; Zulli, 2019). So we ask:

RQ3: What is the relationship between gender and how source credibility is communicated?

The final factor we consider is *poll rankings*. Extant literature demonstrates how horse-race discourse dominates news coverage of political campaigns (see Dunaway & Stein, 2013). Opinion polls that rank candidates are common components of this coverage, especially before significant and televised campaign events. For example, pre-event news coverage may discuss a candidate's ranking among the competitors and attempt to explain the high or low ranking by highlighting their political (in)experience, (in)ability to relate to the voting public, or other electability makers. Political candidates are likely aware of their standing, and discourse surrounding their standing, throughout their campaigns and will adjust their messaging strategy accordingly. Thus, it would be reasonable for candidates ranked lower in the polls to emphasize their credibility to increase their favorability with the voting public more compared with those ranked higher in the polls. Those higher in the polls may not feel as much need to establish their credibility because they already have public support. Thus, we offer a final research question:

RQ4: What is the relationship between poll rankings and how source credibility is communicated?

Study Context

We explore these questions in the context of CNN's climate crisis town hall forum (Preston, 2019). On September 4, 2019, 10 Democratic primary candidates—Joe Biden, Cory Booker, Pete Buttigieg, Julián Castro, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, Beto O'Rourke, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Andrew Yang (ordered alphabetically)—participated in individual, back-to-back, 40-minute discussions about the imminent threat of climate change and their plans to solve this crisis should they be elected president. This climate crisis town hall represents a new format of campaign communication unique to the 2020 presidential election. Beyond its novelty, this campaign event was chosen for several reasons. First, it occurred during the primary campaign, which is a particularly impactful time and one during which the acclaim strategy is prominent (Benoit, Henson, & Sudbrock, 2011; Benoit et al., 2002;

McKinney & Warner, 2013). Second, compared with a traditional debate in which candidates volley back and forth, the candidates who participated in this forum took the stage individually, never engaging in direct conversation with one another; instead, they primarily interacted with the audience and moderator. Being able to speak uninterrupted for 40 minutes on prime-time television provided the candidates with a unique opportunity to emphasize their expertise and personal attributes. The back-to-back format also allowed viewers to compare the candidates, but without the contention that often accompanies political debates. This town hall also centered on the sole topic of climate change, which is one of the issues that Democrats purport to own (Benoit, Glantz, et al., 2011). Because all the Democratic candidates at this town hall forum were promoting climate change reform in some way (see McKasy & Zulli, 2021), they likely would have relied on other or additional strategies beyond policies to differentiate themselves from the other candidates, such as credibility. This context is thus ideal for examining campaign communication during the primary context and if/how source credibility can be used as a differentiation (between candidates) and relational tactic (with publics).

Method

To address the research questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of the transcripts from the CNN climate crisis town hall. The town hall transcripts from the 10 Democratic candidates were collected from the NexisUni database. Coding transcripts of speeches and debates is a common methodological approach in political communication and public relations research (see Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Benoit & Sheaffer, 2006; Benoit, Henson, & Sudbrock, 2011; Coe & Reitzes, 2010) and is appropriate given our research goals, which were aimed at understanding credibility as a rhetorical and strategic tactic. Traditionally, conceptualizations of credibility have included both verbal and nonverbal cues, such as physical attractiveness, similarity between a speaker and the audience, and gender (Pornpitakpan, 2004). While some nonverbal communication can be strategic (e.g., clothing, hair choice, facial expressions), other elements that contribute to perceptions of source credibility, such as attractiveness, gender, and even facial expressions (if they are reactionary) do not reflect strategic communication at work. Considering the focus of this study is how candidates differentiate themselves through credibility appeals, assessing messages is more appropriate than assessing nonverbal messages or audience perceptions. As such, the transcripts analyzed here offer a necessary and innovative assessment of the credibility construct.

Coding Procedures

Two coders completed the quantitative content analysis after extensive training on the coding procedures. Using each question and corresponding response as the unit of analysis ($N = 168$), variables were coded as present or absent in the transcripts, which follows previous research (e.g., Fridkin, Kenney, Gershon, Shafer, & Woodall, 2007; Lewis, 2019; Zulli & McKasy, 2020). To ensure reliability, the entire data set was cross-coded. Intercoder reliability using Krippendorff's alpha can be found below (KA; where applicable).

Source Credibility

Four variables were used to track source credibility (see Table 1 for examples). Foundational to source credibility is the notion that an individual is speaking the truth and can be trusted (Hovland et al., 1953; Metzger et al., 2003). Therefore, *trustworthiness* indicated when candidates asserted they were telling the truth about climate change, the public could trust them to address climate change, or third parties trusted their climate plans (e.g., endorsements; KA = 1). Following source credibility literature (Berlo et al., 1969; Hovland et al., 1953; Metzger et al., 2003), *expertise* indicated when candidates spoke about their credentials, qualifications or training, past experiences, and goodwill through “on-the-ground” professional activities (KA = .91). Extant literature also emphasizes the importance of immediacy, caring, and relatability on perceptions of source credibility (Teven & Hanson, 2004). Thus, the *relatability* variable indicated when candidates offered a personal anecdote or experience as a means of verbally displaying that they were in touch with the public concern (e.g., witnessing events, personally experiencing past or current adverse effects, sharing family stories; KA = 1). Finally, the use of verifiable evidence plays a key role in the credibility of both public relations practitioners (Coombs, 1992) and political candidates (Pressgrove & Kim, 2018). Accordingly, *evidence* indicated when candidates mentioned scientific evidence (e.g., data, expert opinions) to support their claims about the climate crisis (KA = 1).

Question Source

Question source indicated whether the questioner was an affiliate of the CNN network or a member of the public (i.e., video or audience questions; KA = 1).

Gender

Gender tracked whether each questioner and candidate identified as male or female (KA = 1).

Polling

Polling was a third-party ranking of the candidates in a national poll conducted by Emerson College ($n = 627$), which can be found in Table 2. These data were selected because of their timing in relation to the town hall and external legitimacy (Silver, 2018). The survey was fielded August 24–26, 2019, and the climate crisis town hall took place September 4, 2019 (“August National Poll,” 2019).

Results

There were two goals of this study: (1) to investigate how and to what extent political candidates used credibility tactics to differentiate themselves from other candidates who “owned” the same political issue of climate change, and (2) to assess how factors such as public interaction, gender, and poll rankings affected how candidates communicated their credibility. RQ1 asked how and to what extent political candidates use source credibility as a differentiation and relational tactic. All four source credibility variables—trustworthiness, expertise, relatability, and evidence—were used during the town hall event (see Table 1). Among the four source credibility variables, the candidates made the most relatability appeals, at

36.3% of responses ($n = 61$), in an attempt to relate to those present at the town hall and the millions of people watching in the United States. Relatability was followed by expertise appeals in 29.2% of responses ($n = 49$). Finally, candidates referenced scientific evidence and/or their trustworthiness the least, at 16.1% ($n = 27$) and 13.1% ($n = 22$), respectively. A summary variable was created to reflect the number of credibility tactics used in a single response (from 0 to 4). While 32.7% of responses did not include a credibility tactic ($n = 55$), 44.6% of responses included one tactic ($n = 75$), 18.5% included two tactics ($n = 31$), and 3.6% included three tactics ($n = 6$). Less than 1% of responses included all four credibility tactics ($n = 1$). Combined, 67.3% of responses ($n = 113$) used one or more credibility tactics. To further address RQ1 and explore source credibility as a differentiation tactic, we ran a series of chi-square tests. Table 2 reports the use of credibility tactics by the candidates, indicating significant variations in trustworthiness, expertise, and relatability appeals.

Table 1. Percentage of Credibility Tactic Used in Responses and Examples.

Source Credibility	% Responses (n)	Examples
Trustworthiness	13.1 (22)	"But some of it is also of course going to be about mitigation, and moving things and making it easier and building stronger levies. We have to be honest about that or we're not going to be able to make it through this" (Klobuchar, 2019, paras. 141–142).
Expertise	29.2 (49)	"I've been involved in everything from making sure we go with—back in the '90s—everything I've done has been done to take on the polluters and take on those who are . . . decimating our environment . . . that's been my career" (Biden, 2019, para. 14).
Relatability	36.3 (61)	"I think that, first of all, let me just tell you, I think about this issue through the lens of my baby nieces, who are 1.5 and 3 years old. And when I look at those babies, and I think about what the world will be like in 20 years if we don't act, I'm really afraid" (Harris, 2019, para. 26).
Evidence	16.1(27)	"I may be old fashioned, but I believe in science . . . what the scientists have told us climate change is real, it is caused by human activity, it is already causing devastating problems in this country and around the world, and most frighteningly what they tell us is if we don't get our act together . . . the damage done to our country and the rest of the world will be irreparable" (Sanders, 2019, paras. 12–13).

Table 2. Percentage of Credibility Tactic Each Candidate Used in Responses.

Candidate	Nomination Preference	Trustworthiness (%)	Expertise (%)	Relatability (%)	Evidence (%)
Biden	31	11	44	11	28
Sanders	24	0	20	7	40
Warren	15	8	31	31	15
Harris	10	14	46	41	9
Yang	4	8	0	20	16
Booker	3	17	50	67	8
Buttigieg	3	6	19	44	13
O'Rourke	2	6	17	44	11
Castro	1	20	47	53	7
Klobuchar	1	50	36	64	14
$\chi^2 (p)$		22.307 (.008)	23.016 (.006)	26.189 (.002)	11.025 (.274)

Note. Nomination results based on national poll ($n = 627$) fielded between August 24 and 26, 2019, conducted by Emerson College. The percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Percentages are based on each individual candidate's total number of responses.

RQ2 questioned the relationship between audience involvement and how source credibility is communicated. A series of chi-square tests indicated a significant association between the source of the question and the use of both expertise and relatability as forms of credibility. Candidates responding to questions from the audience referenced their expertise 44.9% of the time ($n = 31$), compared with only 18.2% of the time ($n = 18$) in response to questions from a moderator or media commentator, $\chi^2(1, n = 168) = 14.079, V = .289, p < .001$. Additionally, when a candidate responded to a question from the crowd, they referenced their ability to relate 55.1% of the time ($n = 38$), compared with 23.2% ($n = 23$) when the question came from a moderator or media commentator, $\chi^2(1, n = 168) = 17.825, V = .328, p < .001$. On average, questions from the audience were significantly more likely ($M = 1.23, SD = .79$) than questions from a moderator or media commentator ($M = .75, SD = .82$) to trigger the use of one or more credibility tactics ($t = -3.812, df = 166, p < .001$).

RQ3 questioned the relationship between gender and how source credibility is communicated. A chi-square test for independence indicated a significant association between gender and referencing trustworthiness to enhance credibility, $\chi^2(1, n = 168) = 5.318, V = .178, p = .021$. Female candidates were significantly more likely to emphasize why the audience should trust them in their responses to questions (22.4% responses; $n = 11$ of 49) compared with male candidates (9.2% responses; $n = 11$ of 119). Females were slightly more likely to discuss their expertise (38.8% responses; $n = 19$ of 49) compared with males (25.2% responses; $n = 30$ of 119), though this statistic was approaching significance, $\chi^2(1, n = 168) = 3.092, V = .136, p = .079$. On average, female candidates were significantly more likely ($M = 1.18, SD = .91$) than male candidates ($M = .85, SD = .80$) to use one or more credibility tactics ($t = -2.38, df = 166, p = .02$).

Finally, RQ4 questioned the relationship between poll rankings and how source credibility is communicated. A series of t tests was conducted using the polling data collected by Emerson College before the town hall. On average, candidates who used the relatability tactic in their responses were significantly

more likely to be ranked lower or "behind" in the pre-town hall polls ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 6.75$), whereas candidates who did not reference their relatability were higher in the polls ($M = 11.66$, $SD = 10.95$; $t = 4.530$, $df = 164.93$, $p < .001$). In contrast, candidates who attempted to achieve credibility through the use of evidence in their responses were significantly more likely to be ranked higher in the pre-town hall polls ($M = 14.11$, $SD = 11.83$), whereas candidates who did not use evidence were lower in the polls ($M = 8.52$, $SD = 9.48$; $t = -2.694$, $df = 32.70$, $p = .027$).

Discussion

This study investigated source credibility as a differentiation and relational tactic during the CNN town hall on the climate change crisis. Drawing from the function theory of campaign communication, we positioned source credibility as one means of engaging in the acclaim rhetorical strategy. Given the relational potential of source credibility and the new campaign format, this study provides preliminary insight into how credibility can be used as both a differentiation and a relational tactic. Several points warrant discussion.

First, the results indicate that referencing credibility through appeals to trustworthiness, expertise, relatability, and evidence was a dominant trend among candidates, lending important insight into one of the ways political candidates can engage in the acclaim strategy. Indeed, most responses by the candidates included not only a discussion of their climate crisis plans, but also each candidate's credibility and ability to successfully manage the crisis. At the individual level, there were significant differences regarding the credibility appeals that candidates favored. Amy Klobuchar had the highest number of statements that referenced her trustworthiness, Cory Booker called forth his expertise more so than the other candidates, and Bernie Sanders discussed scientific evidence the most (40% of responses). The rest of the candidates varied in their individual use of credibility appeals. Two conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, source credibility was a prominent differentiation tactic among candidates, given that there was significant variance. However, the variation between candidates is likely a combination of the factors accounted for in this study—question source, gender, poll rankings—and individual personalities and rhetorical styles. For example, Andrew Yang did not mention his expertise once during this town hall forum, which is understandable considering that he had no prior political experience. However, Yang's rhetorical style is also rather direct. As indicated by the number of questions he was asked, which was higher than any other candidate (25 questions, compared with the next highest, at 18), Yang often directly responded to the questions posed, answering with either minimal sentences or just "Yes" or "No." These results, when viewed from our quantitative lens, indicate a lack of credibility appeals as a persuasive strategy. Yet, a more rhetorical approach to analyzing credibility suggests that Yang may have just chosen directness over elaborate credibility appeals. Thus, future scholars will do well to consider how personality and rhetorical styles also affect decisions to include such credibility appeals.

Beyond individual variance, the collective results indicate that candidates preferred relatability appeals to any other credibility appeal. Moreover, candidates were more likely to demonstrate their ability to relate when questions were posed to them by an audience member. These results have two important implications. First, there seems to be a clear perceptual difference between the types of responses needed when addressing the media elite compared with the public, adding nuance to the functional theory of campaign communication. Because audience questions during this town hall were, theoretically, more

representative of the concerns of the wider voting public, candidates likely felt a greater need to establish their relatability with the audience to justify a vote in their favor. Second, and perhaps more important, these results demonstrate (1) the dialogic potential of town halls, (2) that campaign communication in general, and source credibility in particular, does indeed function as a relational tactic, and (3) the candidates recognized this public relations opportunity (see Kent & Taylor, 2002). According to Taylor and Kent (2014), dialogic engagement, considered one of the most “ethical forms of communication” and an ideal approach to public relations, emphasizes “meaning making, understanding, cocreation of reality, and *sympathetic/empathetic* [emphasis added] interactions” (pp. 388–389). Of all the credibility tactics, relatability is the one that allows candidates to demonstrate that they identify and empathize with the concerns and struggles of the public. By using relatability appeals in more than half of responses, candidates were able to signal that their plans matched with public concern. That candidates referenced their relatability significantly more when responding to audience questions compared with moderator questions, and more than the other indicator of credibility, signals that the candidates understood how such an appeal could strengthen the relational ties between them and the public while also bolstering their overall credibility. Although town halls will likely never enable full dialogic engagement as Kent and Taylor (2002) envisioned, the results of this study illustrate that they do have dialogic potential, which does seem to influence strategic communication.

Noticeably lacking in candidate responses, however, were references to their trustworthiness. Of the few trustworthiness appeals present in the data (13.1% of responses), female politicians overwhelmingly made such references, in addition to averaging more credibility tactics per response compared with the male candidates. This is not entirely surprising given gender stereotypes and the research indicating how women are often perceived as less competent and credible than men in the political context (Dolan, 2004; Smith, Paul, & Paul, 2007). Knowing these assumptions about political leadership, it makes sense that Klobuchar, Harris, and Warren would highlight their trustworthiness and expertise. What is noteworthy is that the other variables of credibility did not significantly vary among female and male candidates, particularly relatability, which female politicians are perhaps more likely and able to highlight (Zulli, 2019). In some respects, this finding could be perceived as positive, suggesting that female politicians do not feel it necessary to accommodate gender stereotypes and overly stress their credibility to hold the presidential office, instead letting their records and accomplishments speak for themselves. However, given that no woman has ever been elected president, female politicians might still need to increase discussions of their credibility during campaign events.

Additionally, the data revealed that poll rankings were significantly related to the use of credibility tactics in candidate responses. Those lower in the polls were more likely to assert their credibility by relating to public concern. Those higher in the polls were more likely to emphasize scientific evidence to support climate change and their plans. Considering that experimental research has found a connection between perceptions of relatability and likeability (see Bradley, Roberts, & Bradley, 2019), the data presented in this study perhaps indicate a hierarchical ordering of credibility appeals. That is, before candidates can speak to their expertise as crisis managers or the evidence behind their plans, they first must establish they can relate to the general public; this would explain why the lower ranked candidates used more relatability appeals compared with the higher ranked candidates. Candidates such as Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren—longtime politicians and obvious front-runners at the time—may not have needed to

stress their relatability because they were already perceived as such and could move to higher ordered indicators of their credibility. In this sense, *personal* credibility (relatability) might be a necessary precursor to *professional* (expertise) or *informational* (evidence) credibility in the political context. Alternatively, or perhaps relatedly, length in office may be related to credibility appeals; Biden, Sanders, and Warren were the top-ranked candidates heading into the town hall *and* the most established politicians. Although additional studies would be needed to assess the validity of a hierarchical ordering of credibility variables, the evidence presented further highlights the value of relating to the public in the political context and how achieving relational credibility might need to come before appeals to evidence or experience.

Collectively, the study provides preliminary, but compelling, insight into the use of source credibility as a differentiation and relational tactic. By considering how candidates engage in the acclaim strategy in the town hall setting, and illustrating which tactics are common when interacting with publics, we extend the functional theory of campaign communication to include a relational dimension. Additionally, as more (and more diverse) candidates run for office, it will be critical to understand what factors may be related to strategic messaging, such as gender and poll rankings. This study is thus instructive in several ways. Future and more candidates should participate in town halls because this campaign format may be particularly conducive to strengthening their credibility and relationships with publics. News networks should also host more town hall forums of this nature during the primary season because they likely lead to greater information gains (see McKinney & Warner, 2013; Zulli & McKasy, 2020). Finally, scholars using the functional theory of campaign communication could usefully draw from public relations scholarship to inform other functions of acclaims, attacks, and defenses beyond candidate differentiation, such as relational development.

As with any study, there are limitations that future research might seek to address. We chose the CNN town hall on climate change because it represents a new form of campaign communication and was appropriate given this study's interest in issue ownership. However, scholars should explore the ways that political candidates employ credibility tactics when discussing other issues. Further, although we identified gender, poll rankings, and question source as potential factors that might affect how source credibility is communicated, scholars should explore other explanatory variables. For example, differences in question content may influence candidate responses *vis-à-vis* credibility. Length in office may also influence candidates' ability to call on their expertise. Future research should also explore public reactions to credibility, given that not all calls to credibility will resonate or be treated the same by audiences. Finally, because this study was conducted using transcripts from the climate crisis town hall, we were unable to see the corresponding visual performances or hear vocal signals. We do not believe that these visual or auditory cues would have meaningfully altered our interpretation of the data or results. However, future research could explore these nonverbal influences. For now, we believe the present study initiates a critical discussion of key differences in credibility tactics by political candidates, how these tactics vary because of important candidate differences, such as ranking in the polls or gender, and how credibility functions as a relational management strategy.

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