



The effects of source cues on online news perception



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ABSTRACT

Among various interface cues, expertise, identity, and bandwagon cues have been consistently found to have significant effects on media users' perceptions of online news content. To examine the effects of these three types of heuristic cues in the context of online news consumption, the current study involved a 2 (expertise cue: low vs. high) × 2 (identity cue: in-group vs. out-group) × 2 (bandwagon cue: low vs. high) online experiment. A total of 121 undergraduate students participated in the study. Significant two-way interaction effects between the expertise and bandwagon cues on perceived credibility suggested the positive combined effect of these two cues. Moreover, significant three-way interaction effects among expertise, identity and bandwagon cues indicated that the interaction effects between expertise and bandwagon cues tend to work as a function of the identity cue. While confirming the importance of the identity cue in users' perceptions of online news, three-way interaction effects confirmed the co-occurrence of heuristic and systematic processing. The interaction effects also suggested that people process news systematically when the recommenders are out-group members, whereas they process news heuristically when the recommenders are in-group members. Theoretical as well as practical implications have also been discussed in this article.

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1. Introduction

The Internet can quickly and easily provide tremendous amounts of information traditionally delivered by offline media (Liszka, Steyer, & Hueston, 2006). Indeed, the Internet is becoming a news platform that is as popular as traditional print media. Recent estimates indicate that approximately 60% of people in the United States have consumed online news content (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010). With the great increase in the number of online users who consume online content, more and more news agencies have moved to online venues to deliver the bulk of their content; thus, online news websites now play an important role as daily news providers.

Because significant amounts of information have become available online, one of the most important challenges for online users has become distinguishing useful, credible, and quality information from that which is not. To evaluate the quality of information efficiently, people tend to employ quick judgment rules that are called heuristics or “mental shortcuts” (Sundar, 2008). More specifically, when people evaluate information online, they register

diverse interface cues that trigger credibility or quality heuristics; they also evaluate key attributes regarding the source, such as the name of the online news agency posting the information, the time the information was posted, the number of viewers, the characteristics of viewers who recommended a certain news story, and other viewers' comments (Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, & Hastall, 2007). Since the rise of the Internet as a primary news source, scholars have attempted to identify interface cues that might influence users' judgments of the quality of online news. Three cues—the expertise cue, the identity cue and the bandwagon cue—have received the greatest attention and have been empirically demonstrated to be critical in influencing users' perceptions of online news content (Sundar, Xu, & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2008).

Despite this sustained attention, little empirical work has been done to investigate the relationship among these three cues. In particular, further exploration of specific interaction effects among the three cues is still needed; moreover, the specific direction of the interaction effects among the cues remains under-examined. To bridge this gap, the current study attempts to answer the following questions: Which source cues are most powerful when judging the quality of online news content? What are the combined effects of source cues? Based on these questions, this study offers an initial empirical examination of the combined effects of interface cues on users' perceptions of news quality in the context of online news websites.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Expertise cue

The research on the effects of source expertise in information quality perception dates back to an early study conducted by [Hovland, Janis, and Kelley \(1953\)](#). This study found that a message presented by a high-expertise source is perceived to be more credible than a message presented by a low-expertise source. This result implies that the credibility of information is often determined by the believability of its source. In considering how source expertise cues influence people's perceptions of the quality of information, the MAIN model proposed by [Sundar \(2008\)](#) explains that people have a mental shortcut favoring a high expertise source that is triggered by expertise cues.

While the concept of source expertise has been used in combination with other similar concepts, such as authoritativeness ([McCroskey, 1997](#)) and competence ([Whitehead, 1968](#)), it is usually defined as “the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions,” which can derive from high levels of knowledge, ability, and skills ([Erdogan, 1999](#)). Based on this definition, studies have investigated the role of source expertise in different ways, according to the definition of the “source.” In the field of advertising, for example, researchers have explored the effect of celebrity endorsements, or expertise, on attitudinal changes and behavioral intention formations, as it is believed that the perceived quality of the celebrities can be transferred to the perceived quality of the messages ([Cho & Rifon, 2007](#)). Moreover, a meta-analysis revealed that the perceived expertise of celebrities increased the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements ([Amos, Holmes, & Stratton, 2008](#)). Source expertise cue effects have also been examined in the context of online health communication. For example, [Crisci and Kassinove \(1973\)](#) found that people were more likely to comply with a communicator's health-related advice when the communicator was a doctor (with the title of “Dr.”) as opposed to a lay person (with the title of “Mr.”).

While these previous studies have limited the definition of sources to the humans who deliver the messages, in the online domain, these sources appear in the form of media technology as well (e.g. the website itself). Therefore, studies investigating the effect of source expertise in online venues have manipulated expertise cues in more diverse ways. For instance, [Rieh and Belkin \(1998\)](#) investigated users' perceptions of website domains, and found that people perceived information available on .edu and .gov sites as higher quality than that of information available on .com sites. [Flanagin and Metzger \(2003\)](#) had similar findings regarding the effect of website sponsors on users' perceptions of the quality of information. In recent studies, the source expertise cue has been manipulated in more creative ways by examining a variety of interface cues, such as the presence/absence of the “authority seal” (e.g., CNET seal) and the presence/absence of the “authority badge” ([Sundar, Xu, & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2009](#); [Kim & Sundar, 2011](#)).

In online news quality evaluation studies, the names of news agencies, which serve as one of the interface cues on online news websites, turned out to be closely related to the heuristic of news content quality; therefore, the names of news agencies have been widely used to manipulate the level of source expertise ([Kang, Bae, Zhan, & Sundar, 2011](#)). In other words, we can expect that when people read news articles from prestigious news agencies, such as *BBC*, *The New York Times*, or *The Chicago Tribune*, they are more likely to have positive perceptions of the news stories than if they had read the stories from less prestigious or less authoritative news

agencies, such as *The National Enquirer*. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Higher levels of the expertise cue will lead to more positive evaluations of the news story.

2.2. Identity cue

It is well-established that group identity, as a non-content cue, plays an important role in the evaluation of message quality ([Shai-ken, 1980](#)). While group identity can be defined in many ways, from a social psychological perspective, the in-group/out-group identity differentiation that determines the degree of perceived social distance among people has been widely used to examine the effect of group identity cues in information processing. People have some degree of social distance between themselves and other persons based on their social positions or demographics, including age, gender, ethnicity, and education, among others ([Perloff, 1996](#)). Yet people in the same social position perceive no social distance between them, while those in the different social positions experience varying degrees of social distance. Building on this notion, [Sumner \(1906\)](#) argued that such different degrees of social distance create two group categorizations: in-group and out-group. In general, in-group members are those who belong to the same group and are perceived as more proximal, whereas out-group members are those who are outside the group and are perceived as more distal ([Fiedler, Semin, Finkenauer, & Berkel, 1995](#); [Zhao & Xie, 2011](#)). Similarly, [Perdue, Dovidio, Gurtman, and Tyler \(1990\)](#) delineated categories of “we” (i.e., in-group) and “they” (i.e., out-group) and found that the concept of “we” delivered positive value that elicits favorable responses toward the group identity.

It is perhaps natural for people to prefer in-group members to out-group members; that is, to perceive their own in-group members favorably while distrusting out-group members. Previous research has supported the positive effect of in-group membership on people's perceptions and attitudes. For example, [Mackie and Queller \(2000\)](#) suggested that common group membership helps in persuasion because feedback from in-group members is evaluated more positively than feedback from out-group members. Consistent with this finding, [Tropp and Bianchi \(2007\)](#) explored how people evaluate in-group and out-group sources differently, and found that people showed positive feelings toward in-group sources but negative feelings toward out-group sources. One recent study also found that customers prefer products recommended by in-group members than those recommended by out-group members ([Zhao & Xie, 2011](#)).

The role of group identity in individuals' behaviors and perceptions is also addressed in the theory of normative social behavior (TNSB). In TNSB, group identity is conceptualized as “the extent to which people perceive a sense of connection with their referent others” ([Real & Rimal, 2007, p. 173](#)). With regard to the effect of group identity, TNSB explains that individuals' perceptions of the prevalence of certain behaviors among a reference group that demonstrates high group identity typically have a greater influence on individual behavior than the norms of a reference group exhibiting low group identity ([Remal & Real, 2005](#)). For example, [Reed, Lange, Ketchie, and Clapp \(2007\)](#) found that, among three types of reference groups (i.e., friends, peers, and fraternity/sorority members), friends who showed the greatest social connection turned out to have the most influence on each other's drinking behaviors. In addition, [Hong, Rice, and Johnson \(2012\)](#) examined the effect of one's level of identification with one's ethnic group on normative perceptions of adolescent smoking behavior. The results showed

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