

Framing Strategies of Charismatic Leaders: The Case Study of Alibaba

Abstract

This paper examines how charismatic leaders alter their framing strategy in different contexts, in particular the attribution of ethos, to make a claim of credibility based on their authority. In particular, we draw on the literature on charismatic leadership and framing to analyze the rhetoric of Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba, under different levels of ethos, from low to medium to high. Adopting a topic modeling approach, we found that, at high levels of ethos, Ma's framing strategy is visionary or oriented toward the future. In comparison, at medium levels of ethos, his framing strategy tends to focus on addressing the current problem, and with low ethos, he become more conservative, conforming, and rule-following. In essence, we argue that Ma's framing strategy for entrepreneurship and innovation under low, medium, and high levels of ethos is actively articulated through references to the past, present, and future, respectively.

Keywords: charismatic leadership, framing, Jack Ma of Alibaba, topic modeling, ethos

Well, he had no business plan and zero revenue, employs maybe 35-40 employees, but his eyes were very strong, strong eyes, shining eyes. I could tell from the way he talked, the way he looked at us, that he has a charisma, he has a leadership...His business model was wrong. It's the way he talked, the way you know he can bring young Chinese people to follow him. ~ Masayoshi Son, CEO of SoftBank¹

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, management and leadership scholars have tried to identify the communication techniques of charismatic leaders from a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Antonakis, d'Adda, Weber, and Zehnder, 2022; Den Hartog and Verburg, 1997; Glynn and Dowd, 2008; Heracleous and Klaering, 2014; Shamir, Arthur, and House, 1994). These endeavors have led to a much deeper understanding of charismatic leadership. Yet, although there is widespread agreement that charismatic leadership depends on the relationships among leaders, followers, and situations (Conger, 1991; Gardner and Avolio, 1998; Shamir, 1995; Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, and Popper, 1998), research on charismatic leadership has largely overlooked the critical factor of context.

Recent work has called for more socially specific ways of investigating leaders' communication techniques (Atwater, Yu, Tawse, Fields, McFarren, and Nae, 2021; Bligh and Robinson, 2010; Heracleous and Klaering, 2014). In response to this call, we draw on the literature on charismatic leadership and framing to answer the following research question: *How do charismatic leaders alter their framing strategy in different contexts, in particular the attribution of ethos, to make a claim of credibility based on the authority of the speaker?* Empirically, we adopt the topic modeling approach (Blei, 2012; Blei, Ng, and Jordan, 2003) to study how Jack Ma of Alibaba, a well-recognized charismatic leader, exercised framing strategies that are sensitive to social contexts characterized by different levels of ethos attribution to the leaders. Our study contributes to understanding of the role of language in charismatic leadership as well as to the study of framing strategy itself.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, the literature on charismatic leadership and framing is reviewed. This is followed by a description of the case and the methods used. Next, we present and elaborate on the six identified frames (technological innovation, social responsibility, visionary future, universal laws, robust transformation, and common interests) and their applications at different levels of ethos. The paper concludes with implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

¹ Adapted from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPt1PG-Kznk> (accessed January 2022).

2. THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

Charismatic leadership

Originally rooted and advocated in sociology and political science, charismatic leadership is central to the study of organization and management (Banks, Engemann, Williams, Gooty, McCauley, and Medaugh, 2017; Shamir, 1995). A pioneer in this area, Weber (1968: 241) characterizes charisma as an important component of effective leadership, “a certain quality of an individual by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” As such, charismatic leaders have been widely defined as those persons who “by the force of their personal abilities are capable of having profound and extraordinary effects on followers” (House and Baetz, 1979: 339). Building on this line of work, organizational scholars started to look into the qualities and abilities of leaders, such as personality (Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt, 2002; Lord, De Vader, and Alliger, 1986), intelligence (Judge, Colbert, and Ilies, 2004) and competence (House, 1977), that make leaders appear charismatic and appealing to their audiences or followers.

However, the trait or ability approach to charismatic leadership has been criticized for its inconclusive and inconsistent results, prompting scholars to focus instead on what charismatic leaders actually do. For example, Shamir et al. (1994) made seven propositions regarding the speech content of charismatic leaders. Gardner and Avolio (1998) pointed out that charismatic leaders used impression management tactics, such as framing, scripting, staging, and performing to construct a charismatic image and identity. Out of all behaviors studied, leaders’ rhetoric or language use have drawn significant attention from organizational scholars in recent years (e.g., Antonakis et al., 2022; Baur et al., 2016; Carton, 2018). Scholars in this vein argue that the skillful use of linguistic devices such as framing (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996), metaphors (Amernic, Craig, and Tourish, 2007), and stories (Conger, 1991) plays an important role in charismatic leadership.

Despite the accumulation of research on the language of charismatic leaders, research on this topic has been based primarily on the case of U.S. politicians (e.g., Baur et al., 2016; Bligh, Kohles, and Meindl, 2004; Emrich, Brower, Feldman, and Garland, 2001; Seyranian and Bligh, 2008) or Western business leaders (e.g., Amernic et al., 2007; Heracleous and Klaering, 2014; Sharma and Grant, 2011), ignoring the contextual differences between the East and the West (Atwater et al. 2021; Barkema, Chen, George, Luo, and Tsui, 2015; Filatotchev, Wei, Sarala, Dick, and Prescott, 2020).

Moreover, although there is widespread agreement that charismatic leadership is associated with leaders, followers, and situations (Conger, 1991; Gardner and Avolio, 1998; Shamir, 1995; Shamir et al., 1998), research on charismatic leadership has largely overlooked the critical factor of context.

In response to this gap, scholars have called for increased attention to the roles of situated contexts in which the charismatic relationship is embedded (Atwater et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2017; Bligh and Robinson, 2010; Heracleous and Klaering, 2014). In the present research, we draw on past research that takes situated contexts into account and on framing theory to explore how charismatic leaders adjust their symbolic or rhetorical language based on different levels of ethos attribution to the leader.

Framing strategy

Framing, or frames and rhetorical framing, have been used and defined differently within the literature (Bell and Taylor, 2016; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). In this paper, framing refers to how charismatic leaders' communication constructs meaning and reality for both themselves and their followers. Framing is the language of charismatic leadership that has the ability to stimulate and inspire, not only through appeals to logic, but also through appeals to emotion (Burke, 1950; Pfeffer, 1981). Charismatic leaders are often described as determined, confident, and adept at shaping reality for others by "framing experience in a way that provides a viable basis for action" (Smircich and Morgan, 1982: 258). To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make it appeal to the emotions and enduring motives of the audience or follower. Charismatic leaders, via their framing, shape and reinforce shared values, promote a common identity, and interpret reality in a way that is relevant to various stakeholders in order to build legitimacy and give direction to collective action (Amernic et al., 2007; Heracleous and Klaering, 2014).

Framing can take various forms, such as the use of analogies and metaphors (Cornelissen and Clarke, 2010; Hargadon and Douglas, 2001), rhetoric (van Werven, Bouwmeester, and Cornelissen, 2019), narrative stories (Garud, Schildt, and Lant, 2014; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Vossen and Ihl, 2020), and arguments (van Werven, Bouwmeester, and Cornelissen, 2015). Despite the variety of tactics that framing encompasses, a stream of framing research, especially that on charismatic leadership, has underlined the role of linguistic frames, produced by actors through the selective use of vocabularies (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Loewenstein, Ocasio, and Jones, 2012). These linguistic frames give meaning to a subject or event, thereby shaping audiences' opinions and interpretation of an issue or entity as well as their behavior

(Cornelissen and Werner, 2014; Giorgi, 2017; Giorgi and Weber, 2015).

Furthermore, prior work (e.g., Cornelissen and Clarke, 2010; Fisher, Kuratko, Bloodgood, and Hornsby, 2017) has suggested that, because framing encompasses language or other symbols, it is easy for actors to adopt and adjust different framing strategies as conditions change and when communicating with different audiences. However, such an effect cannot be assumed. As Benford and Snow (2000: 628) argue, framing “does not occur in a structural or cultural vacuum” but is embedded in a larger social setting that enables and constrains individual agency in taking strategic action. As a result, research on charismatic leadership and framing has seen progress towards capturing varied contexts to better understand contextual aspects of language use and the development of charismatic leadership. Accounts of context differ, and in this paper, we focus on leaders’ perceived ethos (credibility) in their respective situations, given that charismatic leaders’ authority was considerably based on their ethos (Heracleous and Klaering, 2014; Tompkins, 1987). We show that the perceived credibility or character of the leader, an important aspect of context, is fundamental in offering clues as to the appropriate framing strategy to be employed.

3. METHOD

Case and approach

Our case study involves Jack Ma of Alibaba who, as a “revelatory” case (Yin, 1984), has been chosen for two main reasons. First, Jack Ma is widely regarded as a charismatic leader (Clark, 2018; Svensson, 2021), who has been called “China’s Pied Piper” and the “godfather of the Internet in China” (*Economist*, 2006). Media and analysts regard him as a visionary and as “China’s most famous celebrity business tycoon” (Xie, 2018). He is thus of major significance to a study of business leaders’ framing and rhetorical competence, a status equivalent to GE’s Jack Welch and Apple’s Steve Jobs. Second, Jack Ma of Alibaba has given talks and speeches at a wide range of events including prestigious international events and press conferences, during which he addresses his new ventures and, in particular, the controversy regarding Alipay. The widely varied credibility of Jack Ma in these different contexts enables us to observe and explore how charismatic leaders contingently change their framing strategies with different levels of personal credibility. Furthermore, as a case study, Jack Ma’s framing of his ventures not just “motivates” or “inspires” the search for effective entrepreneurship, but also “illustrates” why strategic framing matters to charismatic leadership (Siggelkow, 2007).

The basic approach used for this study is the topic modeling technique (Blei, 2012; Blei et al., 2003), originating from machine learning and computational linguistics. Topic modeling has recently been used widely in organizational and management research, including leadership research (Doldor, Wyatt, and Silvester, 2019). This automated content analysis technique enables us to inductively extract the latent topics and topic distribution in a collection of documents (Hannigan et al., 2019; Schmiedel, Müller, and vom Brocke, 2019). The topics identified by topic modeling can be viewed as frames that the charismatic leaders variably employed to facilitate the process of reason and persuasion.

Data collection

We collected Jack Ma's speeches on various occasions, ranging widely in audience size, from international conferences to local meetings and written communication, such as his op-ed article in the *Wall Street Journal* and a letter to the Alibaba staff. Both oral and written communication have been identified as useful framing strategies employed by entrepreneurs to secure investment (Clarke, Cornelissen, and Healey, 2019) and by CEOs to influence different stakeholders (Amernic et al., 2007; Choudhury, Wang, Carlson, and Khanna, 2019). Following this line of research, we posit that framing encompasses oral and written language and include both forms of communication in our sample. Our objective here is not just to use a variety of data sources, but also to include occasions or venues as varied as the analysis of ethos (Aristotle, 1991; Heracleous and Klaering, 2014). As summarized in Table 1, our sample consists of 13 texts from 2009 through 2020 (69,809 words). We evaluated Jack Ma's level of ethos in our sample as follows.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

In high-ethos contexts, Jack Ma was invited to deliver speeches at international conferences, local meetings, and award ceremonies. In those contexts, Jack Ma was perceived as credible and charismatic. Comparatively, texts classified as low-ethos attribution represent situations in which Jack Ma appeared to address controversies and scandals, such as counterfeit products on Taobao, a shopping website of Alibaba, and the controversial ownership transfer of Alipay without Yahoo's approval. These incidents put Jack Ma's credibility in question and threatened his status. Lastly, texts

with medium-ethos attribution are situations in which Jack Ma communicated with Alibaba's staff and stakeholders about the company and its development. In those contexts, Jack Ma was not praised as a charismatic leader, nor was his credibility undermined, and therefore we categorized those texts as medium-ethos attribution.

We chose our 13 texts to take into account the diversity of audience, time, and event, so as to explore Jack Ma's framing strategies in different contexts. To avoid a single-source bias, we also made sure that these texts could be collected and verified from at least three credible sources (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Data analysis

With regard to the topic modeling approach, we used Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), the most widely applicable statistical model (Blei, et al, 2003; Hannigan et al., 2019; Huang, Lehavey, Zang, and Zheng, 2018), to analyze the content of Jack Ma's frames. Several preprocessing steps are necessary to create the corpus for the LDA analysis. First, we adopted the *Jieba* tokenizer, a Chinese word segmentation tool (Chen and Hsu, 2018; Li, Chen, and Sun, 2003). Next, we removed highly infrequent words and stop words such as "and," "the," "but," "a," and "if" that contain little topical content (Blei, 2012; Hickman, Thapa, Tay, Cao, and Srinivasan, 2022).

After preprocessing our data, we then conducted topic modeling analysis by applying the LDA algorithm to our corpus with the *gensim* package in Python to generate topics. We first used a quantitative metric such as coherence score and perplexity to estimate the appropriate number of topics (Hannigan et al., 2019; Sarta, Durand and Vergne, 2021). We observed several models containing from 1 to 10 topics, as shown in Figure 1, and found inconsistent results from their coherence scores and perplexity.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Following recent similar practices (Choi, Menon, and Tabakovic, 2021; DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei, 2013; Kaplan and Vakili, 2015), we then produced an interactive visual of the topics by utilizing the *pyLDAvis* package in Python (Sievert and Shirley, 2014) to determine the appropriate number of topics. The package enables us to observe different numbers of topics by examining (1) the most relevant terms for each topic; (2) the prevalence of each topic in our documents; and (3) how topics relate to each other. After manually inspecting the top words for between 3 and 10 topics for their interpretability (Chang, Boyd-Graber, Gerrish, Wang, and Blei, 2009), we settled on a

topic model of 6 topics as most coherent. We show the pyLDAvis visualization output of our final topic model in Figure 2 and present the most relevant terms for each topic in Table 2. After deciding on the appropriate number of topics in our corpus, we generated the topic–document matrix (see Table 3) that shows topic weights for each document in our corpus.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

[Insert Table 2 about here]

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Finally, we worked to label the topics generated based on the most frequently appearing words. This step also serves to validate the topics generated by the model (Kaplan and Vakili, 2015). We reviewed the high-probability words in each topic, as shown in Table 2, as well as the documents with the highest probabilities of belonging to their respective topics. As we developed from these keywords and topics to build causal relationships, we also conducted further literature review to increase trustworthiness and provide thick description. Our objective here is to avoid single-method bias, using an iterative process of confronting theory with data, interpretation, labeling and relabeling.

4. FINDINGS

We begin our discussion of the research findings with each of the topics and then move to discussing how Jack Ma used these framing strategies with different levels of ethos attributed to him. Table 2 displays the 6 topics/frames, listing the 15 highest-ranked terms for each topic. Table 4 displays 6 frames and exemplary texts. All quotes cited in this analysis were translated from Chinese by the authors.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Technological innovation

Major terms that substantiate this topic are *finance*, *world*, *future*, *technology*, *innovation*, etc. The topic highlights the global changes expected in the future due to new technologies. These changes will affect people’s daily lives and even affect each country’s financial system. Jack Ma believes that, in the future, the development direction of the entire country should be pointed toward the digital industry to drive the

country's economy, and Internet technology should be implemented in everyone's lives. For example, Jack Ma said at the World Zhejiang Business Shanghai Forum in 2019:

"In the next ten years, the rules of the world's trade game will change, digital currencies will bring changes to the financial system, and the world pattern will change due to technology."

In addition to mentioning that new technologies will bring major changes to the world, Jack Ma also mentioned the importance of using technology to innovate in the future and that innovation is a key factor in seizing and creating opportunities. At the 2014 Asia Society's Award Ceremony for Game Changers, Jack Ma stated thus:

"I have always been a person who believes in the future...I believe in innovation...If most people are complaining, that's where the opportunity lies."

Social responsibility

Major terms that substantiate this topic include *world, future, success, technology, and client*. The topic highlights that Alibaba not only makes good use of technology to achieve outstanding business outcomes but is also responsible for giving back the benefits obtained to society and using Internet technology to make society a better place. For example, in 2016, Jack Ma published an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal:

"When Alibaba went public in 2014, I told our users, employees and shareholders that today what we raised is not money but trust, especially the trust of our clients...Every day, people around the world pay attention to whether we can stick to our promise. Therefore, I hope all of us can take on the responsibility for this trust and don't forget the original goal of our business."

Jack Ma also demonstrated the concept of Alibaba's obligation to provide high-quality services and platforms in his speech at the World Zheshang Shanghai Forum in 2019:

"Only those companies with good products and good services to help others succeed can do better and lead in the era of globalization."

Visionary future

Major terms that substantiate this topic include *society, development, future, open, and share*. The topic highlights Alibaba's expectations for its future operations. For example, Jack Ma believes that Alibaba will become a successful company in the future. Alibaba will assume social responsibility, share the fruits of success with other companies and users, and accept contributions from other companies to develop together a win-win situation. For example, Jack Ma stated in his speech at the 2020 China Green Company Annual Meeting that:

"We must insist on openness...The future of globalization should be that small-and medium-sized

enterprises from developing countries enter the world economy...The key to this new globalization is the internet.”

Similar points are made by his internal letter to all Alibaba employees in 2010, “Survival for Ideals”:

“Alibaba wants to build a new business civilization featuring openness, transparency, sharing, and responsibility. We want to provide a platform that can help at least 10 million small- and medium-sized enterprises around the world survive and develop.”

Universal laws

Major terms that substantiate this topic are *shareholder*, *payment*, *negotiate*, *interest*, *board of directors*, etc. The topic mainly emphasizes how Alipay, a financial tool developed by Alibaba, is legal and healthy in China. Jack Ma repeatedly stated that the development of Alipay has unlimited possibilities, but it also brings operational complexity. Alipay provides users with online payment, digital finance, online lending, and other services that disrupt traditional finance, so it is necessary to strengthen its management. Jack Ma has also said many times that Alipay not only benefits Alibaba, but also bears responsibility. He emphasized that Alipay can be developed into any form, but the priority is to obtain the permission of the country and comply with the law. For example, at the press conference about Alipay, Jack Ma attached great importance to laws and regulations:

“Still negotiating. But our principle is that first of all it has to be 100% legal. Secondly, it has to be transparent and the third is to ensure the continued, healthy, and stable development of Alipay.”

Also in this conference, Jack Ma indicated that:

“My stand on Alibaba is that all interests can be discussed and negotiated. The only thing that is not negotiable is that it must comply with the regulations and law by getting the license when operating.”

Robust transformation

Major terms that substantiate this topic are *economy*, *future*, *development*, *finance*, and *change*. The topic mainly highlights that global business and economic development have undergone major changes due to technological advances, and companies must make changes in response to such changes. Jack Ma has repeatedly expressed the view that companies need to make changes to sustain development and create opportunities on different occasions. For example, at the 2009 Alibaba shareholders meeting and the 2019 World Zhejiang Business Shanghai Forum, Jack Ma mentioned:

“When the economic situation is good, there are bad companies going bankrupt. And when the

economic situation is bad, there are great companies. Thus, don't blame the external environment, change yourself and take action."

A similar argument made in this meeting is illustrated below:

"The country or company which can adjust their industrial value chain will be able to seize the future. We must realize that the world economy is undergoing fundamental changes... We strongly suggest that our country developed modern finances. It's mean that government need to reform backward financial system and build a modern financial system that follow future trends."

Common interests

Major terms that substantiate this topic are *assist*, *Internet*, *world*, *country*, and *believe*. This topic highlights the reason Alibaba can be established as a strong e-commerce system. Alibaba has helped many small businesses and people and operates under the belief that only by helping others can the company succeed and improve its business operations. For example, at the 2014 Asia Society's Award Ceremony for Game Changers, Jack Ma mentioned:

"I will use the Internet to help little guys... Our faith is that you will success if you help people. All the time, I always believe in the future, young people, innovation... The word 'small' implies power and beauty."

Jack Ma also addressed this topic in his speech at the World Internet Conference in 2014:

"We believe that if the Internet is the most revolutionary technology in this century, it must be able to do things that it couldn't do yesterday. Then what can't be done yesterday? Is to help small businesses and people who haven't been helped in the past."

Framing strategy in different levels of ethos

We moved to discuss the particulars of the framing strategies used by Jack Ma with different levels of ethos. Table 5 displays patterns of frames used with different levels of attribution of ethos. Table 6 displays illustrative data for patterns of frames under different levels of attribution of ethos.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

[Insert Table 6 about here]

With high levels of ethos, Jack Ma's framing strategy is generally visionary or future-oriented, emphasizing technological innovation in e-commerce, the telling of an optimistic scenario, and the aggregation of common interests to create a new world. For illustration, at China Green Companies Summit, Jack Ma stated:

"Small is beautiful, this is another thing that I believe in. If there is no company to help the little

guy, then I will use Internet technology to help them. Multinational corporations can develop very well on Wall Street. However, SMEs don't have enough resources, and no one helps them grow... All the time, I believe in the future, young people, innovation." (H1)

In contexts characterized by medium levels of ethos, Jack Ma's framing strategy or style is oriented toward the problems of the present and immediate situations, focusing on the necessity to unfreeze the status quo of the industry, and the narratives of the potential benefits that accrue from social and organizational change. For example, at the 20th Anniversary Celebrations of Alibaba, Jack Ma said:

"In the future, domestic demand will be a significant factor in solving economic problem...In addition, new globalization is another way to solve problems. The world is afraid of the rise of China and the Internet technology that China possesses. Technology should be kind...We hope that Alibaba will contribute to the new globalization and bring countless opportunities to the world in the future. Moreover, Alibaba hopes to build global commodity trade networks and help people all over the world get financial support." (M3)

When perceived as low ethos, Jack Ma's framing strategy has changed to become more conservative, conforming, and appealing to history and tradition, in that he frequently refers to the shared past, familiar ventures, and governmental regulations to justify Alibaba's business. For example, in Jack Ma's Wall Street Journal Op-ed in 2016, he said:

"We want to be a company that is different from traditional companies. We deeply believe in our mission...We hope to use Internet technology to let Chinese commercialism be acceptable...We can act in accordance with the law, follow by the principles, and abide by the contract. However, under the imperfect legal system, leadership is still needed." (L3)

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we examined how charismatic leaders alter their framing strategy in different contexts, in particular the attribution of ethos, with a claim to credibility based on the authority of the speaker. Drawing on the charismatic leadership literature and framing theory, we conducted a case analysis of Jack Ma, the founder of Alibaba, who has skillfully applied language to communicate ideas, direct followers, and develop legitimacy. Adopting the topic modeling approach, we examined Jack Ma's framing strategy under different levels of ethos, from low to medium to high. We found that, with high levels of ethos, Jack Ma's framing strategy is visionary or future-oriented, emphasizing technological innovation in e-commerce, the telling of an optimistic scenario, and the aggregation of common interests to create a new atmosphere. In contexts characterized by medium levels of ethos, Jack Ma's framing strategy or style is oriented to the problems of present and immediate situations, focusing on arguing for the necessity to secure the status quo of the industry, and the narratives of the potential benefits that arise from social and organizational change. When the context is perceived

as low ethos, Jack Ma's framing strategy shifts to become more conservative, conforming, and appealing to history and tradition, in that he frequently refers to the shared past, familiar ventures, and governmental regulations to justify Alibaba's business. In essence, we argue that Ma's framing strategy for entrepreneurship and innovation under low, medium, and high levels of ethos is actively articulated through references to the past, present, and future, respectively.

Implications for research and practice

This paper has important implications for both research and practice. In terms of research, our analysis produces new evidence of charismatic leadership as a social construction of meaning through language (Emrich et al., 2001; Heracleous and Klaering, 2014). We thus contribute to scholarship at the intersection of leadership and entrepreneurship (Cogliser and Brigham, 2004; Reid, Anglin, Baur, Short, Buckley, 2018) by drawing on the theoretical concept of framing and showed that framing strategies of charismatic leaders is contingent on the degree of ethos. We link charismatic content with situational context. Furthermore, our empirical analysis adds to the temporal orientation of charismatic framing. We found that Jack Ma's framing strategy toward entrepreneurship and innovation in context characterized as low, medium, and high ethos is actively articulated through references to the past, present and future, respectively. Our findings thus indicate that, throughout the charismatic framing process, charismatic leaders need to adjust their temporal orientations in response to the changing contexts they embed in order to mobilize and induce actions from followers.

In terms of practical implications, our research has the potential to provide a repertoire of framings for organizational leaders and entrepreneurs. It is important for both organizational leaders and entrepreneurs to possess "charismatic leadership tactics" (Antonakis, Fenley, and Liechti, 2011) to motivate followers and mobilize resources (Antonakis et al., 2022; Cogliser and Brigham, 2004; Reid et al., 2018), especially in situations of high risk, ambiguity, or uncertainty. Our analysis should provide a toolbox for practitioners to construct effective framing strategies in different contexts.

Limitation and future research

The study has two main limitations. As a single case study, it has inevitably limited generalizability. However, the focus on a single case was necessary to explore how effective leaders change their framing to respond to uncertainties and contingencies. Moreover, by contrasting our results with the literature on the western context, we are

able to identify distinctive elements of charismatic leadership in Chinese contexts. The second limitation is that our data are limited to Ma's communication and thus do not allow for observations of how the framing were evaluated in the eyes of the audience. This is a direction that could be explored in future research. Future research could also continue to expand our understanding of charismatic leadership by exploring whether the skilled use of the past, present, and future through framing is a key competence of charismatic leaders or entrepreneurs.

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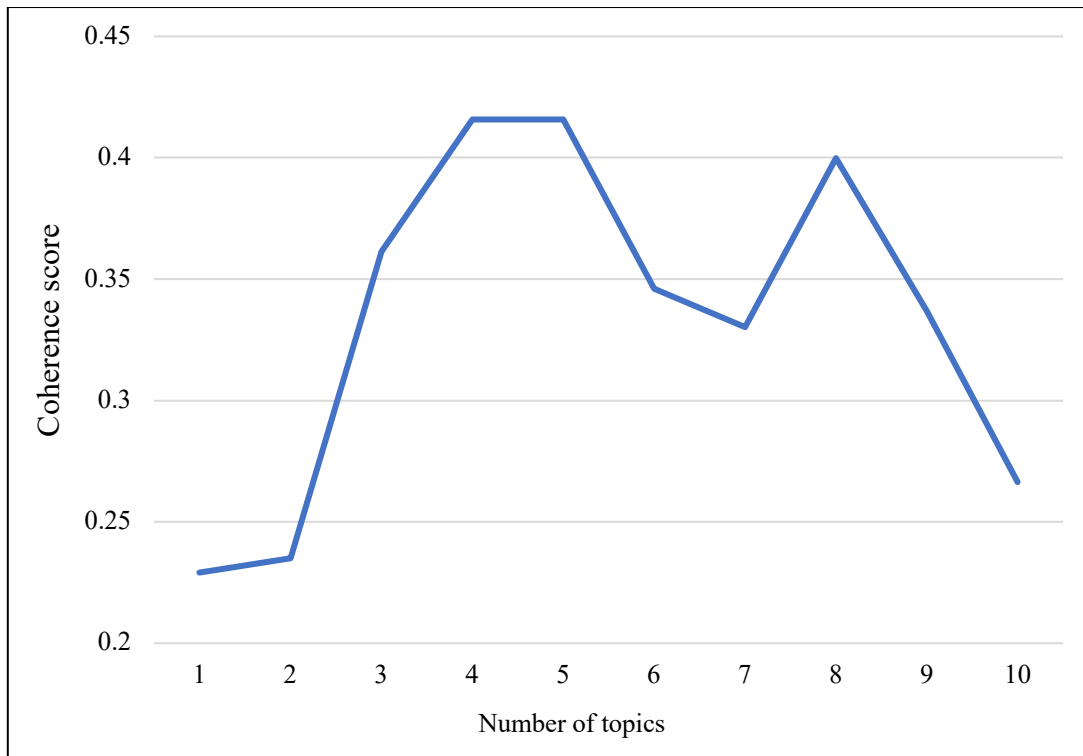
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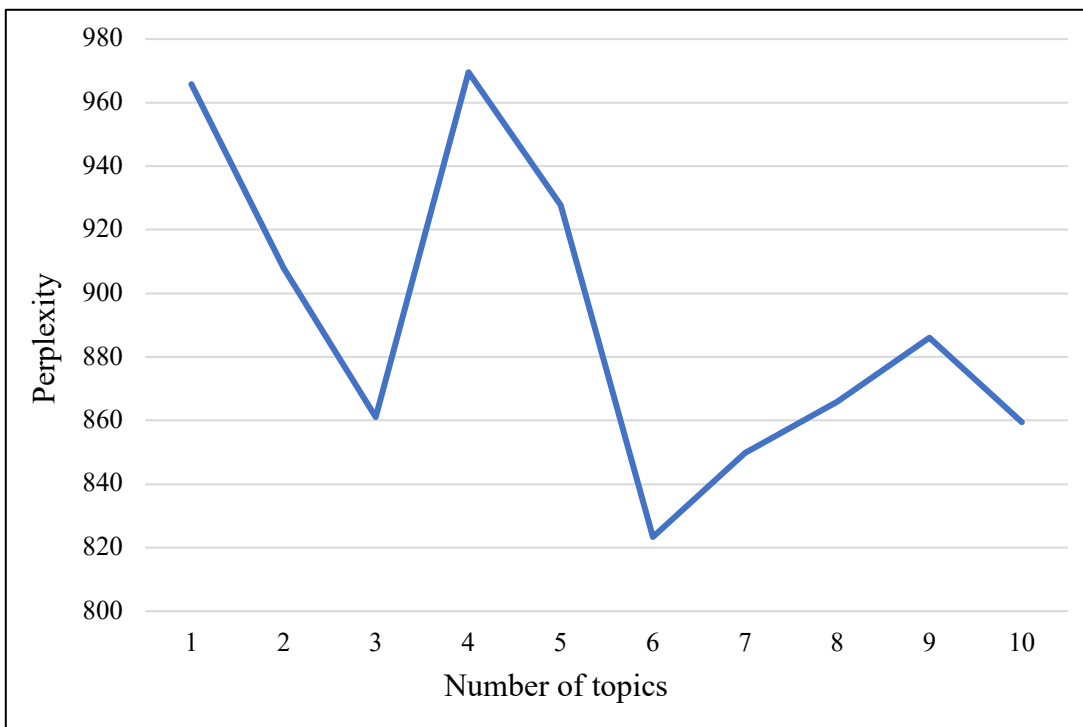
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Table 1. Jack Ma's Framing Data with Different Attribution of Ethos

Ethos	Date	Text	# of words
High	2014/10/16	Asia Society's Award Ceremony for Game Changers (H1)	1,539
	2014/11/20	World Internet Conference (H2)	9,030
	2015/11/18	APEC CEO Summit 2015 (H3)	3,004
	2018/10/25	The Israel - China Joint Committee on Innovation Cooperation (H4)	2,483
	2020/09/28	China Green Companies Summit (H5)	4,298
Medium	2009/05/07	The 2009 Annual General Meeting (M1)	8,373
	2010/05/14	The 2010 Annual General Meeting (M2)	6,190
	2019/09/10	The 20th Anniversary Celebrations of Alibaba (M3)	1,681
	2020/10/26	The Bund Summit (M4)	4,402
Low	2010/09/05	Jack Ma's Letter to Staff: Survive the Ideal (L1)	2,317
	2011/06/14	Press Conference about Alipay (L2)	20,784
	2016/06/23	Counterfeit Goods Have No Place on Alibaba (Wall Street Journal Op-ed) (L3)	1,641
	2019/11/13	The World Zhejiang Entrepreneurs Convention (L4)	4,067
			69,809



(a) Coherence Scores



(b) Perplexity

Figure 1. Diagnostic Values by Number of Topics

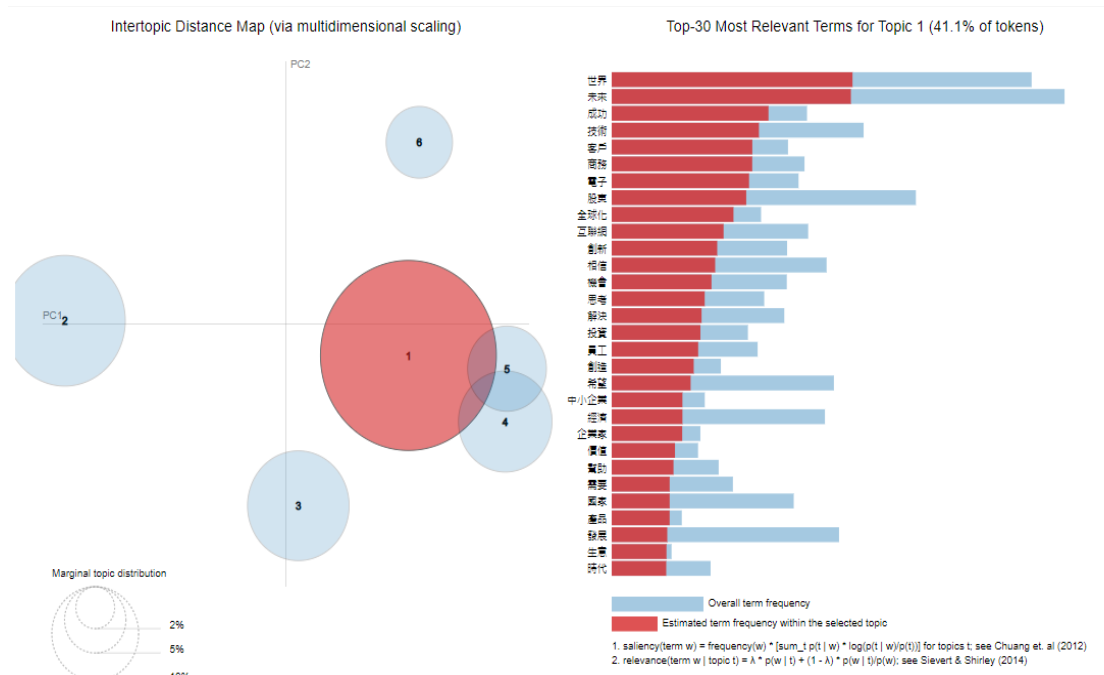


Figure 2. Rendering Topics with the pyLDAvis Visualization System

Table 2. Top Words for Selected Topics

Technological innovation	Social responsibility	Visionary future	Universal laws	Robust transformation	Common interests
Finance	World	Society	Shareholder	Economy	Assist
World	Future	Development	Payment	Future	Internet
Future	Success	Future	Negotiate	Development	World
Technology	Technology	Open	Interest	Finance	Country
Innovation	Client	Share	Bods	Change	Believe
System	Commerce	Insist	Central Bank	Consumption	Revolution
Development	Electronic	Resolve	License	Domestic demand	Little guy
Thinking	Shareholder	World	Discussion	Country	Technology
Need	Globalization	Internet	Understanding	Market	Trading
Risk	Internet	Ideal	Principle	System	Technical
Currency	Innovation	Consumer	Communicate	World	Change
Solve	Believe	Data	Director	Contemporary	SMEs
Supervision	Opportunity	Hope	Hope	Huge	Successful
Opportunity	Thinking	Shareholder	Business	E-commerce	Young People
Hope	Resolve	Responsibility	Perfect	Trade	Creative

Note: SMEs = Small and medium-sized enterprises, BODs = Board of directors

Table 3. Topic-document Matrix (Topic Probability for Each Document)

Topic Text	Technological innovation	Social responsibility	Visionary future	Universal laws	Robust transformation	Common interests
H1	0.831580	0.000899	0.000905	0.000900	0.000903	0.164812
H2	0.000144	0.000144	0.000144	0.000144	0.000144	0.999281
H3	0.000344	0.000343	0.998276	0.000345	0.000345	0.000346
H4	0.997840	0.000431	0.000433	0.000431	0.000432	0.000432
H5	0.000230	0.000231	0.998848	0.000230	0.000231	0.000230
M1	0.000153	0.000153	0.000153	0.000153	0.999234	0.000153
M2	0.000223	0.000223	0.000223	0.000223	0.998886	0.000223
M3	0.000607	0.000607	0.996968	0.000605	0.000608	0.000606
M4	0.000213	0.000214	0.998932	0.000213	0.000214	0.000214
L1	0.998213	0.000357	0.000357	0.000357	0.000358	0.000357
L2	0.000098	0.000098	0.000098	0.999509	0.000098	0.000098
L3	0.000496	0.000495	0.000496	0.000494	0.997524	0.000496
L4	0.000223	0.998886	0.000223	0.000222	0.000223	0.000223

Table 4. Frame and Exemplary Text

Frame	Exemplary Text
Technological innovation	“I have always been the kind of person who has faith in the future...I believe in innovation...If most people are complaining, that’s where the opportunity lies.” (H1) “In the past 20 years, when people asked me what I was doing, I would say ‘innovation’...Some people said ‘Jack, you know nothing about technology’... Indeed, I am not familiar with technology and sometimes scared of technology. However, I’m always the first person in Alibaba to try the newest technology and products we developed. I mean, if even I know how to use that technology, then I’m sure 80% of other people can as well...Innovators think and see things differently. They see innovation as a matter of believing it is there. Innovators don’t work by themselves; they are a collective entity.” (H4) “Technological changes will definitely bring financial changes...In the next decade...digital currencies will bring changes to the financial system, and the world will change because of technology.” (L4)
Social responsibility	“If we create value for them (clients), then we will succeed. Our philosophy is if you help others succeed, you will succeed.” (H1) “We will work hard on listening to our clients and protecting consumers’ rights as well as the interests of sellers (on our platform). We believe that in the future there will be no difference between large companies and small companies...the difference only lies in whether the company takes on the responsibility or not.” (L1) “When Alibaba went public in 2014, I told our users, employees, and shareholders that today what we raised is not money but trust, especially the trust of our clients...Every day, people around the world pay attention to whether we can keep our promises. Therefore, I hope all of us can take on the responsibility for this trust and don’t forget the original goal of our business.” (L3) “Only those companies with good products and good services that help others succeed can do better and lead in the era of globalization.” (L4)
Visionary future	“We must insist on openness...The future of globalization should be that small and medium-sized enterprises from developing countries enter into the world economy...The key to this new globalization is the internet.” (H5) “In the future, we hope that Alibaba will not become just a highly profitable, mediocre company...but will become a good company for society, the world, and our consumers. I hope that we are a good enterprise in society, in the world, and for our users...Alibaba has the most powerful technology, assets, and talents... we will bring more surprise to society with our actions.” (M3) “Alibaba wants to build a new business civilization featuring openness, transparency, sharing, and responsibility. We want to provide a platform that can help at least 10 million small- and medium-sized enterprises around the world survive and develop.” (L1)
Universal laws	“The challenge Alipay faces is a lot more complicated than anyone could ever imagine. Alipay means a huge responsibility. Therefore, we will openly and transparently discuss relevant details with all our business partners.” (L2) “Still negotiating. But our principles are, first of all, that it has to be 100% legal. Secondly, it has to be transparent, and third is to ensure the continued, healthy, and stable development of Alipay.” (L2) “My stand on Alibaba is that all interests can be discussed and negotiated. The only thing that is not negotiable is that it must comply with the regulations and law by getting the license when operating.” (L2)
Robust transformation	“When the economic situation is good, there are bad companies going bankrupt. And when the economic situation is bad, there are great companies. Thus, don’t blame the external environment, change yourself and take action.” (M1)

	“In the 21st century, a fast-growing company like Alibaba and for companies that really want to succeed...must solve social problems...Only companies that solve social problems such as Alibaba can continue to grow.” (M2) “The country or company which can adjust their industrial value chain will be able to seize the future. We must realize that the world economy is undergoing fundamental changes...We strongly suggest that our country develop modern finances. This means that the government needs to reform its backward financial system and build a modern financial system that follows future trends.” (L4)
Common interests	“I will use the Internet to help small companies...Our faith is that you will succeed if you help people. All the time, I always believe in the future, young people, innovation...The word ‘small’ implies power and beauty.” (H1) “We believe that if the Internet is the most revolutionary technology in this century, it must be able to do things that it couldn’t do yesterday. Then what can't be done yesterday is to help small businesses and people who haven’t been helped in the past” (H2) “We have already helped 12 million Chinese SMEs. Alibaba helped them sell products and find customers online. We believe that, since this business model can be successful in China, it can be successful in other countries as well... Alibaba helped small businesspeople and SME to build wealth. Moreover, Alibaba is dedicated to assisting everyone in taking advantage of the Internet as a tool to create wealth.” (H3)

Table 5. Framing in Different Attribution of Ethos

Frame Ethos	Technological innovation	Social responsibility	Visionary future	Universal laws	Robust transformation	Common interests
high	36.60%	0.04%	39.97%	0.04%	0.04%	23.30%
medium	0.03%	0.03%	49.91%	0.03%	49.97%	0.03%
low	24.98%	25.00%	0.03%	25.01%	24.96%	0.03%

Table 6. Illustrative Data for Frames in Different Ethos

Ethos	Exemplary Text
High	“Small is beautiful, this is another thing that I believe in. If there is no company helping the little guys, then I will use Internet technology to help these little guys. Multinational corporations can develop very well on Wall Street. However, SMEs don’t have enough resources, and no one helps them grow...All the time, I always believe in the future, young people, innovation.” (H1) “In the future, the development of globalization will be surrounded by technology...In the past three decades, 6000 companies determine the development of globalization, yet 60 million SMEs will determine the developmental trend of globalization in the future. The geographical expansion is the business expansion. It is a huge opportunity that the world has given us.” (H5)
Medium	“In the future, domestic demand will be a significant factor in solving economic problems...In addition, the new globalization is another way to solve problems. The world is afraid of the rise of China and the Internet technology that China possesses. Technology should be kind...We hope that Alibaba will contribute to the new globalization and bring countless opportunities to the world in the future. Moreover, Alibaba hopes to build a global commodity trade networks and let people all over the world get financial support.” (M3) “Many financial supervisory commissions around the world have a problem that the national financial system doesn’t have risk after their supervision...but the national economy has the potential risk of not developing. While upgrading supervisory skills, it is vital to ensure that there is still space for innovating...The essence of finance is credit management. Thus, we need to build a credit system in the future without just relying on the traditional mortgage guarantee concepts.” (M4)
Low	“Alibaba will never connive a brand manufacturer who produces fake products and will dedicate itself to protecting the product’s intellectual rights. Alibaba’s mission is to support those manufacturers who innovate and invest in their own brands...Failing to protect original designs, trademarks, and technology is just like supporting thievery...We have devoted considerable technology, capital, and manpower to anti-counterfeiting.” (L2) “We want to be a company that is different from traditional companies. We deeply believe in our mission...we hope use Internet technology to help Chinese commercialism be acceptable... We can act in accordance with the law, follow by the principles, and abide by the contract. However, under the imperfect legal system, leadership is still needed.” (L3)