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, marketers have vested interests—they benefit from successfully persuading consumers. Perhaps because of this, research on responses to sources with a vested interest/ulterior motive has proliferated. For example, influential work on the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright 1994) focused on people's response when they know that someone is trying to persuade them. Other work illuminated how source vested interest can lead to inferences of source dishonesty (Fein 1996; Campbell and Kirmani 2000) and ultimately undermine the source's effectiveness, especially when weak arguments are presented (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? Even when trying to be honest, marketers may view their products more favorably than is warranted. Although consumers would likely identify marketers as biased, research has not separated this possibility from perceived dishonesty. In the current article, we demonstrate that separating these sources of skepticism allows researchers to predict consumers' responses more precisely.

Furthermore, this distinction generates predictions about when source bias might lead to skepticism even without vested interest concerns. For example, imagine that a friend has recommended visiting the Smoky Mountains, her childhood vacation destination. Although her recommendation seems earnest and she has no personal stake in Tennessee resorts, might nostalgia have led her to view the Smoky Mountains more favorably than is warranted? This word of mouth (WOM) situation represents just one time when someone might seem biased despite being honest about their opinion 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.

Although consumer researchers have demonstrated that some source perceptions, such as trustworthiness and expertise, can profoundly affect persuasion (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1981a; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983; Priester and Petty 1995, 2003), bias has remained largely overlooked.

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Table 1. Examples of Sources That Comprise the Bias × Untrustworthiness Space

	Untrustworthy	Trustworthy
Biased	Skewed perception and willing to lie (e.g., a sponsored review)	Skewed perception and 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 and willing to lie (e.g., online troll, posting false reviews just to mess with others)	Able to see the objective truth and trying to be honest (e.g., *Consumer Reports* article by someone with no ties, trying to give honest opinion)

In the current article, we separate perceived bias from other potentially related perceptions and, most importantly, demonstrate that it can have parallel and distinct consequences from perceived untrustworthiness. The present analysis goes substantially beyond previous publications on this topic by providing a more in-depth discussion of the distinction between bias and untrustworthiness. The current work also uniquely unpacks 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. Finally, we highlight previously unexplored (and undiscussed) implications for future consumer research.

HOW DO BIAS AND UNTRUSTWORTHINESS DIFFER?

Conceptual Differences

To start, we conceptually clarify the differences between perceiving a source as biased versus untrustworthy, as these may initially seem similar. Consistent with previous trustworthiness formulations in the persuasion literature, we define trustworthiness as the intent to truthfully communicate (i.e., honesty; see Priester and Petty 1995, 2003). In contrast, we define bias as skewed perspective. 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 reviewers include sources that fit into the four quadrants of the bias × untrustworthiness space (see table 1). For example, many reviews are sponsored, meaning that companies compensate consumers to write a positive review. Sponsored sources have a clear vested interest, so many consumers would view them as both biased and untrustworthy: getting paid for their review might make them view the product more favorably, and it might motivate them to lie. However, there are also reviewers who are simply brand loyal (e.g., "I always buy KitchenAid!"). These reviewers are biased to view a product more favorably because they like the brand but are genuinely trying to be honest. Objective and trustworthy reviewers are those with no ties to the product or brand who can honestly and objectively evaluate the product. Finally, there are objective but untrustworthy reviewers such as online trolls who can evaluate products objectively but post false reviews to mess with people.

At the core of this distinction is that bias inherently involves a direction whereas untrustworthiness does not. For any topic, a person may range from being positively biased, to objective, to negatively biased: perceived bias is "bipolar" in nature. However, untrustworthiness does not require a direction. A source could share a message matched in valence to the truth but composed of false information. Thus, untrustworthiness is unipolar, ranging from honest to dishonest with no neutral point.

Finally, bias can stem from motivations that slant perceptions or from knowledge that is slanted, but untrustworthiness per se would not seem to have a purely knowledge-based version. As an example of a motivation-based bias, consider the source described above who endorsed a Smoky

1. Sources can present slanted messages either because their view is slanted or because they choose to present information that disproportionately favors one side over the other. 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 mere amount of knowledge is 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 et al. [2019a] for additional discussion).

Mountains vacation: her nostalgia positively colors her opinion. However, it is possible to have biases that are solely the product of biased exposure to information. For example, a consumer with no nostalgia for the Smoky Mountains might have only ever been exposed to favorable information about the location and never to any of the potential negative information. Importantly, this bias only occurred as a result of exposure to biased information, not as a result of any motivation. Unlike bias, untrustworthiness/dishonesty does not have a purely knowledge-based version. In fact, one cannot really be dishonest per se without advancing something one knows one does not believe.[2]

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 in which participants simply generated descriptions of sources that were biased, unbiased, trustworthy, or untrustworthy. Participants saw 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.

To test these differences experimentally, Wallace, Wegener, and Petty (2019a; study 1a) provided participants with source descriptions designed to capture bias and untrustworthiness. The hypothesis was that perceived bias would capture perceived 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 vs. honesty) × 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) design, participants viewed one source description (e.g., "honest") and rated perceived source bias and untrustworthiness. 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 (see fig. 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 descriptions and a qualitative study with participant-generated descriptions 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.

Table 2. Number of Participants Who Generated Each Description for Untrustworthiness

Trustworthy		Untrustworthy	
Attribute	Participants	Attribute	Participants
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

VESTED INTEREST: A COMMON ANTECEDENT TO BIAS AND UNTRUSTWORTHINESS

Given that bias and untrustworthiness are conceptually distinct, one might wonder why they had been conflated. We speculate that one reason stems from a focus on source vested interest. Given that traditional marketers almost invariably have a vested interest, the focus seems reasonable; however, 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

2. Although there is not a purely knowledge-based form of dishonesty per se, there is a knowledge-based reason for sharing untrue information. That is, one might communicate honestly but simply have incorrect knowledge. If such knowledge were slanted, it might also reflect bias, and the incorrectness could also reflect ignorance (lack of expertise).

Table 3. Number of Participants Who Generated Each Description for Bias

Unbiased		Biased	
Description	Participants	Description	Participants
See both good and bad	13	One-sided	14
No preference	11	Unwarranted partiality	7
Nothing to gain	11	Personal interest	7
Nonprejudiced	5	Preconceived	6
Open-minded	5	Unpersuaded by counterattitudinal 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
Nonjudgmental	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

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

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 cars. However, even if consumers assume that the used car salesman is being 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

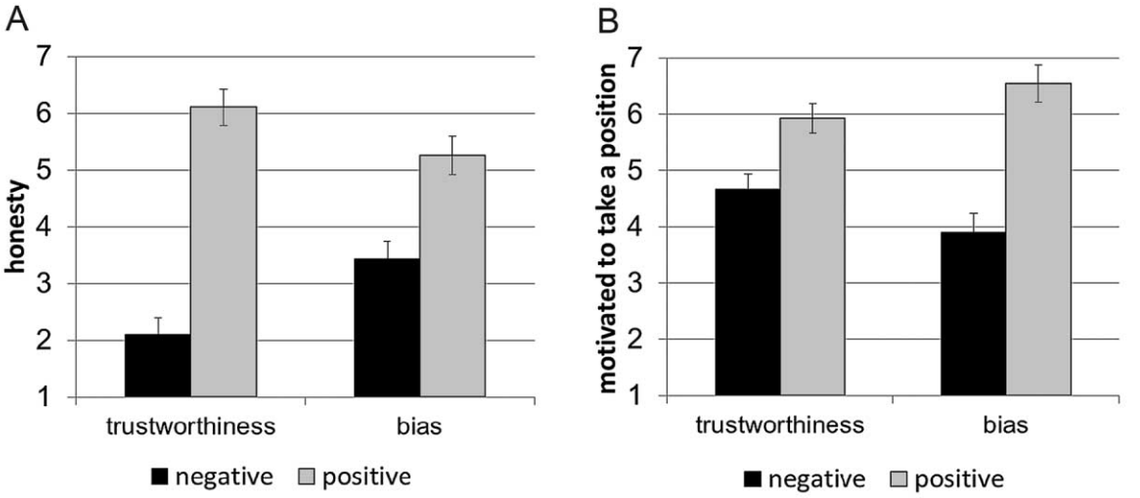

Figure 1. Effects of "motivated to take a position" and "honesty" dimensions on trustworthiness and a lack of bias (adapted from study 1a of Wallace et al. 2019a).

manipulations. However, recent research has done just that (Wallace 2019). In one study, 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 (mirroring previously used vested interest manipulations; Pratkanis et al. 1988; Briñol et al. 2004; Tormala et al. 2006). 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; Hovland et al. 1953; Petty and Cacioppo 1981b; McGuire 1985; Petty and Wegener 1998; Cooper, Blackman, and Keller 2016). A large literature has demonstrated that source credibility can have important implications for consumers' 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 the possibility that "things are not what they seem to be" and noted that, among many other causes of distrust, this may occur because of source's dishonesty or inexpertise. 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, 352), 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 based on trustworthiness and expertise. However, this conceptualization misses that being biased can also make sources less believable, even if they are perceived as expert and honest. This framework identifies three different reasons that recipients might not believe what a source is saying. The first is that the source is not knowledgeable about the topic (lacks expertise). The second is that the source is intentionally sharing falsehoods (is dishonest). The third is that the source has a warped view of the topic (is biased). Therefore, even though bias, untrustworthiness, and inexpertise should each undermine credibility, the reason that they do so is different for each perception. When a source lacks credibility for any of these (or multiple of these) reasons, it can ultimately affect their persuasive abilities. Because source bias had not been previously studied 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 et al. 2019a). These experiments included conditions in which the source would be perceived as highly expert and trustworthy but differentially biased. Because perceived bias should lead people to infer that the source has a skewed perception of the topic, they should be less likely to believe the source.

Empirical Evidence for Negative Effects of Source Bias on Credibility and Persuasion

In one study, participants read about aid workers deciding how to allocate resources between two regions affected by an Ebola epidemic. Participants were randomly assigned to either read (*a*) that one of the workers, Roger, had done his Peace Corps service in the region he was advocating to 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 resource allocation. Importantly, this manipulation did not affect perceptions of Roger as trustworthy, expert, or likeable. This study found 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 similar effects (i.e., reducing persuasive effectiveness), recent research has also demonstrated that source bias can have differing effects than 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 consistently take the same position. 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. For example, consider a friend high in need for uniqueness, so s/he tends to be biased against popular products. It is predictable that this person would consistently derogate popular products. On the other hand, someone not as high in need for uniqueness might change his/her opinion of a popular product and come to favor it as s/he learns new information.

Unlike knowing that a source is biased, simply knowing that the source is dishonest would not be particularly helpful in predicting the source's future stance. 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 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 (1978; see also McPeek and Edwards 1975), sources can 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 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). In sum, when biased sources switch positions, the switch should lead to greater surprise, and that surprise should lead to increased persuasion toward the new position.[3] Conversely, untrustworthy sources should benefit less from a position switch because consumers should not expect them to be consistent.

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 and source untrustworthiness was manipulated or measured. Participants learned about a proposed Canadian university service program in which students would work part-time for reduced tuition. They learned that the university service plan had become a heated political issue in Canada and that APL News, a Canadian news source, had published articles opposing the program. Next, they learned that MediaReports, an independent news rating agency, had rated APL News' objectivity and 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 university service program. Next, they were shown an article in which APL News had switched to support the university service program. Participants rated the quality of the source's reasons for 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 position taking. 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 ($N > 1,500$ 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 untrustworthiness undermines 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, new research has examined when consumers might infer that a source is biased but not untrustworthy. One such study (the Aid Worker 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 or as a science writer. Participants viewed the former nuclear power executive as more biased than the science writer, but this manipulation did not affect perceived source untrustworthiness. Beyond these indirect manipulations, recent research has examined two message qualities that can influence perceived

3. 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).

bias without affecting untrustworthiness or while controlling for influences on untrustworthiness: message sidedness and argument quality.

As mentioned earlier, bias inherently involves a direction (skewed positively or negatively), whereas untrustworthiness does not. Therefore, if a source provides a one-sided message, consumers might infer that they either have not been exposed to the other side or they are motivated to ignore it. Indeed, 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 et al. 2019; 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, perhaps because untrustworthiness does not necessarily have a direction, and people can lie in one- or two-sided manners. 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 (see Rucker, Petty, and Briñol 2008). 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 the universally condemned practice of incest, participants perceived the source as more biased when the message was framed as two-sided rather than one-sided.

Furthermore, because biased people are likely to view weak evidence for their position as stronger than they should, it is quite possible that they will use weak arguments to support their positions. However, if an untrustworthy person lies to support their position, they may as well make up strong arguments. Indeed, research has suggested that consumers infer that a source is biased when the source provides weak (rather than strong) reasons (Wallace 2015). 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. 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 dislikable.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE BIAS/UNTRUSTWORTHINESS DISTINCTION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

There are many implications of the bias-untrustworthiness distinction 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.

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 imply that a source (persuasion agent) is biased or 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, reflecting untrustworthiness. Depending on their impression of the 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 if the source provides a counterattitudinal message or might choose to process the arguments deeply if the source provides a pro-attitudinal message (see Clark and Wegener 2013).

Different Consequences for Selective Exposure to Information

Future research could also examine selective exposure to information following a message from biased or untrustworthy sources. Consider consumers learning about a new issue, product, or person. 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). Therefore, after receiving a message from such a source, 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 biased source on the other side of the topic) to arrive at a 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. If so, 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 to verify the validity of the original information. Of course, if the consumer already starts with some knowledge, 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 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 or 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 an adviser 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 adviser 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 adviser about other alternatives that were not directly related to the 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 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 WOM 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 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, then 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. Furthermore, they may avoid topics on which they perceive that their partner has a bias that goes in the direction opposite their own position.

Perceived Bias and Untrustworthiness in the Domain of Charitable Giving

Perceptions of bias and untrustworthiness may also play a role in charitable giving, both when people are deciding whether to give and when forming impressions of those who have given. First, charitable giving likely represents a domain in which sources are often viewed as biased, but honest. When nonprofit employees request donations for their organizations, they are likely viewed as attempting to communicate honestly, but as having an overly favorable view of the work they are doing. Therefore, separating bias from untrustworthiness allows for a nuanced understanding of how sources will likely be perceived in this domain.

Additionally, people donate to charitable organizations for many reasons. Sometimes they genuinely want to support the organization, but other times, they do so to maintain a positive reputation. This latter motive may be viewed as insincere. Imagine that someone donates a larger amount of money than would be normative. Assuming it is known that this person is not particularly wealthy, what attributions might people make for this generous behavior? One possibility is that the person was moved by compassion for the cause and therefore felt compelled to give generously. This would be more consistent with having a bias in favor of the cause. An alternative is that the person is trying to show off to gain a reputation as a generous person. This might be more consistent with a perception of dishonesty because the charity did not come from genuine feelings of compassion. Whether others view the donation as a product of bias or untrustworthiness would likely influence how much they like the donor afterward.

Bias and Untrustworthiness as Attributions for Poor Gift Giving

Many people have experiences of receiving gifts that they did not like, even while the giver suggests that they put a lot of thought into the gift. What attributions might the recipient make for the poor-gift giving? On the one hand, they might attribute the gift to a bias on the part of the giver. For example, if the giver loves Harry Potter, the recipient may infer that the giver chose the Harry Potter socks for them because the giver viewed the recipient as liking Harry Potter more than they actually did. On the other hand, they might attribute the gift to insincerity on the part of the giver. That is, the giver did not actually put a lot of thought into the gift and only gave it out of a sense of obligation. The attribution that the recipient makes for a mismatched gift may ultimately determine their satisfaction. They may still feel relatively satisfied with the gift if they perceive that it was a product of bias but not if it was a product of untrustworthiness.

Carryover of Bias and Untrustworthiness

Finally, much research has examined how a suspicious mind-set might carry over from one situation to other, even unrelated, situations (Mayo 2015). For example, when people are in a distrustful mind-set, 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 et al. 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 article 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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