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Source Credibility Effects in Advertising:  
Assessment of Mediating Processes

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Source Credibility Effects in Advertising:  
Assessment of Mediating Processes

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## Abstract

Source credibility has been observed to produce favorable, neutral, and sometimes even unfavorable effects on attitudes in persuasion contexts. These diverse and conflicting findings can only be reconciled if it is first recognized that effects due to variations in source credibility on attitude are likely mediated by multiple distinct mechanisms or processes. In this paper, we isolate several such mediating processes, and discuss the conditions under which each one is likely to operate. We also present empirical evidence supporting the existence of these processes, and explicate the implications of this research for the use of credible sources in advertising.



**Source Credibility Effects In Advertising:  
Assessment of Mediating Processes**

It has long been recognized that characteristics of the source of an advertisement (either explicitly identified or implicitly understood) can influence ad effects on the recipient. In particular, the use of credible spokespeople in advertising is commonplace, and clearly based on the assumption that source credibility improves the persuasive impact of advertising messages. Given the intuitive appeal and early empirical support for this assumption (13), it is not surprising that there has been minimal recent research examining the effects of credibility on persuasion in advertising contexts [for exceptions, see Frieden (7), Friedman and Friedman (8), Harmon and Coney (10), Mizerski, Hunt, and Patti (18)]. However, a growing body of evidence in the psychology literature suggests that source credibility effects on persuasion are far more complex than previously believed. Specifically, this literature suggests that (a) source credibility may have favorable, neutral, and sometimes even unfavorable effects on post exposure attitude towards the communication topic, (b) these effects appear to be highly contingent on the specific levels of other variables that are present in the reception environment, and (c) a number of different theoretical models and frameworks such as Kelman's functional approach to social influence processes (8, 17), the Yale reinforcement approach to persuasion (15), cognitive response theory (11, 23), attribution theory (6, 24), and the

elaboration likelihood model (20) can account for these effects to varying degrees. Thus, advertisers are faced with an array of apparently conflicting findings and competing explanations as they consider the merits of using credible sources in their communications.

In this paper, we present a synthesis of recent research on source credibility effects in persuasion, and consider the implications of this research for advertising practitioners. We believe that the problems in dealing with this literature can be alleviated considerably if it is recognized that source characteristics such as credibility can influence attitude towards the advertised object in many different ways. Thus, the search for a single universal explanation for attitudinal effects due to credibility is likely to prove fruitless. In the following sections, we discuss several mediating mechanisms for credibility effects on attitude that have been proposed in the literature. We also examine the conditions under which these mechanisms are likely to operate from the perspective of two currently popular theoretical frameworks proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (20) and Sternthal, Dholakia, and Leavitt (23). Finally, we discuss the implications of each of these mediating mechanisms for source credibility effects in advertising.

### **Nature of Source Credibility Effects on Attitude**

Advertising and communication researchers are increasingly adopting a cognitive, information processing approach to the

communication process. In this approach, the recipient of a persuasive message (such as an advertisement) is viewed as actively interacting with and evaluating the arguments or claims stated in the message. This message processing activity is hypothesized to mediate message effects on post-exposure beliefs and attitudes towards the advocacy object. Given this broad framework, source credibility could have both direct and indirect effects on attitude. By direct effects, we mean that source credibility influences final attitude without affecting processing of the message itself. Indirect effects refer to the possibility that source credibility affects attitude by modifying, changing, or otherwise altering message processing activity.

### **Direct Effects**

Direct effects due to credibility on attitude in a persuasion context have been most clearly explicated in research on central versus peripheral routes to persuasion by Petty, Cacioppo, and their colleagues [e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman (21)]. In this framework, recipients of a persuasive message can adopt one of two distinct processing strategies as they examine the message. A central route to persuasion is said to occur if the recipients carefully examine and process those cues in the message that they believe are central to a meaningful and logical evaluation of the communication object. In contrast, a peripheral route to persuasion results when recipients evaluate the communication object based on a rather cursory and



superficial analysis of readily available and salient cues in the communication, regardless of whether these cues are meaningfully related to the communication object. Specifically, attitudes may be formed or changed via peripheral processing either because the object is associated with positive or negative cues, or because the individual can make a quick evaluative inference about the object based on simple cues in the persuasion context. Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman (21) also propose that motivation and ability to process a communication are the key determinants of whether central or peripheral processing will occur in a particular situation. High motivation and ability to process (e.g, high involvement with and knowledge about the communication issue) leads to central processing, where as peripheral processing results if either the motivation or the ability to process the communication is low.

The "two routes to persuasion" framework suggests that source characteristics such as credibility can have direct effects on attitude under both central and peripheral processing. To illustrate, consider an advertisement for brand X cereal which shows a physician eating the cereal, and also makes the claims that (a) brand X is high in fiber, and (b) brand X stays crunchy in milk. Under central processing, information about the source as well as other stated claims in the ad are likely to be considered relevant to judging the true merits of brand X. Thus, source credibility and believability of the stated claims should independently contribute to the overall evaluation of the brand.

In this instance, the source is acting as a persuasive argument (i.e., a central cue), and is processed in a manner akin to other arguments or claims in the message. Under peripheral processing, recipients are not expected to diligently process the stated claims in the message. However, the picture of a credible source consuming the product could be used to rapidly generate a favorable evaluation of brand X. In this case, the credible source acts as a peripheral cue that triggers an overlearned heuristic (i.e., expert sources should be trusted).

There is now considerable empirical evidence to support the claim for direct credibility effects on attitude -- especially under peripheral processing. For instance, Petty and Cacioppo (20) have shown that when subjects are uninvolved with an advocacy message, attitude is strongly affected by peripheral cues such as source credibility, but is unaffected by the quality of arguments in the message. In contrast evidence supporting credibility effects under central processing is more limited [but see Dean, Austin, and Watts (5) for strong credibility effects under high involvement) suggesting, perhaps, that these effects are weaker, and harder to isolate. A likely reason for this is that persuasive arguments in the message are perceived to be more relevant to judging the true merits of an advocacy, and hence overshadow the effects of other variables such as source credibility when involvement is high.

The preceding analysis generates relatively straightforward implications for the use of credible sources in advertising.

Direct effects of source credibility are expected to follow the intuitively appealing *experto crede* phenomenon -- credible sources should consistently produce more favorable attitudinal effects than sources lacking in credibility. The timing of source introduction should not influence the strength of these effects since the source does not exert its influence on attitude by first affecting message processing. Consequently, the advertiser has considerable latitude in deciding whether a source should be introduced early or late in a commercial message.

Note that although source credibility is expected to produce similar (positive) direct effects under both central and peripheral processing, there are differences which have significant consequences for advertising. Attitudinal effects induced through central processing are based on a detailed assessment of message content, and are thus likely to be more enduring, and less susceptible to counterattack than changes induced via the peripheral route [see Petty and Cacioppo (20) for details]. Consequently, credibility effects under peripheral processing would need to be frequently augmented (perhaps via repetition) unless only short term attitudinal and behavioral impact is desired. In contrast, relatively few exposures should be sufficient to maintain effects through central processing, although the magnitude of these effects is likely to be more modest.

The variables that moderate direct effects due to source credibility on attitude will also markedly differ depending on

which of the two routes to persuasion is being followed. Under central processing, the effects of a cue on attitude are contingent on the persuasive quality of that cue, i.e., the extent to which that cue is considered relevant to logically assessing the communication object. Thus, the source cue should compete with other "central" cues in the ad reception environment (e.g., persuasive quality of message arguments) for impact on attitude. Indeed, the available evidence suggests that very strong or very weak messages may dilute, or even completely eliminate credibility effects when involvement is high [e.g., Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman (21)]. Thus, it may be fruitful for advertisers to employ credible sources only when other central cues such as message quality are either non-existent or at moderate levels. Under peripheral processing, the relative impact of peripheral cues in the ad (such as credibility, source attractiveness, spontaneous emotional responses, attitude towards the ad, etc.) should depend on the relative salience and vividness of these cues -- i.e., the ease with which these cues can be attended to and processed. This suggests, for instance, that if the spokesperson in an advertisement is both attractive and credible, we would expect attitudinal effects due to attractiveness to be stronger because of the vividness of this cue. Evidence supporting this claim was obtained in a study on endorser effects by Pallak, Murrioni, and Koch (19).

### **Indirect Effects**



Source credibility can also affect attitude indirectly by first influencing the way in which people process and evaluate claims made in the persuasive message. We consider two possibilities here, namely that credibility could either influence the magnitude of message processing, or influence the (evaluative) direction of processing. Since these two mediating mechanisms are predicted by different theoretical perspectives, we consider each one separately.

**Effects on Amount of Processing.** The "central versus peripheral processing" framework nicely accounts for source credibility effects under extreme levels of motivation and ability to process message arguments. However, most persuasion contexts are probably not characterized by extreme motivation and ability levels. In recent years, Cacioppo and Petty (4) have proposed an extension of the "central/peripheral routes" framework termed the elaboration likelihood model to account for persuasion processes under moderate levels of involvement and ability. The ELM suggests that when motivation to process a communication is at moderate levels, cues such as credibility of the source will act neither as a message argument nor as a peripheral cue. Rather, credibility will influence the amount of message processing that audiences engage in [see Petty and Cacioppo (20) for details]. For example, consider a situation in which a communication is somewhat counterattitudinal, but the recipient is only moderately involved with the advocacy issue and hence unsure about the extent to which (s)he should process the communication. A



counterattitudinal message clearly represents a threat to the recipient's current beliefs and attitudes. A highly credible source intensifies this threat, and should thus induce detailed evaluation of the message arguments. In contrast, the threat perceived from a counterattitudinal message should be lowered if the message is attributed to a source of low credibility. This should allow recipients to assess the implications of the communication without a detailed examination of its contents. Note that the effects of high versus low credibility sources on the intensity of message processing will be reversed if the communication is proattitudinal. Recipients will perceive a greater threat if they receive a message they agree with from a source that they do not trust. Consequently, a low credibility source should lead to greater message processing for proattitudinal messages.

Empirical support for credibility effects on amount of message processing comes from a study by Heesacker, Petty, and Cacioppo (12) which examined the effects of message quality (strong versus weak) and source credibility (high versus low) on attitude towards a moderately involving and counterattitudinal topic (i.e., an issue whose consequences for the subjects were uncertain). As expected, the credible source induced subjects to more deeply process message claims, and thus intensified the effects of message quality on attitude. In contrast, message quality had no effect on attitude when the message was attributed to a source of low credibility. Stated differently, the low

credibility source diluted the effects of message quality by reducing recipients' motivation to carefully scrutinize the message.

In sum, the ELM framework suggests that effects due to source credibility under moderate involvement levels are contingent on the quality of the message arguments as well as initial opinions of the audience members. If an advertisement is targeted primarily at an unfavorable audience, then a highly credible source should only be used if the claims made in the advertisement can stand up to close scrutiny. If these claims are vacuous, then a credible source would actually be dysfunctional since it would intensify message processing and hence amplify the negative effects due to unconvincing arguments in the message. It would also not be advisable to use a low credibility source, since that would allow recipients to reject the message without engaging in message processing. Instead, advertisers would do well to rely on other positive peripheral cues (such as an attractive source or pleasant music) to create direct attitudinal effects.

These recommendations are reversed for audiences who are initially favorable. Specifically, favorable audiences will be more persuaded by a compelling message if it is coupled with a source of questionable credibility, since such a source would lead to more careful message scrutiny. A highly credible source would only be advisable if it is desirable that the audience not engage in detailed message processing. Such would clearly be the

case when the advertised brand has no distinctive advantage over its competitors, and is hence being supported by relatively vacuous claims.

**Effects on Direction of Processing.** Sternthal, Dholakia, and Leavitt (23) [also see Sternthal, Phillips, and Dholakia (24)] suggest an alternative way in which source credibility may affect attitude in a situation of moderate involvement. These authors examine credibility effects within a cognitive response model of persuasion. The cognitive response model (9, 26, 27) asserts that the effects of a persuasive message on attitude are mediated by the spontaneous thoughts or cognitive responses generated by recipients during message exposure. If these responses are primarily negative (i.e., counterarguments) then negative attitudes result. On the other hand, predominantly positive responses (i.e., support arguments) lead to a more favorable attitude towards the advocacy object.

A variable such as source credibility can influence attitudes by first affecting the mix of counter/support arguments generated during the message viewing episode. If the message is counterattitudinal, then recipients are primarily predisposed to counterargue with the message regardless of the credibility of the source. However, it is more difficult to counterargue with statements made by a credible or expert source. Thus, a credible source should inhibit counterargumentation and hence lead to a more favorable attitude. In contrast, a proattitudinal message will primarily predispose recipients to support argue. If the

message is attributed to a source lacking in credibility, recipients will believe that the source is not qualified to adequately represent the issue that they support. Consequently, a source of moderate or low credibility will actually enhance support argumentation, and hence further polarize the already favorable attitude. In sum, source credibility is expected to influence attitude by first affecting the direction rather than the intensity of thinking.

It should be noted that the framework discussed above was originally presented as a general representation of source credibility effects regardless of level of involvement. Subsequently, Sternthal, Phillips, and Dholakia (24) argued that credibility would likely affect message processing only when involvement was not at extremely high levels. Since the cognitive response model has generally been recognized as not adequately dealing with low involvement message processing situations, it appears that the Sternthal et al. framework is primarily suitable in situations of moderate issue involvement.

A key prediction of the Sternthal et al. framework is that credible sources will be persuasive if recipients have an initial negative opinion towards the advocacy issue, but will actually operate as a persuasive liability for initially positive recipients. This predicted interaction between source credibility and initial opinion has been supported in a number of studies (2, 10, 23). Note, however, that the ELM model makes an identical prediction if the quality of persuasive messages is assumed to be



high. Since all three of the studies listed above employed reasonably compelling arguments in their experimental communications, these studies do not differentiate the ELM model from the framework proposed by Sternthal, Dholakia, and Leavitt (23).

Although the ELM model and the Sternthal et al. framework generate identical predictions when message quality is strong, it is worth emphasizing that the mediating mechanisms for credibility effects postulated by the two approaches are conceptually distinct. The ELM suggests that source credibility influences the extent to which a message is processed. Consequently, credibility simply serves to amplify or weaken the effects of other variables (such as message quality) on attitude. In contrast the Sternthal et al. framework proposes that credibility modifies the way in which message arguments are interpreted independent of the quality of these arguments. Consequently, a compelling test of the two frameworks requires an examination of credibility effects for strong as well as weak messages. Sternthal, Dholakia, and Leavitt (23) predict no difference in the source credibility by initial opinion interaction as a function of message quality, while the ELM framework predicts a three-way interaction, i.e., a source of high (low) credibility is expected to polarize effects due to variations in message quality when initial opinion is negative (positive). Evidence from Heesacker, Petty, and Cacioppo (12) thus appears to support the ELM framework. However, more research



is clearly needed before the precise mechanism for source effects under moderate involvement levels is clearly understood.

Finally, both frameworks make similar predictions regarding the durability of credibility effects, and the appropriate timing for source introduction in the message. Source credibility effects on attitude under moderate involvement are expected to be based on the amount and direction of message processing. Consequently, these effects should be durable and resistant to counterattack, and should be observed only when the identity of the source is revealed early in the communication.

## Discussion

Our review of the literature suggests that source credibility can operate in a persuasion environment in several distinct capacities -- as a persuasive argument, as a peripheral cue, or as a variable that influences the intensity and/or direction of active message processing. Table 1 summarizes each of these mediating mechanisms, the conditions under which they are likely to operate, and implications for the use of credible sources in advertising.

Motivation and ability to process a persuasive communication appear to be the key determinants of credibility effects on attitude. In particular, there is considerable evidence to suggest that variations in involvement with the advocacy issue alters the mechanisms through which credibility operates. Unfortunately, involvement is an individual difference variable

that cannot be manipulated by an advertiser to suit his communication objectives. However, recent research shows that variables such as message tone, mood induce by the advertisement, and media type could also influence the way in which source credibility effects attitudes by inducing central versus peripheral processing on the part of the respondents (1, 19, 25). Research which examines the simultaneous effects of source credibility and these types of variables should prove useful because it would give advertisers insights about how they could alter recipients' message processing strategy so as to maximize effects due to source variables such as credibility.

There is also a need for more research designed to examine credibility effects under moderate involvement situations. It seems likely that recipients of advertising messages are frequently uncertain about the consequences of the advertised brand to their personal lives. Extant literature suggests that credibility effects under such conditions may occasionally be negative, and could be accounted for by more than one mediating mechanism. Moreover, it is possible that the two proposed mechanisms may operate in parallel, or one may dominate the other as a function of other (as yet unspecified) variables in the ad reception environment. These important issues have received virtually no attention in the literature. Indeed, we found very few studies that were explicitly designed to examine the hows and whys of credibility effects under moderate involvement. The study by Heesacker, Petty, and Cacioppo (12) is an exception in that it

provides compelling support for predictions derived from the ELM in a counterattitudinal situation. However, predictions of this framework for credibility effects on an initially favorable audience have never been tested. This is clearly a research area with tremendous theoretical and practical consequences.

Finally, it should be noted that much of our discussion in this paper is based on persuasion studies reported in the psychology literature. There is clearly no guarantee that effects and mediators uncovered in lab studies involving simple, verbal messages will generalize to more complex ad reception environments. There is a need for constructive replication designed to "fix" these effects in environments relevant to advertising and marketing practitioners.

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Table 1. Summary of mechanisms mediating source credibility effects

Moderator variables	Empirical support	Implications
<b>Direct Effects: Credibility as a persuasive argument</b>		
High motivation/ High ability	Dean, Austin, and Watts (1975)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Effects are always positive.</li> <li>2. Effects are relatively enduring.</li> <li>3. Timing of source identification will not influence these effects.</li> <li>4. Magnitude of effects influenced by other central cues.</li> </ol>
<b>Direct Effects: Credibility as a peripheral cue</b>		
Low motivation/ Low ability	Johnson and Scileppi (1969)  Rhine and Severance (1970)  McGinnies (1973)  Andreoli and Worchel (1978)  Mizerski, Hunt, and Patti (1978)  Petty, Cacioppo, and Goldman (1981)  Pallak, Murrone, and Koch (1984)  Worth and Mackie (1987)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Effects are always positive.</li> <li>2. Effects are not very enduring.</li> <li>3. Timing of source identification will not influence these effects.</li> <li>4. Magnitude of effects influenced by other peripheral cues (e.g., source attractiveness).</li> </ol>

Table 1. (continued)

Moderator variables	Empirical support	Implications
<b>Indirect Effects: Effects on the amount of processing</b>		
Moderate motivation	Heesacker, Petty, and Cacioppo (1983)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Effects (positive or negative) are contingent on (a) prior opinion and (b) message quality.</li> <li>2. Effects are relatively enduring.</li> <li>3. These effects will be observed only when source is identified before message.</li> </ol>
<b>Indirect Effects: Effects on the direction of processing</b>		
Moderate motivation	Bock and Saine (1975)	1. Effects (positive or negative) will be dependent on recipient's prior opinion.
	Sternthal, Dholakia, and Leavitt (1978)	2. Effects are relatively enduring.
	Harmon and Coney (1982)	3. These effects will be observed only when source is identified before message.









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