

Public Abstract

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Title:THE CREDIBLE BRAND MODEL: THE EFFECTS OF IDEOLOGICAL CONGRUENCY AND CUSTOMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY ON MEDIA AND MESSAGE CREDIBILITY

This study proposes and tests the credible brand model (CBM), a model that explicates the processes by which media audiences make credibility judgments about media outlets and their products. The primary postulate of the CBM is that media audiences' perceptions of the media credibility of a media outlet, and by extension the message credibility of its news stories, are dependent on their perception of the customer-based brand equity (CBBE) of the media outlet and the ideological congruency between their personal worldview and the worldview of that media outlet.

A survey was conducted to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions associated with this model. The survey probed respondents' ideological congruency with two media brands (Fox News Channel and CNN) and their perceptions of the media credibility and brand equity of the media outlets. The data showed strong support for the CBM.

The implications of the CBM for the theory and practice of mass communication are substantial. Theoretically, the model proffers a new way of thinking about the media credibility process. The effect of ideological congruency on CBBE, and consequently, media credibility shows the increasing impact of audiences' personal worldview on their perception of media products, and challenges the traditional view that media credibility primarily depends on some action or inaction of the news media.

The other important relationship in the CBM is the effect of CBBE on media credibility. The application of branding practices to the news media is a recent phenomenon; therefore, theories that explicate the roles of brand equity in mass communication are still being developed. This study extends the frontiers of scholarly knowledge on the subject and proposes a model that would help future researchers understand the effects of CBBE on the news credibility process. Despite the infancy of scholarly research on brand equity and the media, the validation of the CBM suggests that the increasing use of advertisements and other branding practices by news media outlets may actually help improve audiences' perception of the media. Concerted effort by media organizations to define their brands in the minds of news consumers with coordinated branding campaigns and carefully crafted slogans such as CNN's, "the best political team" and "the most trusted name in news," and the New York Times' "all the news that's fit to print" may actually become embedded in news consumers' subconscious mental processes and improve their perceptions of news media outlets' credibility and trustworthiness.

This study also found a strong relationship between traditional management's ways of differentiating products and organizations (branding) and news media's differentiation method (media credibility). CBBE explained a statistically significant portion of the variance in media

credibility for both Fox News Channel (82%) and CNN (71%) after controlling for the effects of the confounding variables. The relationship between CBBE, a proven profitability index, and media channel credibility suggests that a decrease/increase in CBBE may instigate a similar trend in media credibility.

Media managers and journalists sometimes act as if their goals are dichotomous, with journalists touting the importance of news quality and journalistic excellence while lampooning media managers' focus on profitability goals, and vice versa. This dichotomous paradigm often results in intra-organization conflicts, which could eventually undermine both media credibility and CBBE goals. This study, however, shows that the two concepts that exemplify exceptional news quality (credibility) and profitability (CBBE) are related. Thus, confirming the congruency of the newsrooms' and the boardrooms' goals. It is important for journalists to realize that newsroom budgets, and consequently excellence in news gathering and reporting, are tied to media outlets' profitability while media managers also need to understand that profitability depends on news quality, which research shows is dependent on newsroom investments.