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Consuming Information from Sources Perceived as Biased versus Untrustworthy:
Parallel and Distinct Influences

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ABSTRACT

Consumer research has examined whether perceptions of ulterior motives behind marketing result in greater consumer skepticism and reduced persuasion. Yet, skepticism could stem from perceiving a message source as untrustworthy or as biased. The possibility of source bias has been relatively overlooked or conflated with untrustworthiness. Yet, recent research has demonstrated that consumers perceive source bias and untrustworthiness differently. Sources are viewed as biased when they have a skewed perception but as untrustworthy when they are dishonest. Bias and untrustworthiness can serve as independent reasons to view a source as lacking credibility, and thus can undermine persuasiveness. However, when sources switch positions, perceived bias and untrustworthiness can have different influences on surprise and different downstream consequences for the persuasiveness of the new message. Unique and common antecedents of bias versus untrustworthiness are discussed, as well as implications for consumer research.

In traditional marketing contexts, it is quite noticeable that marketers have vested interests – they have something to gain by successfully persuading consumers to purchase their products. Perhaps because of this, consumer research on people’s responses to knowing others have a vested interest/ulterior motive has proliferated. For example, influential work on the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright 1994) focused on how people respond when they know that someone is trying to persuade them. Other work focused on how source vested interest can lead people to infer that a source is being dishonest (Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Fein 1996) and, ultimately, lead that source to be less persuasive, especially when the arguments presented are weak (Priester and Petty 1995). However, even if consumers were sure that a marketer was trying to be honest, might there still be a reason to doubt what the marketer says? In addition to motivating someone to lie, vested interest can also bias a source’s view of the relevant object or topic. That is, even when trying to be honest, marketers may still view their products more favorably than they should. Although consumers would likely readily identify marketers as biased, research has not previously separated this possibility from perceptions that the source is dishonest. In the current paper, we show how separating these sources of skepticism allows researchers to predict consumers’ responses more precisely.

Furthermore, this distinction allows for predictions about times when source bias might lead to skepticism even without vested interest concerns. For example, imagine a friend has recommended going to the Smokey Mountains, where she spent her childhood summers. Although her recommendation seems earnest, might there be reason to doubt the majesty of the mountains she describes? Could nostalgia have colored her perception – might she be *biased*? Yet, she has no personal stake in Tennessee resorts. This word of mouth situation represents just one time when someone might seem biased despite trying to be honest and lacking a vested interest. Without separating perceived bias from untrustworthiness and vested interest, researchers are unable to predict consumers’ responses in such a situation. People can perceive others as biased across many domains and situations, from news consumption to product recommendations to formal advertisements. Given the pervasiveness of perceived bias, it may seem obvious that consumer research would have directly addressed the consequences of perceived bias.

Although consumer researchers have demonstrated that some source perceptions, such as trustworthiness and expertise, can have a profound impact on persuasion (e.g., Petty and

Cacioppo 1981a; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983; Priester and Petty 1995, 2003), bias has remained largely overlooked. In the current paper, we separate perceived bias from other potentially related perceptions and demonstrate that it can have parallel and distinct consequences from perceived untrustworthiness. The present analysis goes substantially beyond previous publications on this topic by unpacking how confusion around vested interest manipulations and the numerous definitions of “trustworthiness” may have led to this dearth of source bias research. It is also the first to report descriptions of qualitative data on the differences between bias and untrustworthiness as well as an experiment examining the effects of vested interest on perceived bias and untrustworthiness (both previously only reported as part of a dissertation, Wallace 2019). Finally, we highlight unexplored implications that this distinction has for future consumer research.

HOW DO BIAS AND UNTRUSTWORTHINESS DIFFER?

Conceptual Differences

As a starting point, it is important to conceptually clarify the differences between perceiving a source as biased versus untrustworthy, as these perceptions are both negative and may initially seem similar. Consistent with previous trustworthiness formulations in the persuasion literature, we define trustworthiness as honesty (cf. Priester and Petty 1995, 2003). In contrast, we define bias as having a perspective that is skewed (especially by motivation to hold a particular view or what Kruglanski 1989 called a ‘need for specific closure’). Untrustworthy people intentionally present false information, whereas trustworthy but biased people do not intend to deceive. Instead, they provide their honest, but skewed, perspective.¹

Online product reviews can include sources that would fit into the four quadrants that comprise the bias x untrustworthiness space (Table 1). For example, many reviews are now sponsored, meaning companies pay people or send them free products to write a positive review. Sponsored sources have a clear vested interest so many people would view them as both biased

¹ Some readers may also wonder about the distinction between bias and expertise. Expertise refers to the amount of knowledge a person has on the topic. People might assume that individuals with high levels of knowledge would be less likely to have biased knowledge. However, short of possessing all knowledge about a topic, the amount of knowledge seems clearly separable from potential slants in that knowledge. Additionally, even if someone has all available knowledge, the person may have motivations that cause certain pieces of that information to be disproportionately valued (see Wallace, Wegener, and Petty 2019) for additional discussion).

and untrustworthy: getting paid for their review might make them view the product more favorably than they should, and it might motivate them to lie to continue being sponsored. However, there could also be reviews from people who are simply brand loyal (e.g. “I always buy KitchenAid!”). These reviewers might represent people who are biased to view a product more favorably than they should because they like the brand but are genuinely trying to be honest. Of course, one would also hope to find objective and trustworthy reviewers such as those typically presented by *Consumer Reports*: those with no ties to the product or brand who can honestly and objectively evaluate the product. Finally, there might be objective but untrustworthy reviewers such as online trolls who are able to evaluate products objectively, but post false reviews just to mess with people.

	Untrustworthy	Trustworthy
Biased	Skewed perception + willing to lie (e.g., a sponsored review)	Skewed perception + trying to be honest (e.g., someone who is brand loyal so views brand more favorably than it deserves, but no intention to deceive)
Objective	Able to see the objective truth + willing to lie (e.g., online troll, posting false reviews just to mess with others)	Able to see the objective truth + trying to be honest (e.g., <i>Consumer Reports</i> article by someone with no ties, trying to give honest opinion)

Table 1. Examples of sources that comprise the bias x untrustworthiness space

Empirical evidence for conceptual differences between bias and untrustworthiness

In an initial attempt to assess the natural meaning of different source characteristics, Wallace (2019) conducted a qualitative study (previously only reported in the cited dissertation) in which participants simply generated descriptions of sources that were biased, unbiased, trustworthy, or untrustworthy. Participants were given one source characteristic (i.e. “biased”) at a time and were not asked to make comparisons between the different characteristics. Importantly, participants generated relatively distinct profiles for the dimensions of untrustworthiness (Table 2) and bias (Table 3). Whereas untrustworthiness descriptions primarily concerned dishonesty, the bias descriptions concerned one-sidedness and motivation to take a particular stance.

Table 2. Number of participants who generated each description for untrustworthiness

<i>Trustworthy</i>		<i>Untrustworthy</i>	
Attribute	# part.	Attribute	# part.
honest	14	unreliable	9
dependable	10	dishonest	4
reliable	9	inconsistent	3
sincere	3	undependable	2
consistent	2	sketchy	2
compassionate	2	shifty	2
believable	1	deceitful	1
reputable	1	scheming	1
safe	1	shady	1
aboveboard	1	unaccountable	1
open	1	insincere	1
well-meaning	1	fake	1
nice	1	unbelievable	1
logical	1	withholding	1
comfortable	1	artificial	1
clean	1	cruel	1
well-dressed	1	lazy	1

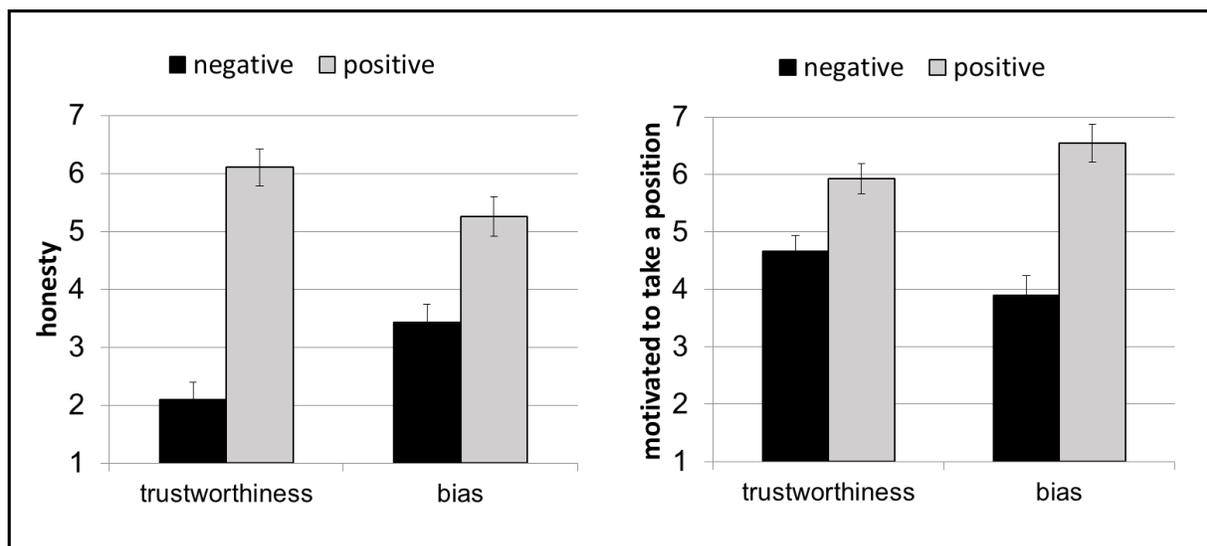
Table 3. Number of participants who generated each description for bias

<i>Unbiased</i>		<i>Biased</i>	
Description	# part.	Description	# part.
see both good and bad	13	one-sided	14
no preference	11	unwarranted partiality	7
nothing to gain	11	personal interest	7
non-prejudiced	5	pre-conceived	6
open-minded	5	unpersuaded by counter-attitudinal info	6
unattached to a particular side	5	close-minded	5
neutral	4	have a preference	5
no preconceived ideas	3	prejudiced	5
no strong opinions	3	try to convince others	4
non-judgmental	3	unwilling to seek out facts	4
objective	3	affiliated	3
curious	2	favoritism	3
tolerant	2	unfair	3
fair	1	personal beliefs interfere	3
honest	1	experience	3
no relation	1	strong beliefs	3
sincere	1	emotional	2
no stake in the game	1	repeat the same points	2
no emotion	1	adamant	1
explaining reasons for position	1	not objective	1
		predisposed	1
		stereotyping	1
		does not see big picture	1
		political leaning	1

To test these differences experimentally, Wallace, Wegener, and Petty (2019a; Study 1a) provided participants with source descriptions designed to capture the bias and untrustworthiness dimensions. The hypothesis was that perceived bias would capture perceived source motivation to hold a particular (skewed) view, whereas perceived untrustworthiness would capture perceived source dishonesty. Thus, in a between-subjects experiment with a 2 (concept: motivation versus honesty) x 2 (valence: positive versus negative) design, participants viewed one source description (e.g. “honest”) and rated the source along the bias and untrustworthiness dimensions. Indeed, when the source was described as honest versus dishonest, participants perceived a larger difference in how trustworthy the source was than in how biased the source was (Figure 1). However, when the source was described as motivated to take a particular position versus open to taking either position, participants perceived a larger difference in how

biased the source was than in how trustworthy the source was. Thus, experiments with researcher-imposed source descriptions and a qualitative study with participant-generated source descriptions have each provided evidence for the conceptual distinction between bias and untrustworthiness. Importantly, neither study prompted participants to compare or contrast bias and untrustworthiness, nor did they ask participants to provide descriptions of one characteristic at a particular level of the other (i.e. “biased but trustworthy source”). When viewing only one characteristic at a time, participants spontaneously viewed them as distinct.

Figure 1. Effects of the “motivated to take a position” and “dishonesty” dimensions on trustworthiness and a lack of bias [adapted from Study 1a of Wallace, Wegener, and Petty (2019a)].



VESTED INTEREST AS A COMMON ANTECEDANT TO BIAS AND UNTRUSTWORTHINESS

Given that bias and untrustworthiness are conceptually distinct, one might wonder why they had been conflated in earlier research. As mentioned earlier, we speculate that one reason stems from a focus on source vested interest – having something to gain through a persuasive attempt. Given that traditional marketers almost invariably have a vested interest, the focus seems reasonable, though as the examples above illustrate, it does not encompass all consumer-relevant situations. Within this vested interest focus, researchers have typically either conflated bias with untrustworthiness or focused exclusively on the consequences of a vested interest for

dishonesty. For example, some research has found that people who have an ulterior motive are typically perceived as less sincere (though there are moderators, see Campbell and Kirmani 2000; Fein 1996; Fein, Hilton, and Miller 1990). Additionally, research on persuasion has repeatedly used vested interest as a source honesty manipulation (e.g. Briñol, Petty, and Tormala 2004; Hovland and Mandell 1952; Pratkanis et al. 1988; Priester and Petty 1995; Tormala, Briñol, and Petty 2006) and demonstrated that sources with a vested interest tend to be less persuasive (though there are boundary conditions, see for example Priester and Petty 2003; Wei, Fischer, and Main 2008).

Although researchers have often explicitly discussed vested interest as affecting dishonesty, researchers have occasionally interchangeably referred to it as affecting perceived bias. For example, when describing a Hovland and Mandell (1952) study that examined source vested interest consequences, Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953) referred to the speaker with a vested interest as “motivated” to take the position they did (which seems akin to bias) but they referred to the source without a vested interest as “honest” (which seems akin to trustworthiness), “fair,” and “impartial” (which seem more akin to a lack of bias). As another example, Walster, Aronson, and Abrahams (1966) demonstrated that when sources advocate against rather than for their interests (e.g. a criminal advocating for more powerful prosecutors), they were perceived as more credible and more persuasive. Walster et al. (1966) found that this source manipulation affected perceived honesty (see also McPeck and Edwards 1975). However, Koeske and Crano (1968) described the Walster et al. (1966) manipulation as a source bias manipulation.

It makes sense that researchers would have inferred that these manipulations could affect either perception. Having a vested interest might lead people to lie. Imagine a stereotypical used car salesman—this person might choose to be dishonest to sell more cars. However, even if consumers assume that the used car salesman is being completely honest, they may infer that his/her connection with the cars and the commission he/she would earn in selling them might bias his/her perception of them.

Empirical evidence for vested interest effects on perceived bias and untrustworthiness

Research has not generally measured both perceived bias and untrustworthiness in response to vested interest manipulations. However, recent research reported in a dissertation has done just that (Wallace 2019). In a study in which participants were told that a source was trying

to persuade them of the benefits of phosphate-based laundry detergents, they read that the source was either a detergent manufacturer or a consumer advocacy group that investigates products to help consumers make sound decisions (mirroring previously used vested interest manipulations, Briñol, Petty, and Tormala 2004; Pratkanis et al. 1988; Tormala, Briñol, and Petty 2006). In this study, participants perceived the source with a vested interest as both more biased and less trustworthy than the source without a vested interest. These effects held when examining independent effects on each perception while controlling for the other, providing additional evidence for the independence of bias and untrustworthiness.

These results suggest that previous vested interest manipulations could have confounded perceived bias and untrustworthiness, leaving it unclear whether the observed effects were due to one perception, the other, or both. They also hint at one reason that source bias and untrustworthiness may have been conflated in the literature. That is, because vested interest manipulations were commonly used to study untrustworthiness and those manipulations can affect either perception, researchers conceptually lumped them together. This research highlights that because vested interest affects both perceived bias and untrustworthiness, a focus on vested interest may lead researchers to overlook situations in which bias and untrustworthiness are more clearly separable. In addition, this study specifies one situation in which a single antecedent (vested interest) leads to simultaneous but separable bias and untrustworthiness perceptions.

TRUST AS CREDIBILITY OR A PART OF CREDIBILITY?

Source credibility – the source’s overall believability – is perhaps the most studied variable in persuasion literature. Source credibility has traditionally been conceptualized as the combination of expertise (knowledge/experience) and trustworthiness (honesty; Cooper, Blackman, and Keller 2016; Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953; McGuire 1985; Petty and Cacioppo 1981b; Petty and Wegener 1998). A large literature has demonstrated that source credibility can have important implications for consumer's attitudes, and thus, their overall consumption decisions (see Petty and Cacioppo 1984).

An additional source of confusion is that the term “trustworthiness” has sometimes been used to refer to source honesty (a component of credibility) and has sometimes been used synonymously with credibility. For example, Mayo (2015) defined distrust as entailing the possibility that “things are not what they seem to be” and noted that, among many other causes of distrust, this may occur because message sources were dishonest or inexperienced. As another

example, Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Aleman, and Yague-Guillen (2003), defined consumer trust as, “the confident expectations of the brand’s reliability and intentions in situations entailing risk to the consumer.” They split consumer trust into two dimensions: 1) brand reliability: the brand’s competence and 2) brand intentions: the brand’s willingness to keep the consumer in mind if a problem should arise. This definition and splitting of brand trust maps onto credibility and its expertise and trustworthiness components. As a final example, Darke, Ashworth, and Main (2010), like many others, measured “trust” by asking participants the extent to which they perceived a brand as “not-credible/credible, unreliable/reliable, untrustworthy/trustworthy and inexpert/expert.” Thus, these uses of “trust” go considerably beyond honesty or dishonesty, and these broader conceptualizations might encourage overlooking source bias as a separate credibility component. Defining trustworthiness more specifically as dishonesty and treating it as a part of credibility, rather than synonymous with credibility, allows for source bias to undermine overall credibility separate from any influences of untrustworthiness. For these reasons, we use trustworthiness to refer specifically to source honesty, and we use credibility to refer to overall source believability.

DOES BIAS HAVE INDEPENDENT NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON PERCEIVED CREDIBILITY AND PERSUASION?

As mentioned above, persuasion research has assumed that credibility is the combination of trustworthiness and expertise. However, this conceptualization misses that holding a skewed viewpoint (i.e., being biased) can also make sources less believable. This means that even if sources were perceived as expert and honest, they could still lack credibility if perceived as biased. This could ultimately affect their persuasive abilities. Because source bias had not been previously studied as an independent perception through methods that would allow it to be distinguished from untrustworthiness, recent foundational research was conducted to examine whether bias might have negative influences on credibility and persuasion beyond effects of untrustworthiness or inexpertise (Wallace, Wegener, and Petty 2019a).

Empirical evidence for negative effects of source bias on credibility and persuasion

In one study examining source bias effects on perceived credibility, participants read about Dr. Brown, a phosphate detergent company employee (Wallace et al. 2019a, Online Supplement). In one condition, Dr. Brown was described as biased in his view of phosphate

detergents -- his work led him to view them too favorably. In another condition, Dr. Brown was described as objective in his view of phosphate detergents -- his work led him to view them objectively. Importantly, in each of these conditions, perceived vested interest, expertise, and trustworthiness were held high. Dr. Brown was described as a chemist who honestly believed that phosphate detergents would provide the cleanest clothes. Participants viewed Dr. Brown as more credible in the objective than the biased condition. These effects occurred controlling for perceived trustworthiness and expertise, providing evidence that bias serves as a third pillar of source credibility.

Another study tested whether the source bias effects on credibility would have downstream consequences for persuasion (Wallace et al. 2019a). This study used an indirect source bias manipulation in which participants inferred that the source was biased without being told directly. Participants read about aid workers deciding how to allocate resources between two regions affected by an Ebola epidemic. Participants were randomly assigned to read either that (a) one of the workers, Roger, had done his Peace Corps in the region he was advocating receive resources or (b) this information was omitted. When Roger had a personal connection, participants inferred that he was more biased in his view of how to allocate resources. Importantly, this manipulation did not affect how much participants perceived Roger as trustworthy, expert, or likeable. This study further replicated previous results that participants viewed the biased source as less credible than the objective source. This lack of credibility ultimately led message recipients to allocate fewer resources to the region that Roger advocated. In sum, this research demonstrated that source bias can have independent negative effects on credibility and persuasion beyond effects of trustworthiness and expertise, establishing bias as a third, independent pillar of (in)credibility. Furthermore, it established that in some circumstances, people infer bias independently of untrustworthiness, inexpertise, dislikability, or vested interest.

CAN BIAS AND UNTRUSTWORTHINESS HAVE DIFFERENT EFFECTS?

Beyond having separable but similar effects (i.e., reducing persuasive effectiveness), recent research has also examined whether source bias could have differing effects compared to source untrustworthiness (Wallace, Wegener, and Petty 2019b). This research examined whether bias and untrustworthiness would have different consequences for consumers' expectations that the source would be consistent over time in the position taken. That is, consumers might expect

biased sources to be more consistent in their position-taking than objective sources because switching positions would require biased sources to overcome whatever bias drew them to their initial position in the first place. For example, consider a friend who is high in need for uniqueness so he/she tends to be biased against popular products. It should be predictable that this person would consistently derogate popular products. On the other hand, someone who was not as high on need for uniqueness might change his/her opinion of a popular product and come to favor it as the person learns new information.

Unlike knowing that a source is biased, simply knowing that the source is willing to be dishonest would not be particularly helpful in predicting the stance that the source will take. Imagine that consumers encountered a news tabloid known for printing false information. It is not clear whether the tabloid would be consistent or inconsistent in their position taking because the tabloid is willing to lie, and is, therefore, not even constrained by the evidence. Thus, it seems likely that consumers would expect biased sources to be more consistent than objective sources, but they should not have these same expectations for untrustworthy versus trustworthy sources.

Expectations about position consistency could also have downstream consequences for the source's persuasive abilities. Consistent with Eagly, Wood, and Chaiken (1978b, see also McPeck and Edwards 1975), sources might be more persuasive when they take an unexpected position. An unexpected position might increase persuasion because consumers would attribute the position shift to the source learning new compelling information. Such an attribution should lead to beliefs that there is likely strong support for the new position, which should increase persuasion toward the new position. In contrast, when a source takes an expected position, consumers can attribute it to the factor that created that expectation (e.g., the source's bias). Putting all this together suggests that when biased sources switch positions, the switch should lead to greater surprise, and that surprise should lead to increased persuasion toward the new position.² Conversely, untrustworthy sources should benefit less from a position switch because consumers should not expect them to be consistent in the first place.

² Of course, not all position switching leads to positive attributions. For example, research has shown that when a source provides an unexpected position against their group's best interest, people can make negative attributions (e.g., disloyalty; Petty et al. 2001).

Empirical evidence for different influences of source bias and untrustworthiness on expectations of position consistency

To test these hypotheses, Wallace et al. (2019b) ran several studies in which source bias was manipulated along with either manipulated or measured source untrustworthiness. Across several studies, participants learned about a proposed Canadian university service program in which students would work part-time to receive reduced tuition. They learned that the proposed university service plan had become a heated political issue in Canada and that APL News, a Canadian news source, had been publishing articles about the downsides of the proposed program. Next, they learned that MediaReports, an independent news rating agency had rated APL News' objectivity and, in some studies, their truthfulness. Participants were randomly assigned to read that APL News was relatively biased or objective and, in some studies, was relatively untrustworthy or trustworthy. Participants reported their perceptions of the source as biased, untrustworthy, and credible, as well as their expectations that APL News would continue reporting negative information about the proposed university service program. Next, they were shown an article in which APL News had switched positions, now supporting the university service program. Participants reported how strong they thought the source's reasons were for supporting the new position and their attitudes toward the university service program.

Consistent with predictions, these studies consistently showed that the more participants viewed the source as biased, the more they expected the source to be consistent in the position taken. However, source untrustworthiness had no effect on expected position consistency. In addition, the more participants' consistency expectations were violated when the source switched positions, the more they inferred that the source had good reasons for their new position. The perceived reason quality then led them to develop more favorable attitudes. In sum, source bias had a positive indirect influence on persuasion through position switching unexpectedness and reason quality inferences.

Interestingly, this pattern did not result in a positive total effect of bias on persuasion. Recall that bias can also have a negative effect on persuasion through its effect on credibility. Across all seven studies testing these hypotheses ($N > 1500$ participants), results consistently suggested that bias has opposing influences on persuasion—with bias having a negative effect through credibility but a positive effect through expectancy violations. Conversely, source untrustworthiness consistently produces a negative influence on persuasion because of the

consistent untrustworthiness effects on credibility. Broadly, this work highlights that source bias and untrustworthiness can have differing effects, suggesting that they should not be lumped together in either basic or applied work.

INFERRING BIAS WITHOUT INFERRING UNTRUSTWORTHINESS

Although the work to date has primarily focused on independent consequences of bias and untrustworthiness, other research has examined when consumers might infer that a source is biased but not untrustworthy. One such study was described in the section on source credibility. An additional example was a study in which a source advocated for building more nuclear power plants Wallace et al. (2019b, Study 6). The source was either described as a former nuclear power executive who now writes articles for a local paper or as a science writer for a local paper. Participants viewed the former nuclear power executive as more biased than the science writer, but this manipulation did not affect how trustworthy they perceived the source to be. Beyond these indirect manipulations, recent research has examined two message qualities that can influence perceived bias without affecting untrustworthiness or while controlling for influences on untrustworthiness: message sidedness and argument quality.

Consumers view sources who provide one-sided messages (or messages framed as one-sided) as more biased than those who provide two-sided messages (Wallace, Hinsenkamp, Braun, and Wegener, in preparation; reported in Wallace, 2019). For example, in one study, participants perceived a salesperson as less biased when the salesperson provided a two-sided rather than one-sided appeal for a bike. Message sidedness had no effect on perceived untrustworthiness. Because a two-sided appeal is less extreme than the one-sided appeal, the researchers also conducted a study in which the same two-sided information was provided in both conditions, but one condition labeled the information as positive and negative, whereas the other condition did not label the information, so sidedness was not as apparent (cf., Rucker, Petty, and Briñol 2008). In this study, emphasizing the two-sidedness versus not reduced perceived bias. Although information sidedness might seem somewhat definitional of objectivity versus bias, the typical sidedness effects can be reversed for topics on which consumers expect others to have a one-sided position. For example, in another study, when a source provided a message opposing incest, participants perceived the source as more biased when the message was framed as two-sided rather than one-sided.

Beyond message sidedness, research has also suggested that consumers infer that a source is biased when the source provides weak (rather than strong) reasons (Wallace 2015). When a source provides weak arguments, the consumer must make an attribution for why the source would take a position that they cannot supported well. A logical attribution is that the source is biased. Across three studies, when a source provided weak arguments for the political candidate she was supporting, participants inferred that she was more biased than when she provided strong arguments for her candidate. Importantly, consistent with the notion that bias is an independent source perception, in these studies, consumers infer bias above and beyond inferences that the source is untrustworthy, inexpert, or dislikeable.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE BIAS/UNTRUSTWORTHINESS DISTINCTION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

In the current manuscript, we have clarified that when consumers perceive sources as biased, they perceive them as having a skewed perception. In contrast, consumers perceive untrustworthy sources as dishonest. Although consumers may at times infer that a source is both untrustworthy and biased, there are times when consumers can infer bias without necessarily inferring untrustworthiness. Perceived bias can have independent negative influences on perceived credibility and persuasion beyond effects of trustworthiness or expertise. However, source bias and untrustworthiness can have differing influences on the expectations consumers have for how consistent the source will be in position taking. When the source switches positions, it can lead source bias to have a positive indirect effect on persuasion through expectancy violation and reason quality inferences. Meanwhile, source untrustworthiness still has a negative effect on persuasion. We are also beginning to see that antecedents can independently influence perceived bias beyond any effects on untrustworthiness.

When taken together, there would seem to be many implications for consumer research and consumer behavior more generally. Some implications would be for how to interpret research using vested interest manipulations, which has been a focus in consumer research. Other implications would follow fairly directly from the types of persuasion effects that have already been identified, but the current conceptualization also leads to a number of additional questions and implications that are yet to be studied. In the following sections, we identify new directions that follow from the conceptual distinction we have drawn between source bias and untrustworthiness.

Methodological issues with vested interest manipulations

Some implications of the current work pertain to how one might interpret previous research examining vested interest or ulterior motives, which have been particularly interesting to consumer researchers. As noted above, when researchers have used vested interest manipulations, it is unclear whether the obtained results are due to perceived bias, untrustworthiness, or a combination of the two. To the extent that researchers want to make claims about a particular perception, it would be preferable to use a manipulation that better focuses on the target perception or at least to measure both perceptions to statistically control for the potential confound.

A related point is that the focus on vested interest (where a source might be viewed as both biased and untrustworthy) might have obscured cases in which the two perceptions conflict (such as in cases where the source is viewed as biased but honest or as untrustworthy but objective). As we outlined earlier with our product reviewer examples, consumers can encounter each of these sources. However, the consumer research to date provides relatively little evidence about people's responses to these different sources.

Bias and untrustworthiness in the Persuasion Knowledge Model

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright 1994) has examined how people's knowledge of persuasion can influence the way that they cope with persuasion attempts. The current work suggests the possibility that consumers may possess some knowledge about whether different persuasion tactics might imply that a source (persuasion agent) is biased or that a source is untrustworthy. As one example, consumers might infer that persuasion tactics relying on nostalgia reflect that the source is biased, whereas they might infer that fear tactics reflect more intentional manipulation, perhaps reflecting untrustworthiness. Depending on their impression of the persuasion agent, they may choose to cope with the persuasion attempt differently. For example, if they assume that the persuasion agent is biased, they could try to correct for the agent's bias by shifting their attitudes in the direction opposite of the agent's position (Wegener and Petty 1997). Conversely, if the agent is viewed as untrustworthy, consumers might choose not to process the message, at least if the source is providing a counter-attitudinal message, or might choose to process the arguments deeply if the source is providing a pro-attitudinal message (Clark and Wegener 2013).

Different consequences for selective exposure to information

Although the research in this article highlighted the consequences that source bias and untrustworthiness can have on persuasion, we believe that these perceptions can have differing consequences in other consumer domains as well. As one example, future research could examine selective exposure to information following a message from biased and untrustworthy sources. Consider consumers who are learning about a new issue, product, or person (e.g., a political candidate or new boss). Such consumers may infer that a biased but honest source will provide a message that privileges information on one side of the issue despite that information being accurate (or at least accurately portraying what that source believes is true). After receiving a message from such a source, therefore, consumers might feel that they have a fairly good handle on that side of the issue, but they lack information on the opposing side. If so, they might engage in a directional information search aimed at learning more about the opposing position. Once they have gathered that information, they can integrate the information from the biased source along with the additional information (perhaps gained from a similarly biased source on the other side of the topic) to arrive at a reasonably balanced viewpoint.

In contrast, because the information that an untrustworthy source provides should not seem credible at all, the consumer should feel that they need to start from the beginning when seeking information. If so, then they might engage in a more balanced search that addresses not only the information omitted by the untrustworthy source but also information that covers the same position taken by the trustworthy source to verify the validity of the information they had previously received. Of course, if the consumer already starts with some knowledge, perhaps based on a previous purchase, and that knowledge represents only the good or bad side, then information gained from a biased but honest source on the other side of the issue could be viewed as successfully “completing” their balanced information search. In contrast, information from a dishonest but objective source might not be viewed as helpful in completing one’s balanced information search. These and related questions about information seeking remain for future research.

Different consequences for recommendation seeking

Relatedly, bias and untrustworthiness might also have different consequences for recommendation seeking. It is relatively difficult to imagine any situation in which a person would prefer a recommendation from an untrustworthy source rather than a trustworthy one. However, it may not be the case that people always prefer to seek recommendations from those

who are objective rather than biased. It seems most likely that consumers with an accuracy or a fairness goal would want to seek recommendations from objective sources. However, this may reverse when people have an enjoyment goal or a defense goal. To the extent that people are aware of their own biases, they may think that others who share their biases are the most qualified to give them recommendations about what they would enjoy or what would support their view most effectively. For example, when considering which political documentary to watch, consumers may ask others who they know share their political biases, as they would be more likely to have a similar perspective. In this case, even someone with an objective political perspective may not be as good as someone with a shared bias. After all, when attempting to determine whether one's attitudes or opinions are correct, social comparisons viewed as most helpful are supposed to be comparisons with people viewed as "similar others" (e.g., Festinger 1954; Goethals and Nelson 1973; Gorenflo and Crano 1989). It could be that similar biases would play an important role in some social comparison settings, but it seems less likely that similar untrustworthiness would do the same.

Additionally, a fruitful literature has examined how people choose a person to advise them based on whether they are seeking a product recommendation from a category versus seeking information about a particular alternative (Gershoff, Broniarczyk, and West 2001). It may be that if a person believes an advisor would be biased in their view of one alternative, they would not seek their recommendation of a product in the category because they would be likely to recommend the option dictated by their bias. However, they might be comfortable asking the advisor about other specific alternatives that were not directly related to the advisor's bias.

Perceived bias and untrustworthiness in word of mouth situations

The distinction between perceiving others as biased and untrustworthy may also be useful in understanding perceptions of those engaging in word of mouth (WOM), as well as what information people choose to share. Much research has focused on the motives underlying WOM (Berger 2014). For example, research has suggested that people may engage in word of mouth to self-enhance or identity signal. However, it is not clear whether other people can pick up on these motives and if they do, whether speakers are perceived as biased or untrustworthy (or both). It seems possible that some self-enhancement or identity signaling concerns would lend themselves to perceived bias and others to perceived untrustworthiness. For example, people high in the need for uniqueness might disparage a popular product. This could be perceived as a

biased but honest product review (i.e., the person's desire to be unique motivates them to view popular items more negatively). However, exaggerating a story for entertainment purposes may be viewed as more untrustworthy than it is biased (i.e., if it seems that the person knows what they are saying is not true). Given the distinctions drawn here, the attribution that people make could have implications for the persuasive effectiveness of the WOM and its consequences.

How someone perceives their conversation partner may also affect whether and how they choose to engage in WOM. For example, sometimes people engage in WOM to acquire information. However, if they perceive that their conversation partner is untrustworthy, they will likely not choose to seek information from that person. However, if people perceive their partner to be honest but biased, they may perceive that they could at least gain some information about a product, even if that information is skewed. The perceived direction of a partner's bias may also affect WOM: people may strategically try to present a position that is more similar to their partners' perceived bias to socially connect. Further, they may avoid topics on which they perceive that their partner has a bias that goes in the direction opposite their own position.

Carry over of bias and untrustworthiness

Finally, much research has examined how a suspicious mindset might carry over from one situation to others, even unrelated situations (Mayo 2015). For example, when people are in a distrustful mindset, they are more likely to employ negative testing strategies when problem solving, which can result in them being more likely to reach the correct answer (Mayo, Alfasi, and Schwarz 2014). Additionally, when products fail to live up to expectations created by marketers, this can result in people perceiving marketers as lacking credibility (Darke, Ashworth, and Main 2010). These effects can be generalized even to products or companies that are quite different from the company that committed the transgression. Although this research on carryover effects has often characterized itself as studying "trust," these studies have used general credibility measures. Whether a negative reaction to one entity carries over may depend on what that negative reaction is. When the negative reaction is based on perceived dishonesty, that perception may be quite likely to carry over to a wide range of topics and entities. However, when the negative reaction is based in perceived bias, the negative reaction may only carry over to topics perceived as related to the bias and to entities perceived to have similar biases. When "trust" is measured with a more general credibility measure, it may behave more like trustworthiness and hide unique bias effects.

CONCLUSION

The current analysis goes beyond previously published research and theory by highlighting how the distinction between perceived bias and perceived untrustworthiness has consequences for many domains of consumer research. Building on early research addressing consumer skepticism, research has begun to distinguish different possible roots of skepticism that might have separate antecedents and consequences. The current paper is the first comprehensive review of this research and includes descriptions of previously unpublished qualitative data distinguishing perceived bias and untrustworthiness, as well as experimental data examining effects of vested interest on perceived bias and untrustworthiness. This review highlights that in the persuasion domain, perceived bias can have independent but directionally consistent negative effects alongside source untrustworthiness through reduced credibility. Further, source bias can have directionally different effects compared with source untrustworthiness when sources switch positions. We have also identified independent antecedents of bias (e.g., weak argument quality or one-sided messages). We look forward to future research examining implications of this distinction for consumer behavior and related domains.

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