

## The “Drinking-Buddy” Scale and Perceptions of Assertiveness, Responsiveness and Authenticity

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### Abstract

Previous research has reported that the “Drinking-Buddy” scale, a single question frequently used in political polls, could be interpreted as a single-item measure of para-social behavior as it related to interpersonal attraction. This study attempted to expand understanding of the concept by testing whether responses to the “Drinking Buddy” question was also related to several other interpersonal traits, i.e., authenticity, assertiveness and responsiveness. The participants were college students who voted in the 2012 election. They rated the candidates, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, as drinking buddies and then rated each of these candidates in terms of the perceived authenticity, assertiveness and responsiveness. It was hypothesized that participants’ ratings for each of these candidates’ traits would be higher for the candidate they chose as a drinking buddy, but that there should be no statistical differences between the ratings that the supporters of each candidate rated their own candidate. All of the directional hypotheses were supported for each of the three variables.

**Keywords:** Drinking buddy; Barack obama; Buddies; Hypotheses; Political candidates; Perceived

### Introduction

Past research on para-social behavior and the media has primarily focused on media celebrities [1,2] or athletes) [3-6]. Little work has been done to test para-social relationships with political candidates, despite the fact that the role politicians have as media personalities has been recognized since the 1960s [7]. Further, political candidates symbolically represent a number of potentially important social relationships [8], including that of personal identity [9]. Thus, some individuals apparently relate to political candidates on a quasi-interpersonal basis. That quasi-interpersonal format would imply that some individuals could evaluate those candidates in terms of variables that traditionally fall within the realm of interpersonal communication.

One approach to studying para-social behavior in politics is through the use of the “drinking-buddy” concept, i.e., is this candidate someone you would feel comfortable with while having a beer at a local. The thesis of this approach is that the “drinking-buddy” scale is a measure of how voters relate to candidates or political parties, but the specific nature of that relationship is unknown. Glazer [10], in an analysis of a nationwide sample regarding partisanship prior to the 2006 midterm elections, reported that most American voters would prefer to have a beer with a Democrat rather than a Republican. Powell, Richmond and Williams [11] found that the drinking-buddy concept was associated with perceptions of interpersonal attraction, but not with perceptions of homophily. The implicit assumption behind both studies was that the concept measures some form of interpersonal affinity toward a candidate. However, relatively few of these interpersonal variables have been tested in relationship to voters’ perceptions of political candidates.

Several other communication variables have the potential to be influenced by the drinking-buddy response, including assertiveness, responsiveness and authenticity. Assertiveness refers to the way people assert or defend themselves and their rights as individuals [12]. People with low assertiveness don’t stand up for themselves and often get taken advantage of by others. People with high levels of assertiveness tend to get ahead and don’t let others take advantage of them. This does not mean that such individuals are aggressive or rude; they simply stand their own ground. While previous research has not looked at the role of assertiveness in political images, the trait is known to be related

to leadership emergence [13] and communication competence [14].

Responsiveness is the capacity to be sensitive to the communication of others, to be seen as a listener, to make others comfortable in communicating, and to recognize the needs and desires of others. Such qualities as sympathetic, compassionate and friendliness are associated with the responsiveness construct. Responsiveness is known to be related to perceptions of government services [15], public reactions [16], and business reactions to customers [17], but it has not been tested in terms of political images.

Authenticity refers to the perception that an individual is communicating on a topic with sincerity and truthfulness. Authenticity has also been identified as a key factor in successful health communication [18], intercultural communication [19], public relations [20], advertising [21], religious communication, entertainment programs [22-27], blues music [28], and instructional communication [29]. A key component in authenticity studies is the concept that authenticity reflects the “real” person or thing. This concept is apparent whether authenticity is studied in terms of interpersonal communication [30], friendships [31], religion [32], or teaching.

Each of these three variables—assertiveness, responsiveness, and authenticity—has the potential to be an important factor in understanding how politicians communicate with voters. Further, the relationship between these variables and other forms of affinity (such as the “drinking buddy” concept) has not been tested in the political arena. This study attempted to close this gap by testing three research hypotheses:

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H1: Ratings on perceived assertiveness will be higher for the candidate selected on the "drinking-buddy" scale than the ratings for the other candidate.

H2: Ratings on perceived responsiveness will be higher for the candidate selected on the "drinking-buddy" scale than the ratings for the other candidate.

H3: Ratings on perceived authenticity will be higher for the candidate selected on the "drinking-buddy" scale than the ratings for the other candidate.

If the "drinking buddy" scale tests the para-social aspects of the relationship for each candidate equally, then supporters of each candidate should also have similar ratings for the candidates they prefer, i.e., Obama supporters' ratings for Obama should be similar to Romney's supporters' ratings for Romney. Thus, as a cross check, three null hypotheses were also tested

H4: Obama's ratings on perceived assertiveness from those who selected Obama as their drinking buddy will not differ significantly from Romney's ratings on perceived assertiveness from those who selected Romney.

H5: Obama's ratings on responsiveness from those who selected Obama will not differ significantly from Romney's ratings on responsiveness from those who selected Romney.

H6: Obama's ratings on perceived authenticity from those who selected Obama as their drinking buddy will not differ significantly from Romney's ratings on perceived authenticity from those who selected Romney.

## Method

### Sample

The participants were 110 students at a state university in introductory communication classes. Participation was voluntary. The use of this convenience sample is appropriate in this particular study, given that young people (particularly college students) played an active role in the 2012 election. The participants were provided with a written summary of the purpose of the study, assurance of the anonymous nature of their responses, and contact information for the Institutional Review Board.

### Procedures

Participants were given a questionnaire that asked a series of questions about the candidates in the 2012 presidential election. The questionnaire included items to test candidate preference, the drinking-buddy concept, and perceptions of candidate assertiveness, responsiveness and authenticity for both candidates (Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney). All responses were anonymous.

### Measures

The "drinking-buddy" concept was measured by asking "Which candidate would you feel most comfortable drinking a beer or soda with at a local bar, Barack Obama or Mitt Romney?" This measure does not have alpha reliability because it is a one-item measure, but it follows the item structure of the question reported by Glazer, changing only the candidates being tested.

Assertiveness and responsiveness were measured using the two-dimensional SocioCommunicative Style scale developed by Richmond and McCroskel [33]. The scales consist of two ten-item measures (one

measure for assertiveness, the other for responsiveness) in which respondents are asked to rate the words from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) regarding the extent to which the words described the individual being tested. The alpha reliability for these measures exceeds .80.

Authenticity was measured with a ten-item scaled developed by Hickson et al. [34]. The measured asked the respondents to rate ten words from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) regarding the extent to which the terms described the individual being tested. The alpha reliability for this measure was .85.

### Statistical analysis

All hypotheses were tested using *t*-tests to compare the means of the two groups appropriate for each hypothesis.

## Results

Hypothesis one, regarding ratings of assertiveness, was supported. For both Obama ( $t=8.51$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and Romney ( $t=7.14$ ,  $p<.001$ ), participants who chose one as a drinking buddy rated that candidate significantly higher in assertiveness and the other candidate was rated as significantly lower on assertiveness (Table 1).

Hypothesis Two, regarding ratings of responsiveness, was supported. For both Obama ( $t=13.98$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and Romney ( $t=5.35$ ,  $p<.001$ ), participants who chose one as a drinking buddy rated that candidate higher in responsiveness and the other candidate as lower (Table 1).

Hypothesis Three, regarding ratings of perceived authenticity of the candidates, was supported. For both Obama ( $t=6.62$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and Romney ( $t + 6.41$ ,  $p<.001$ ), participants who chose one as a drinking buddy rated that candidate as significantly higher in perceived authenticity, and rated the other candidate as significantly lower on authenticity (Table 1).

Null Hypothesis Four, regarding ratings of assertiveness, was confirmed. There was no significant difference between the assertiveness ratings of Obama by Obama's drinking buddies and the assertiveness ratings of Romney by Romney's drinking buddies.

Null Hypothesis Five, regarding perceived responsiveness, was confirmed. There was no significant difference between the responsiveness ratings of Obama by Obama's drinking buddies and the responsiveness ratings of Romney by Romney's drinking buddies.

Null Hypothesis Six, regarding perceived authenticity, was confirmed. There was no significant difference between the authenticity ratings of Obama by Obama's drinking buddies and the authenticity ratings of Romney by Romney's drinking buddies (Table 1).

## Discussion

This study has confirmed that the drinking buddy scale is associated with perceptions of several interpersonal traits, specifically assertiveness, responsiveness, and authenticity. This research confirms previous research which found that ratings of interpersonal attraction were associated with the concept, but is expands that research to three additional measures of interpersonal affinity. Thus far, the only interpersonal trait which has not been associated with the drinking buddy scale is that of homophily, or perceived similarity. That case may have been one in which voters have trouble viewing any presidential candidate as being similar to themselves. Regardless, these results indicate that the drinking buddy scale is an indirect measure of affinity that should be further studied by scholars.

	Mean	SD	N	t	Cohen's d	Effect Size
<b>H1a: Obama's DBs-Authenticity</b>						
Obama	33.38	9.57	65	6.62***	1.09	0.48
Romney	24.12	7.23	65			
<b>H1b: Romney's DBs-Authenticity</b>						
Romney	36.84	6.6	26	6.41***	1.78	0.66
Obama	25.34	6.33	26			
<b>H2a: Obama's Drinking Buddies--Assertiveness</b>						
Obama	34.26	6.32	65	8.51***	1.49	0.6
Romney	24.12	7.23	65			
<b>H2b: Romney's Drinking Buddies--Assertiveness</b>						
Romney	37.1	5.56	26	7.14***	1.98	0.7
Obama	23.34	8.09	26			
<b>H3a: Obama's Drinking Buddies--Responsiveness</b>						
Obama	40.35	7.38	65	13.98***	2.45	0.78
Romney	21.29	8.14	65			
<b>H3b: Romney's Drinking Buddies--Responsiveness</b>						
Romney	37.03	8.72	26	5.35***	1.45	0.6
Obama	24.69	7.9	26			
<b>H4: Authenticity--Obama Dbs vs McDBs</b>						
Romney's Dbs		36.89	6.6	26	0.19	
Obama Dbs		37.26	8.87	65		
<b>H5: Assertiveness</b>						
Romney Dbs		37	5.56	26	1.93	
Obama Dbs		34.26	6.32	65		
<b>H6: Responsiveness</b>						
Romney Dbs		37.03	8.72	26	1.8	
Obama Dbs		40.35	7.58	65		

\*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

Table 1: Drinking Buddy Study.

These results also suggest that one potential area of promising research could be to test the predictive validity of the concept in terms of theories about political relationships. Seymore-Ure, for example, argued that voters use the media to establish political relationships with candidates. Similarly, Surlin [35] argued the media audiences sometimes identify television characters as “surrogate friends,” an argument supported by subsequent research [36]. Both of these concepts offer additional opportunities for future testing of the “drinking-buddy” concept. Additional research is needed to confirm these possibilities.

Further, given the popularity of the drinking-buddy concept in media coverage, more examination is necessary to understand the concept in relation to politicians. Begala [37], for example, pointed to this concept as being a major barrier for Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential election. Germond and Witcover [38] saw a similar problem for Al Gore in the 2000 election. Still, is the concept simply another way of measuring a candidate's image, or does the concept say something about the voters' view of themselves? The goal of such research should be to establish the nature of its relationship to political images or to debunk it as a means of measuring political affinity.

Further research is also needed on the relationship between the drinking-buddy scale and potential unfulfilled social needs. Gardner and Knowles [39] have argued that para-social behavior is particularly strong among individuals who have such unfulfilled needs. That possibility should be expanded to include the “drinking-buddy” concept to verify if psychological or social needs are related to the concept. Future research should try to identify the nature and extent of those social needs [40,41].

## Conclusion

The current study was conducted to further understand the role of para-social behaviors between political candidates and the electorate. Specifically, this study examined the “drinking-buddy” concept as it influences voter perceptions and behaviors. It was hypothesized that a “drinking buddy” would be perceived to be assertive, responsive and authentic. Three additional null-hypotheses were offered to test whether these perceptions could be affected contextually by candidate or party affiliation within the 2012 presidential elections. With the confirmation of the three research hypotheses and the three contextual null-hypotheses, the relationships between the candidates being seen as a good drinking-buddy and believing the candidates being seen as assertive, responsive and authentic held in spite of the specific candidate or party affiliation, thereby discounting these contingencies as possible sources of conversation. Thus the “drinking-buddy” question does, in fact, tap into fundamental perceptions and beliefs of the electorate, particularly in terms of affinity for their favorite political candidate. Thus the value of this question does provide insight into voter's para-social behaviors.

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