
Attribution Theory In Public Relations

A social psychology theory that can be applied to many disciplines is the attribution theory. The attribution theory is the theory of how people explain others' behavior by attributing it to internal dispositions or external situations. Many different parts make up this theory, including misattributions, dispositional and situational attributions, and the fundamental attribution error. This theory was developed first by Fritz Heider in 1958, but his theory was not able to explain the different parts that made up attribution, which Bernard Weiner's theory was able to do. Weiner's theory suggested that a person's own attributions can show what their efforts will look like in future endeavors.

A study by Doohwang Lee, Hyuk Soo Kim, and Jung Kyu Kim proposes and tests a model of consumers' online brand community engagement behaviors. The Impact of Online Brand Community Type on Consumer's Community Engagement behavior study recruited 120 college students that were directed to join an online brand community on Facebook. Consumers' online brand community engagement was the dependent variable in this study. The two variables that mediated the effects of the brand communities were social identification motivations and intrinsic motives of altruism. The study showed that the consumer-created online brand community engendered higher intrinsic motives of altruism than the marketer-created online brand community, thus supporting that the consumers' attribution processes influence their

social identification motivations and community engagement intentions. This study also showed that attribution processes motivated consumers to socially identify themselves with the online communities they joined. The results of this study also showed that marketers should be strategically aware of how to use brand communities as a marketing tool and that consumers are aware of when marketers' main reason for effort being profit, making consumers less likely to engage in their brand.

A second study uses the attribution theory to analyze personal and interpersonal motivation for collaborative projects. The Personal and Interpersonal Motivation for Group Projects study done by Sarah Peterson and James Schreiber developed questionnaires for undergraduates to answer. These questionnaires contained hypothetical questions depicting success or failure in group projects, depending on effort and ability given. The dependent variables included emotions such as shame, anger, pity, guilt, pride, and gratitude, along with predictions of future success. The emotion of gratitude followed success, and the negative emotions followed failure. This study supported Weiner's attribution theory by consistently showing that low-effort students felt more guilt following failure than high-effort students. This study also concluded that a potential benefit of guilt would be that low-effort students would try to avoid the negative feeling of guilt by working harder on future group projects. However, Weiner's prediction for shame was not supported by the study. Only undergraduates who were low-effort felt shame, not those that were low-ability.

The attribution theory can be extremely useful in public relations. As shown in the first study, marketers and public relations personnel can use this theory to successfully involve consumers in their organizations. Consumers' attributions are very important when it comes to involvement in a company's brand. What a consumer attributes a company with will determine the success

of a public relations campaign. PR campaigns target specific groups of people with which they believe they will have the most success. The attribution theory can be useful when PR personnel is developing a campaign. Researching what the campaign's target market can positively attribute to their brand will give a higher chance of the campaign being successful. As shown in the first study, when consumers attributed the efforts made in the online community as profit-driven, they became less likely to engage in the brand. If a company were to show that its efforts were driven towards the satisfaction of the consumers, potential customers will be more likely to involve themselves with the brand. By attributing these efforts to the happiness of the customer, the consumer will feel that their emotions are being valued over the profit the campaign brings in. The attribution theory can help public relations personnel better develop their campaigns and create them in a way to gain an increased number of involved consumers.

The attribution theory can also be used in public relations to help PR personnel better understand their target markets, and why they are reacting to their campaigns in particular ways. The attribution theory has two subtypes: dispositional and situational. Public relations teams can look at these two subtypes to determine why or why not a campaign was successful with their chosen target market. Using dispositional attribution, PR teams can look at consumers' traits, and determine how these traits enhance or hinder the efforts of their campaigns. Once a PR team explores the traits of their target market, their campaign can be catered to these specific traits to increase the probability of the campaign being successful. PR teams can also use the situational subtype to try to develop a likely successful campaign. The situations a target market may be facing can determine their view on a PR team's campaign. How successfully a campaign is received by a consumer can have to do with the consumer's current situation. When target markets are developed, PR teams look at all of the statistics regarding that market, and commonalities the people in that market share. These statistics should provide PR teams with the information to decide how, where, and when to deliver their campaigns. All three of these variables can control how effectively the campaign is received by the target market. Marketing campaigns to the dispositions and situations of the campaign's target market will increase the chances of the said campaign being effective.

I chose to explore the attribution theory because of how applicable it is. It can be used in many different respects and can be used to explore and explain behavior, which is the part of psychology that interests me the most. While researching studies that used this theory, I found many different fields in which it had been used, ranging from perceptions of mental health to sales. My major is public relations, so that is why I chose to explore how the attribution theory has been and can be used in this field. I would like to work on a public relations team one day, and I believe knowing how this theory works can be incredibly important in the process of creating a successful PR campaign. I believe this theory can help PR teams have a better understanding of the people they are marketing to. If these teams can manipulate the attributions associated with their brand positively with their target markets, it will likely have a positive effect on the success of the campaign. By looking at the behavior of the people they are marketing to, along with these people's dispositions and situations. Looking further into their target market's traits and the situations they are facing can also help create a more successful campaign.

I had originally known that the attribution theory could be applied to multiple things, I learned while researching that it can be applied to almost anything. There was an abundant amount of studies that used this theory to test hypotheses', but I didn't realize how much this theory could intertwine with other disciplines of psychology. I saw studies that used the attribution theory to

explore social loafing, and the emotions that were attributed to the success or failure of groups. I thought it was interesting how the two correlated with one another. Though I knew this theory had a broad reach, I didn't quite realize how much it actually covered.

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