

ANTECEDENTS OF WEBSITE CREDIBILITY:
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

A Thesis
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
KRISTEN FRANZ
Dr. Shelly Rodgers, Thesis Supervisor

MAY 2010

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

ANTECEDENTS OF WEBSITE CREDIBILITY:

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

presented by Kristen Franz, a candidate for the degree of master of arts and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Shelly Rodgers

Professor Maria Len-Rios

Professor Fritz Cropp

Professor Michael Porter

Many, many thanks to my parents and sister for their unending support and encouragement over the years. And, of course, to my wonderful and loving HDLM.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone involved in my thesis-writing and review process, especially my thesis advisor and committee. This includes Drs. Shelly Rodgers, Michael Porter, Maria Len-Rios and Fritz Cropp. Special thanks to Dr. Rodgers for her guidance and support over the years, both as my professor and thesis advisor. She helped me develop a thorough understanding of credibility as it pertains to websites, and this understanding will undoubtedly help me in my future professional endeavors.

ABSTRACT

Credibility online and in websites has long been studied in an effort to determine the specific factors contributing to a website's perceived credibility. This study expanded on past research focused on website credibility and schema, and explored the relationship between websites and the parent companies and brands associated with them.

Depth interviews were conducted with eight study participants of varying ages. Participants were asked to come prepared to review and discuss websites they liked and found credible, and websites they disliked or found not to be credible. Questions focused on those elements of each website constituting schema, and the relationship websites had to various parent companies and brands.

The study found that schema was an important factor in all websites, whether liked or disliked or viewed as credible or not credible, and therefore was not a key factor in determining perceived credibility. The study also found that in general, websites associated with well-known brands and companies, especially those with outside reinforcers such as advertisements or bricks-and-mortar stores, were perceived as more credible than the websites of lesser-known companies or brands.

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INTRODUCTION

As a result of today's digitally savvy world, companies are increasingly aware of the importance of having a credible website. Credibility affects the way consumers perceive the quality of online services and resources and how they evaluate the quality and trustworthiness of the information they receive. Online credibility also influences the impact of Internet-based messages (Wathen & Burkell, 2002) and helps consumers process information, evaluate purchase options, and form perceptions of companies and information sources. With online communications, credibility is particularly important since authors, sources and the currency of information are often times unknown.

Building online credibility and trust with end users is critical for all organizations; however, factors or antecedents for building online credibility are unknown and research in this area has yet to identify a set of antecedents that address website credibility, specifically. Significant research in the area of Internet credibility has been conducted (see Flanagin and Metzger (2007) for a recent bibliography). As a result, some of the attributes contributing to a website's general trustworthiness and appeal have been examined and suggested by previous research. Warnick (2004) identified a set of attributes that website users believed made up a basic website. These attributes, also referred to as schema, include the following: the ability to easily navigate a site and find the information desired, the ability to easily identify information sources, the knowledge that a site is current and frequently updated, the ability to find out background information and other important facts about a site, and knowing who owns a particular site (Warnick, 2004). Limited advertising, sophisticated site graphics and design, the

verification of quality and online standards from third parties, and links and references on other sites and within other resources also contribute to consumer perceptions of credibility and quality.

While these attributes and guidelines serve as a starting point for determining aspects of a website's overall appeal and credibility to consumers, they do not necessarily address how these elements of credibility influence or determine the broader credibility of the companies, brands and products being represented. Specifically, two areas that have not been widely considered are 1) the credibility afforded a website from being affiliated with a positively regarded corporate source, and 2) the degree to which the set of beliefs Internet users hold when navigating websites, also referred to as schema, can influence the perceived credibility of a website. Both of these are important for businesses trying to understand how to effectively design and develop their websites, and trying to understand the role their website plays in the consumer evaluation and purchase decision making process.

Purpose of Study

The goal of this research was to increase understanding about specific characteristics that make a website credible, as well as examine the relationship between perceived website credibility and corporate credibility. Greater knowledge of these characteristics can help businesses and organizations improve their websites as well as their perceived website credibility. The intent of this study was also to determine if perceived website credibility is mainly a product of a website's content, functionality and design characteristics, or other factors such as schema and company or brand associations

that may also play a role. More specifically, is website credibility an “emotional” thing based on ideas consumers have about websites, such as schema, or a “factual” thing based on the actual information, content and design being featured? For example, a consumer’s view of website credibility could be influenced by the content, information and attractive design of a website, or by a consumer’s assessment that a website meets certain basic and objective layout characteristics, so is therefore credible.

These objectives were accomplished in this study with a qualitative approach using depth interviews of user experiences with websites. Eight study participants were chosen who use the Internet on a regular basis to gather information, perform research or make purchases. Depth interviews were utilized to better understand how each study participant evaluates websites and their perceived credibility, and how the perceived credibility of a brand or corporation influences that brand or corporation’s website in terms of perceived credibility. Qualitative analyses were then used to analyze participants’ responses and stories.

Respondents were asked questions about the layout of different websites in terms of how logical they were and their navigatability, as well as how their views of websites might differ based on any associations those websites have with certain corporate companies or brands. These questions were designed to speak to those areas of website credibility that have not been previously addressed by other studies and research. Specifically, how does the credibility of a brand or company influence the perceived credibility of that brand or company’s website? Understanding this relationship will allow companies to better understand the role their website plays in consumer evaluation, information gathering and purchasing behaviors. Understanding how consumers perceive

schema on websites, or the set of common beliefs regarding a website's design and layout, will also allow companies to better understand and address the areas of a website that are important for consumers and necessary to include.

Metzger (2007) reviewed the results of previous studies concerning website credibility and summarized the findings in terms of how Internet users assess online credibility. Based on those findings, she suggests various areas of website credibility research that need to be explored further. According to Metzger (2007), future research on Internet credibility needs to be much broader, including a variety of research methods and Internet users performing different types of online tasks. She continues by saying that future research should provide guidelines on usability and effectiveness that help Internet users better determine how to evaluate credibility online (Metzger, 2007). Additional research also needs to be done to determine how user motivation impacts the website credibility evaluation process (Metzger, 2007). This study addresses some of these areas by exploring the influence that corporate affiliations and brands play on perceived website credibility. This is a relationship that has not been previously studied and that will help illuminate user motivations and thought processes when evaluating and determining website credibility.

This paper is organized as follows: the first section provided an overview of the study. Section two will review important literature on various topics related to credibility, concluding with the research questions to be addressed by this study. The next section will describe the methodology used, including how participants were selected, how questions were administered and what questions were asked. The fourth section will

analyze the results of the depth interviews conducted, and the final section will present conclusions and summarize the research's findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In media communications, credibility makes it possible for practitioners to connect with their audiences, and for audiences to gain confidence in the items they read, see and hear. Extensive research on credibility has been conducted and researchers continue to study new aspects of credibility to refine previous research on the topic. This study will examine a specific type of credibility – website credibility – and explore the factors that determine website credibility, as well as the relationship between a website's credibility and any associated brands or corporations.

The result of so much research into the subject of credibility is a definition that is constantly evolving and improving. Two of the earliest researchers on the topic of credibility were Hovland and Weiss (1951). The pair identified credibility as being made up of two basic concepts: trustworthiness and expertise. Throughout the years, other scholars have also studied credibility and identified additional dimensions including believability, fairness, dynamism and completeness (Moore and Rodgers, 2005; Soh, Reid and King, 2007; Berlo, Lemert and Mertz, 1969). Tseng and Fogg (1999) proposed four types of credibility in computer applications, including presumed, reputed, surface and experienced. Presumed credibility describes how much a person or thing is believed based on generally accepted assumptions in the perceiver's mind. Reputed credibility describes how much a person or thing is believed based on evaluations from outside parties. Surface credibility describes how much a person or thing is believed based on

“face” value and experienced credibility describes how much a person or thing is believed based on “first-hand experience” (Tseng and Fogg, 1999).

Within the subject of credibility, Internet credibility refers to the credibility of on-line resources and information as a whole, while website credibility refers only to the credibility of a specific website. We will begin by examining different types of credibility and their definitions. This will provide sufficient backdrop for this study and the factors influencing and leading to a website’s credibility.

Media Credibility

In terms of journalism and media communication, media credibility has to do with audience perceptions of a news channel’s believability independent of individual and media sources and their message content (Bucy, 2003). Media credibility is different from source credibility as source credibility stresses the characteristics of the message sender versus the message content (Bucy, 2003). How the public views the credibility of media sources is important to the study of journalism and to research attempting to determine the best way to connect and communicate with audiences. A 2007 Pew Research Center poll found that the public’s once steady perception of media credibility had continued to decline. When interviewed, 39% of Americans expressed confidence in the media’s ability to get facts straight, a significant drop considering prior responses were typically between 55 and 46% from 1985 to 2001 (Ruby & Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008).

Source Credibility

Source credibility, especially as it pertains to the media, was first studied by Carl Hovland and his colleagues in the 1950s. According to Hovland et al. (1951), source credibility helps determine an audience's attitude toward a particular communicator (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Their early studies on the topic sought to determine how individuals' opinions were influenced by changes in source characteristics, and how opinions obtained from high- and low-credibility sources persist over time (Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953). In terms of the media, there are different types of source credibility including website, print, Internet, magazine, television, radio, newspaper and advertizing. Extensive research exists for each; however, this paper will focus specifically on Internet and website credibility.

Source credibility addresses the perception an evaluator has of a particular entity, and whether that perception influences the message received. An entity can be anything or anyone supplying a message, including a person, organization, company, website or publication. Source credibility has been shown to influence attitudes and behavioral intentions (Lafferty, Goldsmith and Newell, 2002). Source credibility includes specific consideration of corporate credibility and spokesperson credibility since each is viewed as a type of source (Lafferty, Goldsmith and Newell, 2002). In the case of this study, source credibility has to do with the perceived credibility a corporation or brand is conveying to an end website user.

Corporate Credibility

Corporate credibility is a subset of source credibility and relates to the company behind a product being seen as the source (Newell and Goldsmith, 2001). More

specifically, corporate credibility describes the perception consumers have regarding a firm, its knowledge and its ability to be trusted. (Newell and Goldsmith, 2001).

According to Len-Rios (2003), corporate websites provide information on companies and their products or services; some also sell products and services.

Research in this area suggests that corporate credibility influences consumer decision-making products, messages and what to purchase (Newell and Goldsmith, 2001). Goldsmith and Lafferty (1999) studied how corporate credibility in advertising affected consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. They found that corporate credibility impacts the way consumers perceive brands, especially when compared to endorser credibility. Len Rios (2003) identified rules that consumers use when evaluating corporate websites. She concluded that two-way communication and personalized service were critical factors in corporate websites developing relationships with consumers. These findings are important to the research at hand because they suggest that corporations can influence the perceived credibility of their websites through factors indirectly related to the website itself but directly related to the communication and type of service being offered.

Internet Credibility

Internet and website credibility has drawn public attention as spam, hackers and untrustworthy authors and sources are reported; however the concerns for website sponsors are much broader. A 2003 UCLA study found that the number of users who view the Internet as reliable and accurate is going down. The 2005 Trust Barometer agrees: the Internet is the least popular source for information about organizations

(although this is changing). To become more popular in the future, the Barometer contends that organizations will need to focus on enhancing their website aesthetics and functionality to help reassure consumers (Edelman Public Relations, Trust Barometer, 2005). Internet users exhibit a low 29% trust for websites that have products for sale and only a 33% trust of sites offering advice about product and purchases. In contrast, 58 percent trust newspapers and television news and 47 percent trust the federal government. (Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2002). While the importance of these trust issues and their impact on on-line businesses and interactions has been studied, there is still much research to be done to find a solution for how to build credibility online and, more specifically, building website credibility for consumers.

Flanagin and Metzger (2000) studied how people's perceptions of the credibility of various categories of Internet information compared to similar information provided by other media. In short, they wanted to find out whether people view the Internet as more credible or less credible than other information sources. They believed this was an important topic since on-line information can differ from other types of information due to its "open source" nature compared to more traditional media sources. In this sense, online information has a higher likelihood of being inaccurate and uncomfortable for consumers compared with the reassurance and familiarity of traditional media sources. This study is important to the research at hand because it demonstrates that online information has historically been perceived as being highly inaccurate compared to traditional media sources. Knowing this means companies must work even harder to have highly credible websites if they want to attract and retain customers and their business.

In their research, Flanagin and Metzger (2000) examined questions about 1) the perceived credibility of modern mass communications media, 2) the user's verification of the information received, 3) the perceived credibility of a medium based on the type of information sought, and 4) whether users of the Internet verify the information they receive differently than other users according to the information they seek. The researchers found that the methods people use to verify information from traditional media sources are clearly understood and organized, and that they followed established patterns. However, this is not the case when evaluating information obtained from online sources. They also found that information type was an important factor in the evaluation of Internet information credibility. This means that users assess credibility differently depending on the type of information they are reviewing (entertainment, news, commercial or reference). This is an additional reason why the research at hand chose to focus solely on people who use the Internet for information gathering, research and purchasing activities.

Flanagin and Metzger noted that based on the findings of others, media credibility may be more contingent on the type of information being sought instead of the medium from which it is obtained. For example, consumers are more interested and more involved in certain types of information, especially those types that may involve personal or financial ramifications. In these instances, consumers will be more motivated to double check and confirm the accuracy of the information they receive. Finally, Flanagin and Metzger indicate that people view sources that they're comfortable with and use frequently as more credible than sources they don't. This is an interesting finding that can be of immense value to corporations in their website development. If a website is

believed to be a reliable and credible source of information, consumers will return to that site more frequently than one that is not believed to be credible. This is an important factor for companies to keep in mind as they work to build customer loyalty and dependency.

In general, studies have found that Internet users don't routinely verify the truthfulness of information they find online (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Scholz-Crane, 1998). Flanagin and Metzger (2000) used a series of studies to examine how much Internet consumers use a set of recommended criteria to evaluate the accuracy and believability of the information they obtained online. The criteria include accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency and coverage. Fink-Shamit and Bar-Ilan (2008) found that the assessment of information quality consists of four components: credibility of content, credibility of site, predictive relevance and veracity assessment. These factors are important for companies to remember and employ as they examine their current and future website offerings.

Metzger conducted research to determine what type of information credibility checking activities students and non students engage in, and how these activities evolve over time. Respondents were asked how often they performed different tasks when visiting websites. Those behaviors included checking for contact information and author information, looking for third party seals of approval and activities to verify the accuracy and thoroughness of the content presented. The researchers found that students in general take a more laid back approach to online information verification and credibility checking. Understanding which areas of a website are being most frequently checked or

monitored by consumers when looking to verify a website's credibility can help companies lay out their website content accordingly.

Burbules's (2001) research examined how determining credibility online is different and more challenging than determining the credibility of traditional media sources. He comments that there are three primary conditions: volume (there is so much information online and one search can return thousands or millions of hits. This means that more people are involved with adding information to the web and having the ability to be involved); the internet is a self-sustaining reference system which makes it hard to verify information at times since you may just be operating in the same circle as you try to cross-check references and information; and the rate at which the internet is growing and information can circulate within it. These factors are important for companies to understand as they work to counteract the aspects of operating online that can diminish perceived website credibility.

Website Credibility

This research posits that website credibility goes above and beyond the basic elements already identified by previous researchers, and more broadly reflects credibility back on the source being represented. For example, a credible website is more than just the sum of certain elements such as layout, design and content; it is the entire website as a whole and that website's ability to reflect positively on the brand or corporation being directly or indirectly represented.

Compared to Internet credibility which refers to the credibility of on-line resources and information as a whole, website credibility refers only to the credibility of

a specific website. While these two types of credibility share many of the same characteristics, they are also quite different. Internet credibility is challenging to measure and depends largely on the accuracy of information gathered and the sources from which that information has been obtained.

Freeman and Spyridakis (2004) studied the factors that can influence how consumers evaluate online health information and sources from websites. According to the researchers, readers of web information typically only use the information on one page to assess the credibility of a website they're looking at. This means that readers are not reviewing author, sponsor or "about us" information before implementing information they read online. This is an interesting but frightening idea for companies not prepared for their website's credibility to be evaluated so quickly and narrowly.

Freeman and Spyridakis (2004) discuss four characteristics that affect online health information: the publisher of the information, the author of the information, the originators of the information (the sources contained within the text) and the communication channel or technology used to convey the information. Other factors that can influence a website's credibility include contact information such as a street address and the inclusion of external links. Likewise, the absence of these items can also impact a website's perceived credibility (Freeman and Spyridakis, 2004). Freeman and Spyridakis (2004) also point out that information overload, a shortage of time, age and experience with online media can all influence a person's view of online or website credibility.

Similarly, Rains and Karmikel (2009) examined relationships between perceptions of website credibility and both message characteristics and structural features of health websites such as privacy policy statements and third-party endorsements,

finding a positive relationship. These definitions identify good elements but don't speak to the higher responsibility of a website to influence the credibility upward and out of a related brand or corporation.

Burbules (2001) outlines several aspects of website credibility that serve as a foundation for the current research, including: credibility proxies, skepticism, outside opinions and online communities. First are proxies of credibility, which include the website's URL type as well as the layout, visual quality and freshness of the information presented. This first element is useful to the research at hand because it indicates that there are certain characteristics that website users look to when attempting to determine website credibility, and that those characteristics may in fact be indirect indicators versus direct indicators such as content. Second is skepticism, or questioning all types of information presented including internal and external sources presented. This element is useful to the research at hand because it demonstrates how consumers begin to formulate their website credibility beliefs through the evaluation of content provided and a review of the sources provided. Third is considering what others think of a website's credibility, such as search engines and online directories. This element is useful to the research at hand because it considers outside sources and influences in determining credibility. Fourth is the formation of online communities that distribute credibility across multiple users and groups. This element is useful to the research at hand because it shows how quickly credibility ideas can disseminate among end-users, and ultimately impact a website's and brand's credibility.

Wathen and Burkell (2002) found in their research that the characteristics of a website can influence perceived credibility. According to the researchers, numerous items

contribute to how information is evaluated for credibility, including source, receiver and message characteristics. This includes aspects such as the site's design, layout and color choices as well as spelling and grammar mistakes (Wathen and Burkell, 2002).

According to the researchers, users consider many different factors when determining the credibility of online information. They propose a possible model of how credibility assessment may take place on-line based on an interpretation of available evidence. The stage model describes how consumers evaluate websites through the use of questions to determine surface credibility and message credibility to get to content evaluation. The evaluator decides whether the credibility under question passes or fails after asking the included questions. The model asserts that credibility assessments on the Internet are iterative and that users make immediate judgments about a website upon entering, and then based on those judgments, decide to proceed deeper into the site or leave the website altogether. These findings tie back into the research questions at hand and what is being studied by confirming that website credibility is often determined by design, content, layout and other factors, all of which are evaluated by consumers shortly after arriving at a website. To avoid consumers misperceiving a website's credibility and quickly leaving, companies must ensure that they have included the correct design, layout and content elements consumers want and expect to see.

Hong (2006) contends that credibility judgments have to do with the source being evaluated as well as the context of the evaluation. She discovered that many different factors can influence perceived credibility including the inclusion of quotes in an article and website structural features such as top-level domain name, navigation tools, the presence of a privacy policy statement, endorsements from outside organizations, site

ownership, the currency of information and contact information. Hong's research also found, however, that a website's structural features don't have much impact on its perceived credibility but that message features do.

The research of Hong and others uncovers some interesting insights concerning domain name suffixes and the credibility they convey. Sites with domain names such as .edu, .org, and .gov (Rieh & Belkin, 1998; Treise, Walsh-Childers, Weigold, & Friedman, 2003) are often viewed as more credible than .com sites. In general, these findings suggest that commercial sites are seen as less credible than domain names implying some type of institution affiliation. It's important for companies to keep these types of findings in mind since all aspects of a website can influence the perceived credibility of the website, as well as the brand or corporation associated with it.

Endorsements from third parties have also been found to impact perceptions of a website's credibility along with related factors such as outside links and indications of information currency (Alexander & Tate, 1999). Items that aid in the organization or perceived organization of a site are viewed as beneficial to one's credibility, while elements such as the inclusion of advertisements have been negatively associated with perceived credibility (Fogg et al., 2001). Websites, in contrast, receive much of their credibility from the brands and companies they are associated with. In other words, website credibility is often influenced by corporate credibility. Conversely, Rodgers (2003) found a relationship between website credibility and Internet users' evaluations on website sponsors.

Since expertise, believability and trustworthiness are key components of credibility in general and of a website's credibility in particular, it's understandable that

the majority of a website's credibility would be tied to the views people have of the parent company or organization affiliated with a particular website. This is especially true for websites associated with well-known brands and companies that already have established credibility with their consumers and the public. For example, a user may find a company's website difficult to navigate, frustrating to use and too cluttered, but may still believe that the website is credible simply because of the reputation associated with the company behind the website. The distinction between the credibility a website's information, functionality and layout can provide versus the credibility a website has from its association with a well-known brand or company is still an open question. Past research on website credibility has focused on ease of navigation, site design and layout, aesthetic appeal, currency and accuracy of site information, the ability to tie the information presented on the website back to an "author" or source and how quickly a website and its pages load, among other factors.

Bellman and Rossiter (2004) studied website schema, which they defined as the set of beliefs consumers have about information on a website, including where that information is located and how the website is laid out. They found that consumers perceived websites more favorably when the website schema they expected matched the website schema they encountered on a particular website (Bellman and Rossiter, 2004). This is due in large part to the fact that websites featuring familiar schemas are easier to navigate and, therefore, help consumers form more positive brand beliefs and associations (Bellman and Rossiter, 2004). Website schema is an important part of the research at hand because it has been previously shown to play such an important role in the basic determination of a website's perceived credibility. Schema incongruity has been

studied in the past in examinations of product evaluation (Myers-Levy and Tybout, 1989). Hilligoss and Rieh (2008) identified three levels of credibility judgment: construct, heuristics and interaction. The construct level addresses how people define credibility; the heuristics level addresses commonly accepted rules when evaluating credibility; and the interaction level addresses credibility judgments made by evaluating outside cues and interactions. Len-Rios (2003) also studied a similar concept in her research on the consumer evaluation of corporate websites. In an effort to determine the rules consumers use in evaluating corporate websites, Len-Rios examined what types of expectations or “rules” consumers had regarding corporate website communication. Those expectations and pre-conceived rules are similar to schema in the way they determine how consumers will react to different elements of the website both in terms of information, content, layout and design.

Expanding on the Current Definition of Website Credibility

Past research concerning website credibility has been focused primarily on the aspects of a website believed to influence user perceptions of credibility, and the activities users engage in when visiting and evaluating websites. Limited research has also been done on the set of beliefs users have concerning website information and the location of that information, commonly referred to as schema. Much of the research has depended on observations of user interaction with websites and/or questionnaires about characteristics from checklists or pre-supplied options. Neither approach allows creation of understanding which is not constrained by this study’s research methodology. This research will use a qualitative approach to determine how previously identified website

aspects and schema impact beliefs on the specific factors leading to a website's perceived credibility. It will also attempt to distinguish between credibility resulting from these factors and credibility that's inherent in a website due to an association with a particular brand or company.

Research Questions

Previous research has offered explanations as to factors that contribute to a website's perceived credibility. However, these factors don't do a complete job of identifying the elements that a website must have in order to be perceived as credible, and do not address the way websites may gain credibility from brands and corporations. Furthermore, these elements do not sufficiently examine the extent to which general elements such as schema directly influence a website's perceived credibility.

Research Question 1:

To what extent do website users perceive the websites of well-known and trusted brands and companies as more credible than those of lesser-known brands and companies?

Research Question 2:

For brands and companies that are lesser known, what role do external factors play in determining and influencing a website's perceived credibility?

Research Question 3:

How do website elements and schema influence perceived website credibility?
Specifically, how important is schema compared to other factors in determining perceived website credibility?

METHODOLOGY

Measuring Credibility

There are many ways to measure credibility. These approaches include interviews, questions, factor analyses, testing and other related methods. The Roper question was a popular way to determine credibility previously in terms of the media. This question asked about the relative believability of media and returned differing answers over time, beginning in 1959 (Gaziano and McGrath, 1986). Wathen and Burkell (2002) propose that credibility can be assessed by simply asking respondents whether they think information and/or information sources are believable. After Hovland (1951) identified trustworthiness and expertise as the two main components of credibility, others began to break that down further to include other dimensions such as “safety,” “qualification,” “dynamism,” “knowledgeability,” “accuracy,” “fairness,” and completeness in an effort to more specifically measure peoples’ reactions to and perceptions of these various sub-factors.

The methodology employed in this study was qualitative interviews along with limited narratives. This method was chosen after carefully examining the various ways in which credibility can be measured. Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Liao (2003) describe how narrative research approaches replace the traditional interviewer/interviewee relationship with one where both parties actively participate in a story telling discussion. Instead of trading off questions and answers, both the interviewer and interviewee work together to build on specific events and experiences. Depth interviews, in contrast, focus more on the

delivery and answering of previously scripted, open-ended questions. Both approaches have their benefits and drawbacks, which is why this study attempted to employ both methods. Certain topics lent themselves to a more basic interview style, while other topics such as how participants navigated through a website and what he or she saw, clicked on, read and thought appeared to be a good match for the free-flowing recollections of narration.

A qualitative methodology was chosen because it allowed the researcher to more fully explore the feelings, emotions and rationale behind the words and actions of participants compared to more finite quantitative methods. Qualitative methods do not bias the respondent by providing preconceived choices for them to respond to. Fully understanding how consumer and information-oriented participants view websites, use websites, navigate websites and evaluate websites, especially as it pertains to credibility, was critical to this research and its potential to uncover new and changing motives and ideas in the field of website credibility. For these reasons, depth interviews containing open-ended and follow-up questions, and narrative accounts of experiences with specific website approaches, were utilized along with reviews of websites believed to be credible and not credible by the study participants.

Depth interviews and narrative accounts encourage participants to talk freely about their experiences, feelings and ideas related to specific websites and their recent website visits. To minimize the possibility that participants would not be able to recall specific facts and details about the websites being discussed, a computer was present during the interviews for participants use to review their chosen websites and discuss what they were seeing and experiencing real-time. Participants were asked to come

prepared with the URL of two websites: one website they liked using and found credible, and one that they didn't like using or found to be lacking in credibility. Participants discussed each website real-time with the researcher while simultaneously reviewing them on a computer.

The researcher asked the participants detailed questions about each of these websites, as well as discussed topics related to website credibility in general. For example, respondents were asked why they felt the "likeable" and "credible" website they selected was credible, and the specific elements of the website that lent to its credibility. Respondents were asked the same questions about the less favorable website they selected, including which elements of the website lead the participant to have a negative perception of it and view it as less credible. Follow up questions were also asked regarding various aspects of credibility (trustworthiness, expertise, dynamism, fairness, completeness and believability) present or missing in the two websites that were selected.

In addition to the above questions, respondents were also asked about brand and corporate credibility, and any possible relationships between a brand or corporation and its website. To ensure that new ideas related to websites and credibility had a chance to emerge, subjects were asked to provide narratives about their positive and negative interactions with specific websites so the researcher could learn more about participant experiences and perceptions first-hand. Specifically, respondents were asked to talk about times when they used a website that they did not know or have experience with, as well as how they felt about certain corporate brands after viewing unknown websites. An interview guide and sample of the questionnaire used can be found in Appendices 1 and 2.

Sample

Only participants who use websites for research or information-gathering purposes, or for making purchases, were asked to participate. The researcher did this to account for the fact that people utilizing the Internet solely for entertainment and social networking reasons may not view and evaluate website credibility and the possible factors contributing to it in the same way as those using the Internet for more specific goal-oriented purposes. For example, someone interested in celebrity happenings and gossip may not be concerned with where certain reports and information come from and may understand that it's possible that what she's reading may not be true. In this example, the person reading celebrity gossip online cares less about the credibility of what she's reading compared to the entertainment she's receiving. Ideally, the information read would be accurate and truthful but those qualities may be less important to someone looking primarily for entertainment.

A variety of ages and backgrounds were sought for this study since there is a documented link between age and perception of media credibility. According to Bucy (2003), "in general, older, more educated audiences tend to be the most critical of media, while younger, less educated news consumers are most likely to rate new media highly believable." Although this has been shown to occur mostly in network news compared to other forms of media (Bucy, 2003) such as websites, it was still an important factor to consider. The researcher felt that an appropriate mix of adult participants in terms of age and demographics was also important to account for differing levels of familiarity and expertise with computers and the Internet

Eight study participants, ages 30 to 63, who met the Internet usage guidelines outlined above were chosen to participate in the study. All are employed and work in a professional setting. Participants were not randomly chosen, but great care was taken to ensure that they represented a range of age groups, skill sets and professional expertise. Possible differences between men and women were also taken into consideration, which is why even numbers of male and female respondents were chosen.

Human Subjects and Interview Process

After IRB approval was secured, subjects were sent an email that briefly described the project, its purpose and the possible risks involved with participating. Subjects were asked to participate in the study and to sign a consent statement included with the email. A sample of the consent e-mail distributed to participants can be found in Appendix 3. Upon indicating their willingness to participate, a 90-minute interview time was set up at a mutually agreeable location. When the meeting was scheduled, the participant was reminded to be prepared to discuss two websites during the interview. Specifically, users were asked to consider consumer or organizational websites they had experience with that they liked and disliked or found credible or not credible. This was done so questions could be asked specific to features contributing to website credibility. Specifically, elements such as the website's schema, believability, trustworthiness, dynamism, corporate affiliation and other related ideas would be addressed. Questions would also be asked about the brands or corporations associated with the websites chosen, and how perceptions of those brands or companies might influence website

credibility, if at all. Samples of the interview guide and questionnaire can be found in Appendices 1 and 2.

RESULTS

All eight interviews were conducted within a four-week period and recorded using a hand-held recording device. Due to the nature of the responses and reliance on narrative techniques in part, results were then summarized by listening to each of the taped interviews again. All study participants were very willing to participate and share their views on the websites they had chosen, and their thoughts specific to ease of use, positive and negative attributes and perceived credibility of the corporate brand as well as the website itself. Summaries of all interviews can be found in Appendix 4.

Each of the respondents was asked to be prepared to discuss two websites they had used previously to gather information, perform research or make purchases. A list of the websites chosen by the study's participants is included below in Table 1.

Table 1		
	Website Liked	Website Disliked
Participant 1	www.espn.com	www.amazon.com
Participant 2	www.consumerreports.org	www.buick.com
Participant 3	www.newegg.com	www.epinions.com
Participant 4	www.yahoo.com	www.hamiltonwatch.com
Participant 5	www.sierratradingpost.com	www.barriepace.com
Participant 6	www.overstock.com	www.dir.ca.gov
Participant 7	www.rei.com	www.reimerseeds.com
Participant 8	www.orbitz.com	www.news.google.com

For this study, three research questions were proposed. The results of the interviews as they relate to these research questions are summarized further in this section, including participant quotes.

Research Question 1: Do website users perceive the websites of well-known brands and companies as more credible than those of lesser known brands and companies?

In general, participants indicated that they viewed the websites of larger and more well-known companies as more credible than those of smaller and lesser-known companies. This is consistent with previous findings that source credibility can influence attitudes and behavioral intentions (Lafferty, Goldsmith and Newell, 2002). Rodgers

(2003) also found a similar positive relationship between website credibility and Internet users' evaluations on website sponsors.

As summarized in the results section, some of the participants felt that well-known companies have been “vetted” over the years and that their staying power, reputations and track records help participants feel secure in their credibility. One participant commented on the company behind one website “I trust the source – it’s a long-standing, non-profit organization.” He followed that by saying “they are a sober voice.” Flanagin and Metzger determined previously that people view sources they’re comfortable with and use frequently as more credible than sources they don’t, a finding that can help reinforce why participants tend to view the websites of well-known companies as more credible than those of lesser-known companies. One participant referenced that large companies have the infrastructure and budget to employ skilled IT departments and software to help ensure the security of personal and financial information. Some participants also mentioned that large companies come under scrutiny more than smaller companies because they’re more well-known, and therefore more closely monitored by the public at large, so they have to act in a credible way.

In comparison, a few participants indicated that smaller companies can be just as credible as large ones if there are outside sources to confirm their mission and history, third-party endorsers such as awards or Verisign, and elements such as easy-to-find contact information and liberal return policies (on shopping websites). Smaller and lesser-known websites don’t always get a chance to prove their credibility, however. Discussions with the study’s participants confirmed that many make quick and preliminary judgments of websites they don’t know very well upon visiting them. This

finding echoes Wathen and Burkell's stage model, which contends that consumers make immediate judgments of a website before deciding whether or not to proceed further and look for additional information, or leave the site altogether.

Research Question 2: For brands and companies that are lesser known, what role do external factors play in determining and influencing a website's credibility?

Most participants indicated that lesser-known companies needed to be verified or cross-checked by researching information on search engines and other websites, and by talking to others who may have experience with the brand or company. Freeman and Spyridakis (2004) ascertained that readers of web information typically only use the information on one page to assess the credibility of websites they looked at. This finding may help support the idea that outside influences and factors help website users formulate quick reactions to a website's perceived credibility using very little of the actual website's content. Information on the company's website, such as a history of the company, mission statement or explanation as to how they operated could also help.

For example, one participant indicated that the Consumer Reports website would appear very credible to him if he weren't already familiar with the organization, because of their transparency in how they conduct their research and their long history of being in business. Another participant said she would feel that the Hamilton Watch website was credible if she didn't already know the brand because they show you real stores where you can purchase their watches, as well as a list of celebrities in movies who have worn their watch. She conceded that the "celebrity endorsement" of the product made her believe that the Hamilton brand and, therefore website, were credible.

Third-party endorsements such as Verisign and the acceptance of Paypal also made many participants feel safer, along with easy-to-find contact information that included a physical address and phone number. Rains and Karmikel (2009) also found a positive relationship in their studies between website credibility and privacy policy statements and third-party endorsements. Attractive and logically laid-out websites along with features such as search boxes and scrolling windows featuring updates or products also made consumers feel more confident in a website's credibility, as well as a comprehensive and extensive list of items or amount of information.

Barbules (2001) previously outlined several aspects of website credibility. One of these aspects was what others think of a website's credibility, such as search engines and online directories. Many of the study's participants referenced looking for outside reinforcements from search engines, reviews, other websites and acquaintances on a regular basis when trying to determine a website's credibility.

Research Question 3: How does website schema influence perceived website credibility? Specifically, how important is schema compared to other factors in determining website credibility?

Overall, schema didn't appear to play a big role in participant perceptions of credibility. Participant thoughts on schema were determined by asking questions about the various aspects of website design, layout and content that constitute "schema" as a whole. In general, participants were flexible in the layout of a website as long as it was easy to navigate and fairly logical. Wathen and Burkell (2002) concluded this in their studies as well: aspects such as a website's design, layout and color choices, as well as

spelling and grammar mistakes, could help determine perceived credibility. Most of the study's participants expressed that they did like seeing "traditional" layouts where main categories were outlined along the top with the ability to easily and quickly drill down to sub-categories and specific products or information. One participant commented "I guess the reason I like this site is that it's inherently useful and for making smart decisions." Another described one website as "smartly laid out, not a lot of bells and whistles" in terms of what he liked about it. However, others didn't even mention layout specifically as long as they could quickly get to the information or function on the website they were looking for. Bellman and Rossiter (2004) concluded that websites featuring familiar schemas were easier to navigate and, therefore, allowed consumers to form more positive brand beliefs and associations. This study echoes this finding that web users like logically-laid out websites that are easy to understand and navigate. Comments and responses along these lines included "all the [product review] scores are lined up nicely top to bottom," "I like the way these are laid out," and "the website is rationally laid out."

Several of the participants referenced that the basic layout for websites has been determined already in terms of navigation across the top and down the left side. For this reason, they did expect to see these types of layout and navigation elements because they have become the "norm." Other aspects of schema, including ease of finding information, did present themselves somewhat in the responses to the questions and ensuing discussion. Many of the participants wanted to see easy-to-find contact information, including a phone number and physical address. This echoes a finding of Freeman and Spyridakis (2004) that contact information (or the lack thereof) such as a street address

and external links can impact a website's perceived credibility, both positively and negatively.

A summary of the most informative collective responses to the interview questions is also presented below.

Question: Describe the features of the site that you like and that make you want to use it.

All respondents commented that they liked websites that followed basic layout and navigation "rules." This included main categories across the top and the ability to quickly drill down to sub categories and specific information or products. Most participants liked the inclusion of a conveniently located search bar that returned accurate search results, and easy-to-find contact information that included a phone number and physical address. Many participants also commented that they liked to see a brand or company associated with the websites that they know and feel comfortable with in terms of its history, staying power and reputation. Participants liked sites to be logically laid out and easy for them to quickly find what they were looking for. Sites also needed to be comprehensive and have a breadth of products and information listed. Several participants also commented that reviews from other users or outside "experts" was something they liked to see on a website and that made them feel like the website cared about helping them find the right products or information for their needs.

Question: Why do you choose to use this site compared to others?

Participants usually referenced the brand or company behind a website when it came to choosing one site over another. They like to see a name they know and trust, and

that's been around for a long time. This was particularly true for participants discussing websites requiring purchases and the exchange of sensitive personal and financial information. Participants also referenced preferring one site over another if a site was lean and attractive, logically laid out, easy to navigate and find what they were looking for, current in the information presented and up-to-date in terms of the basic technology included on the site. Ability to easily contact the company, specifically by phone, was also a key consideration.

Question: Is it trustworthy? Believable? Is there expertise conveyed? Is it dynamic? Please explain.

In general, participants believed that the sites they chose to look at that they liked to use were trustworthy and believable. Most said that if this weren't the case, the site wouldn't be one they would continue to use. Several participants expressed that expertise could be conveyed through reviews from other users and category or industry experts, and from sections on the site discussing the details of a company's history and mission. Most participants felt that the sites they liked were dynamic in their use of pictures, ability to sort results in many different ways, and ability to zoom and see various views and angles when it came to shopping websites.

Question: Do you think this website is credible? What are the aspects of the site that make you think it's credible?

Participants tended to think the sites they liked to use were credible. Many of the same elements continued to present themselves when discussing why a site was likeable

as well as credible. These included comprehensive and current information, ability to easily find contact information including a phone number and physical address and user reviews of products from experts or other users. Additional outside reinforcers such as Verisign and accepting Paypal were also cited, as well having outside knowing of the company or brand from TV ads, mailers, word of mouth and physical with very detailed product descriptions were perceived as being more credible than those that didn't.

Question: When you go to a website, are there certain things you're looking for or elements you expect to see? Like what? Does this website incorporate those elements? What do you think about a website that doesn't incorporate them?

Participants typically indicated that they liked and expected to see the same types of elements originally indicated above in any website they go to. These included logical layout and navigation, comprehensive and extensive information and products while still being able to quickly and easily narrow down what they were looking for. Most also referenced a clean and attractive website look and feel, easy-to-find contact information and the association of a reputable company or brand behind the website.

Question: How much do you know about the brand/company affiliated with the website? Does that influence your thoughts on the website's credibility?

Most participants were familiar with the brand or company associated with the website they chose that they indicated they liked using. Most relayed they'd had personal experiences with purchasing items from the site or using the site in some way, and all were familiar with the brand or company associated with the site they chose. Several participants referenced outside reinforcers that helped in shaping their thoughts on the credibility of the website in terms of the company or brand. These included tv and other

advertisements, mailings, word of mouth, recommendations from others they knew or trusted and third party endorsements from magazines and other sources. Many cited the long histories and positive reputations associated with the companies behind the website, and some referenced bricks and mortar stores as physical proof that the company was “real” and able to accommodate their returns or complaints.

Question: What would you think of the website in terms of its credibility if you didn't know anything about the brand/company it was affiliated with? If you didn't know anything about the brand or company associated with a particular website, how would you determine if that website was credible? What would you look for?

Most participants agreed that the websites they liked would probably still be fairly credible without the association of an already known brand or company. They did clarify, however, that they'd have to work much harder to confirm the site's credibility in other ways such as checking for awards and outside certifications and associations such as Verisign and Paypal. They also said they'd look on the site and use outside search engines and blogs to learn more about the company's history and reputation, and what others had to say about it and the website in general. Several participants also said they would look at things like the company's contact information and the amount of information or number and type of products contained on the site.

Question: Have you ever visited a website for a brand or company you stumbled across or simply didn't know very well? Did the website help you form an opinion as to the credibility of that brand or company? How? What specifically about the website made you think the brand or company might be credible? In what other ways does a website influence your perception of a brand or company?

Participants tended to agree that websites can help them form opinions of companies or brands that they don't already know much about. They said websites do this based on the way they look, the amount of information or type and number of

products they contain, their ease of use including search boxes that return accurate results and links that aren't broken and an easy to find and comprehensive history or mission of the company or brand listed on the site.

Question: Do you think the websites of large, well-known companies are more credible than those of smaller companies who may be less well-known? Why or why not?

This varied among participants. Some felt strongly that larger and more well-known companies were more credible. Some even responded "absolutely." The participants who did agree said that large companies had "more to lose" from not telling the truth or acting questionably than smaller companies, and that they were also probably more closely monitored. Participants also said that large companies have more money and larger IT departments, as well as more advanced software to help with protecting personal and financial information. Many of the participants expressed that large and well-known companies were able to become successful by acting appropriately and treating customers right, versus smaller companies that may have less of a reputation to protect. This wasn't the case for one participant, however, who stated the following about a large and well-known company's website: "I think I did actually request more information from this website and it didn't work. I was a little annoyed by that."

Other participants felt that small companies could be just as credible, and that on the internet, especially in this day and age, all online companies were roughly equal. Some said that smaller companies could be just as credible if they could be easily contacted and if they had external endorsers of their credibility (Verisign, Paypal, awards, blogs and online reviews, etc). According to one participant: "It seems like an affiliation with Paypal or Bill Me Later is a better way to show that your purchase is safe." Another

commented that “awards used to be a way you would know that a website had legitimate information.”

Question: How would you define credibility?

Most of the participants agreed that credibility was, at least in part, being able to believe that a company was going to do what they said they would. One described credibility as “an absence as much as possible or an effort to mitigate conflict of interest.” Another participant described credibility as “experience, knowledge, time in the space, good public opinion.” Another said credibility was “the inherent trust that one has in another that they’re going to deliver on what they say they’re going to deliver on, and that what they say is true.”

Question: How would you define website credibility?

Many of the participants started by saying that website credibility was “the exact same thing” as general credibility. Most expanded on the definition by saying that website credibility was the belief in the trustworthiness of the company behind the website in making good on the promises on the site. Definitions also included the ability to easily contact a company and see that there was a real person behind the website. One participant said it was what a website did to try and be credible. “It needs to be accessible, to try and provide visitors with information they came for in whatever way appropriate for the website.” Another said website credibility meant that “content, products and policies were listed online and that if you’re purchasing something, you can easily resolve issues that arise with a human.”

Question: How important is credibility online? In a website?

All of the participants agreed that credibility online and in websites was extremely important. “It’s pretty important” said one. Another said “It’s very important. It was hard for me to find a website that I didn’t like or find credible because I don’t go to them. I don’t frequent websites that I don’t like or trust.” Many indicated that companies often only have one chance to introduce you to their products or services, and that there website often times is that opportunity. If they can’t convey credibility quickly and convince you they are worthy, then you may never use them. The participants also agreed that credibility is very important online and in websites as well since so much business and information is transacted on websites today compared to in the past.

All of the respondents offered stories or narratives about certain experiences they’d had with the websites being reviewed. For example, one subject described his experience with ordering items off of a website when the links didn’t work. Another subject talked about his experiences with the bricks and mortar counterpart of the company’s website he was reviewing.

The results previewed in this section will be discussed further in the discussion section.

DISCUSSION

Nine predominant themes emerged from the research upon analysis of the interviews. Those themes are logical layout and navigation, breadth and comprehensiveness of content, expertise of site contributors, transparency, credibility of corporate company/brand, outside reinforcers of a company's credibility or name, ease of finding necessary information, websites mirroring the credibility that a company or brand has already established and third-party verifications of credibility.

The following indicators of credibility were expressed from the study's participants: comprehensive information and products, logical layout, ease of finding what your looking for and not feeling like a company is hiding information from you, easy-to-find contact information and ability to contact with a live human being, expert authors or contributors associated with the site who have outside, pre-determined credibility, current information, attractive design that is up-to-date in terms of technology and functionality, stream-lined layout and minimal ads and third-party endorsements such as Verisign and PayPal. The researcher asked participants to discuss aspects of the websites that had previously been identified as components of credibility. Specifically, believability, fairness, expertise, likability and dynamism. Since the study's participants may not equate these ideas with "credibility," asking them to explore how each concept relates to the websites being reviewed helped reveal underlying ideas concerning credibility.

None of the participants talked in detail about specific design, graphics and layout characteristics. In general, most of the participants were fairly flexible on these points as

long as the websites were attractive, current-looking, logical and easy for them to use to find the information they needed. Some participants did comment that they didn't like websites that lacked basic technological features, or that didn't "keep up with the Joneses;" however, when prompted, most couldn't come up with specific elements they expected or liked to see on websites. These findings are interesting as they relate to schema specifically. Participants all agreed that schema in websites was important; however, since the websites they liked and found credible and the websites they disliked and found less credible were both viewed as incorporating various elements of schema, the influence of schema on perceived website credibility appeared to be minimal.

One of the study's most notable findings was that websites don't typically drive credibility up to companies or brands; rather, the brands and companies behind a website lend credibility down to the websites associated with them. This is important for companies to understand, especially companies and brands that are not already well-known. Rather than focus time and money on their websites in an effort to increase their perceived credibility, companies and brands should focus their time and money first and foremost on building awareness, positive word-of-mouth and on outside reinforcers such as advertisements and bricks-and-mortar locations. This will allow well-designed websites that include basic schema elements to be perceived as credible thanks to the increased positive associations of the companies and brands behind them.

It was interesting that most of the study's participants did not find the website they selected that they didn't like to use as overwhelmingly un-credible. In general, most of the participants felt that the website still had aspects of credibility in spite of issues involving outdated information, broken links, search boxes that didn't work properly and

limited contact information. This is a testament to how much the internet has advanced and how common-place it is in the every day lives of most people. Concerns of credibility surrounding the internet and websites in general appear to be minimized compared to even just a few years ago. This is similar to the findings Metzger made in a previous study that students, in general, take a more laid back approach to online information verification and credibility checking. The extent to which these findings translate to other age groups is unclear; however, they do indicate that website users are not necessarily overly concerned with verifying the credibility of the websites they view and use.

Obtaining a wide range of ages for the participants included in this study was a challenge for the researcher. It was more difficult than anticipated to find participants over the age of 60 who used the Internet on a regular basis, and who had enough experience with online information-gathering, research or purchasing to participate in the study.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has contributed new insights into how people perceive website credibility based on the size and familiarity of the brand or company, the factors that help determine website credibility when the company or brand affiliated with the website is unknown, and schema.

Large and well-known companies are typically perceived as being very credible. There are a lot of factors that contribute to this, such as outside reinforcements of a brand including advertisements, word of mouth, reputation and bricks and mortar locations. Large and well-known brands have typically been around for a long time too, so they can have credibility simply from being in business and existence for a long time. Larger companies are perceived to have “more to lose” if they’re not credible, and as having large budgets and extensive resources for ensuring security and credibility when it comes to website users and customers.

Smaller and lesser-known companies were somewhat assumed to have less-credible websites since the history and reputation of them was not as great. One participant commented that larger and more well-known companies are more closely regulated by the public and others so they are held to higher standards and can’t get away with saying things that are untrue. She also said that they have a lot of money to spend on their websites, etc so they appear inherently more credible. Most of the participants agreed that the websites of well-known companies/brands reinforced or did nothing to reinforce the credibility already in existence. Smaller companies, in comparison, could have websites that made you think the site was credible based on certain features, or not

credible at all. Those features were things like expertise conveyed by the authors and contributors on the website, availability of contact information so you could confirm the company actually existed and could be contacted to resolve issues, breadth of information contained and comprehensiveness.

It appears that the traditional definitions for website credibility are not as much in play as they may have been previously. Layout and design have become so standard and commonplace that they no longer dramatically influence perceptions of credibility; rather, consumers simply need for their layout and design needs to be satisfied. Furthermore, schema does not appear to play a predominant role since most websites today follow the same layout and design “formulas.” As this research shows, the relationship a website has to a well-known and respected brand plays an important role in determining credibility, along with outside reinforcers such as advertisements, word of mouth, reviews on third-party sites and from third-party sources and bricks and mortar locations.

Limitations of this study included a small sample size, the limited age ranges of participants, including a lack of participants age 40 or older and the number and types of websites chosen. Future studies should further explore and contrast the factors associated with website credibility for websites associated with well-known brands and companies compared to companies and brands that are not known. Future research could involve researchers selecting a well-known company website and an obscure company website and asking specific questions concerning the layout, content, design and perceptions of the company associated with them. Similarly, some combination of “credible” and “non-credible” websites of companies or brands that are not readily well-known could be

randomly assigned to participants to review and discuss. These variations on the study at-hand would minimize the challenge many participants encountered in selecting websites they didn't like or find credible.

This study casts new light on website credibility and the role that company and brand recognition and credibility play in determining it. This study also helps determine the aspects of a website that consumer use to determine credibility when little is known about the company or brand associated with it. These findings will help researchers think about a different direction for website credibility that is less dependent on the layout and features associated with the website, and more dependent on the content and outside brand, company and third-party associations.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Guide

Background and Warm-Up Questions

How many times/week do you use the Internet?

For what purposes primarily?

Approximately how often do you use the internet research-related reasons or to make a purchase, evaluate a product or service or gather information?

Research Question 1:

Do business consumers perceive the websites of well-known brands and companies as more credible than those of lesser known brands and companies?

- How much do you know about the brand/company affiliated with the website? Does that influence your thoughts on the website's credibility?
- Do you think the websites of large, well-known companies are more credible than those of smaller companies who may be less well-known? Why or why not?
- Why do you choose to use this site compared to others?
- Do you think this website is credible? What are the aspects of the site that make you think it's credible?

Research Question 2:

For brands and companies that are lesser known, what role do external factors play in determining and influencing a website's credibility?

- What would you think of the website in terms of its credibility if you didn't know anything about the brand/company it was affiliated with?

- If you didn't know anything about the brand or company associated with a particular website, how would you determine if that website was credible? What would you look for?
- Have you ever visited a website for a brand or company you stumbled across or simply didn't know very well? Did the website help you form an opinion as to the credibility of that brand or company? How? What specifically about the website made you think the brand or company might be credible? In what other ways does a website influence your perception of a brand or company?

Research Question 3:

How does website schema influence perceived website credibility? Specifically, how important is schema compared to other factors in determining website credibility?

- When you go to a website, are there certain things you're looking for or elements you expect to see? Like what? Does this website incorporate those elements? What do you think about a website that doesn't incorporate them?
- Describe the features of the site that you like and that make you want to use it
- Talk to me about the website as you move around it, telling me about the navigation, the layout, the content, the design, etc. and what you like and don't like and why. Describe things like how easy it is to use, how aesthetically pleasing it is, what type of information is on the website, what you think about the company/brand associated with the website, etc.
- Tell me about the site in terms of how logical it is and whether it makes sense
- Why do you choose to use this site compared to others?

APPENDIX 2

Questionnaire

Date and time

Location

Approximate Age

Gender

Job/Industry

How many times/week do you use the Internet?

For what purposes primarily?

Approximately how often do you use the internet research-related reasons or to make a purchase, evaluate a product or service or gather information?

Name of the website you like:

- Describe the features of the site that you like and that make you want to use it
- Talk to me about the website as you move around it, telling me about the navigation, the layout, the content, the design, etc. and what you like and don't like and why. Describe things like how easy it is to use, how aesthetically pleasing it is, what type of information is on the website, what you think about the company/brand associated with the website, etc.
- Tell me about the site in terms of how logical it is and whether it makes sense
- Why do you choose to use this site compared to others?
- Is it trustworthy? Explain.
- Is it likeable? Explain.
- Believeable? Explain.
- Dynamic? Explain.
- Does it have expertise?
- Do you think this website is credible? What are the aspects of the site that make you think it's credible?
- When you go to a website, are there certain things you're looking for or elements you expect to see? Like what? Does this website incorporate those elements? What do you think about a website that doesn't incorporate them?
- How much do you know about the brand/company affiliated with the website? Does that influence your thoughts on the website's credibility?

- Are there any outside factors that play a role in influencing your views on a certain brand and its credibility? Describe.
- What would you think of the website in terms of its credibility if you didn't know anything about the brand/company it was affiliated with?
- If you didn't know anything about the brand or company associated with a particular website, how would you determine if that website was credible? What would you look for?
- Have you ever visited a website for a brand or company you stumbled across or simply didn't know very well? Did the website help you form an opinion as to the credibility of that brand or company? How? What specifically about the website made you think the brand or company might be credible? In what other ways does a website influence your perception of a brand or company?
- Do you think the websites of large, well-known companies are more credible than those of smaller companies who may be less well-known? Why or why not?

Name of the website you don't like:

- Describe the features of the site that you don't like and that make you want to use another site instead
- Talk to me about the website as you move around it, telling me about the navigation, the layout, the content, the design, etc. and what you don't like (and do) and why. Describe things like ease of use, aesthetics, what type of information is on the website, what you think about the company/brand associated with the website, etc.
- Tell me about the site in terms of how logical it is and whether it makes sense
- Tell me why you don't like this website compared to others
- Is it trustworthy?
- Is it likeable?
- Believeable?
- Dynamic?
- Does it have expertise?
- Do you think this website is credible? What are the aspects of the site that make you think it is or isn't credible?
- When you go to a website, are there certain things you're looking for or elements you expect to see? Like what? Does this website incorporate those elements?
- How much do you know about the brand/company affiliated with the website? Does that influence your thoughts on the website's credibility?
- What would you think of the website in terms of its credibility if you didn't know anything about the brand/company it was affiliated with?
- How would you define credibility?
- How would you define website credibility?
- How important is credibility online? In a website?

APPENDIX 3

Sample E-mail

Good afternoon:

I am a Master's student at the University of Missouri – Columbia in the process of completing my thesis. I'd like to ask for your participation in a study I'm conducting on website credibility.

Your participation in this study should take no more than an hour to an hour and a half and will consist of answering questions about your perceptions of websites. You will be asked to view and discuss websites while looking at them on a laptop computer. To facilitate the process, please come prepared with the URLs of two websites you've used for research-related reasons or to make a purchase, evaluate a product or service or gather information. Please select one website you "like" using, and one that you "dislike" or would not choose to use again based on your perception of the website.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to stop at any time. You will not be compensated for your time and no physical or mental harm is expected as a result of your involvement. Your answers to questions will be recorded but no personally identifying information, including your name, will be linked to any of the responses you give.

Any questions you have before or after the study can be directed to me at kristen.franz@gmail.com, or (916) 996-7146. Any concerns you have with the study as a whole can be directed to Dr. Shelly Rodgers at srodgers@missouri.edu.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to me via e-mail or call me at (916) 996-7146 to arrange a date, time and location.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Kristen Franz

APPENDIX 4

Interview Notes

Participant 1

The first subject interviewed was a 30-year old male named Dan who holds a management position with a national healthcare company. He indicated that he uses the internet on a regular basis for e-mail and social purposes, as well as information gathering, research and/or shopping. The participant chose the following two websites for discussion: www.espn.com and www.amazon.com.

The participant began by discussing www.espn.com. He started out by saying that he feels positive about the site and likes using it. He commented that it's attractive, well-laid out and user friendly. News and entertainment are separate, good interactive features, logical.

ESPN is a sports-driven brand so you believe their expertise and authority. Lots of information but not overwhelming. Can quickly scan through page to see what's going on. There's always main stories/news in the middle. Often times video and interviews as well. On the side there are quick links to other news and headlines. A lot of information that's easy to find and navigate. Also narrow the information down well so you can drill down into certain topics. All pages are laid out the same so you can logically tell how to move through different sections, sports, etc. Authors write articles and contribute to the site so there's expertise and familiarity from those names/contributors. Commented that he doesn't like that a decent amount of the information is for insiders only, by

subscription, but that is nicely limited to things that only really hard-core fans would be interested in. The site is trust-worthy because the brand ESPN seems trust-worthy and reliable. The participant believes what he reads on the site because he knows ESPN and trusts them. He commented that this is confirmed by outside sources also supporting the credibility of the brand, such as the TV network and magazine. Those channels integrate well with the website and validate what's on the website. The site is dynamic with interactive features, polls and graphics. Expertise is there – authors, analysts and other contributors who are seen as experts in their field who the participant knows, believes and likes outside of the ESPN website.

Likes a clean, uncluttered website that is clearly delineated. Navigation and banners across the top that define sections and sub-sections you might want to explore. Main information and stuff he wants to see is at the top of the page, above the scroll. Ads are minimal but well-integrated into the site in terms of colors and style so they aren't flashing and distracting.

Websites that don't incorporate these elements are perceived negatively and he doesn't want to use them. Cheap and weird, credibility in question. Participant would be negatively influenced by the same site if the ESPN name was not attached to it. Participant would inherently like the site because it was ESPN but wouldn't use it even if it were ESPN if poorly laid out.

If didn't know the brand associated with the website, would determine credibility by looking for the sources associated with the content on the site. Layout would also be important in terms of not being too difficult to get to, along with the type of content presented. Source cred can be determined by looking at the credentials of the author or

source associated with the information. For unknown websites, looking for features on the website that make you like it such as supplemental information that shows the company isn't trying to only sell information but educate consumers, etc as well.

Large companies are perceived as being more credible because there are so many out there. Small companies or unknown ones are hard to determine if they're telling the truth. Large companies have more of a presence and so it's easier to believe they're telling the truth.

Amazon.com was chosen as the site the participant didn't like. Overwhelmed immediately, so much going down, hard to narrow down what want and are looking for. Strange that Amazon sells for other sellers so the same products can be sold from many different people, new or used, at various price points and conditions. Seems shady. Don't like that they're always trying to "sell me something." Ads all over, always making suggestions for other things. I'm already on a site where I want to buy so don't need more ads for other things to "check out" or buy. Get distracted. Also don't like the white, plain background.

Layout is probably logical but where it takes you isn't. Click on a category and then tons of results come up. Often there are duplicates or results come up that aren't what was searched for. Can find two items that are the same but the price is different; multiple listings that are the same but different sellers and prices. Amazon is useful but so big that have to really hunt around and look hard/dig to find what really want. So, the site itself is credible but there are vendors associated with the site that don't seem credible because their prices are too low, names are strange and you've never heard of the company in some small town. Amazon is trustworthy and believable because the brand is

big and well-known but there are elements of un-credibility due to the other companies associated with the site. Too much like a swap-meet or bazaar.

Some of the feedback on the site about what others have bought is good, or about what others have looked at. Helpful to see how others looking for something similar have acted.

Know the Amazon brand and used to buy books from them. Don't know specifics on the brand but is familiar with the brand and thinks it's fairly credible. Would never use the site if didn't know anything about Amazon and its history online. Seems scattered and uncredible if the Amazon name wasn't associated with it.

Credibility is defined as the inherent trust one has in another that they will deliver what they say they will, and that what they're saying is true. Website credibility is the same (what I'm being told is true and what's I'm reading is true) except the content, product and policies listed are found online and you can easily interact with a human to resolve issues or questions. Online and website credibility are very important. Hard to find websites that are rarely used or disliked because he doesn't use them typically. Important because representing a particular brand or company and you're trying to get people to believe you and do business with you, and because you can't interact with anyone in person. Less tangible. Less time to make an impact and gain trust.

Participant 2

The second subject interviewed was a 39-year old male named Sam who works as a data analyst and programmer. He indicated that he uses the internet on a regular basis for work, e-mail and social purposes, as well as information gathering, research and online

shopping. The participant chose the following two websites for discussion:

www.consumerreports.org and www.buick.com.

The participant began by discussing consumerreports.org. He stated that he feels very positive about this site and uses it on a regular basis to research and compare items when contemplating a possible purchase. The consumer reports website is no-nonsense and cleanly laid out. Key categories a person might be interested are listed and easy to navigate through, as well as sub-categories for further drill-down. Website is useful and intuitive; smartly and conservatively laid out. Not a lot of “eye candy.”

Participant likes the rating system from CR for determining if a product is good or bad. Intuitive and easy to quickly determine if something is ranked high or low and what the characteristics are that they are evaluating. None of the scores are too high so you think they’re being critical and really being tough in their grading. They also have check marks by ones they like so you can quickly tell which ones they like and recommend. You can get into buying guides for various categories of products, such as digital cameras, cars, etc. You can roll over descriptions and pictures, look at reviews.

Participant trusts the source because non-profit, long-standing and independent rating organization. Very balanced and non-biased. Not a zippy site but very logical, comprehensive, well-laid out and rational. Not a lot of bells and whistles but still attractive and clean. Rating system is sensible and they don’t overwhelm you with too much extra information you don’t care about or need to know. Nice summary box with all the critical information you really need to know (final score, how it compares to others, price, etc).

CR has been around for a long time, remembers it as a child. Gained a reputation, has staying power. Group of scientists, they explain how they do things. Non-profit and not paid by anyone or supported by ads. Transparency in their methods for testing and their processes for doing things. Definite expertise. More up front about their mission, purpose and testing approaches more so than other comparable sites. Grandparents and other family members liked and used the organization so it becomes ingrained. Like impartial, consumer-advocate sites when it comes to evaluating things for purchase and determining products that may be best. Great reputation. Credibility also comes from the content (comprehensive) and currency of the site. They don't appear to push one brand over another because they are so comprehensive in the information they present.

Expect to see clearly laid out and logical navigation across the top and/or side. This site meets both. Expect the major categories of any site to be laid out across the type and wants sites to follow that logic. Appreciate content-heavy sites that are well-laid out and still attractive. Scrolling too much is a problem; want main content to be "above the scroll." Contact information is important to see on a site, although hard to find for CR, probably because they figure you don't need to communicate with them too much. But is critical for a web-only site or one where you're buying them or doing things. If not easy to find contact information, feel strange about the site's credibility and makes you worry about how easy it is to get in touch with someone if there's a problem. Likes to see a headline section or place where key news, new products or updates, etc cycle through. Suggests things I may not know about or think about that I can click on to learn more about. Sites that don't include these features are less attractive and make the participant want to use them less, or not at all. Also depends on the industry or what the website is

promoting. High-tech industries or websites backed by companies with a lot of money should include scrolling news and updated features that “keep up” with other similar sites and with changes and advances in technology. Helps sites that have tons of information and different things direct users and find out about new things.

External factors are minimal for CR, although there is influence from word-of-mouth from people who like the brand and believe in the brand. For other brands, outside sources can absolutely reinforce a brand’s credibility and the website is usually just a reinforcement of that credibility has already been established. Without knowing about the CR legacy and reputation, the site does appear to be credible on its own thanks to transparency in their mission and testing, the way they review and their rating scales seem fair and logical, site appears to be comprehensive, no particular brand or price point is always a winner, there is a wide range of scores and prices, there aren’t brands that area left out. Look up a company online if you don’t know anything about it to see if the company is legitimate, what others are saying, research the prices and ratings on the site to see if what they’re saying is mirrored by what other consumers and sites are saying.

For sites where the brand or company is not well-known: if the sites is being recommended by someone or a website who is trusted and known, that helps. If the site has a breadth of information and items on the site then they clearly have a lot to support what they do. Can make them seem like a “real company” with real products. Look at the site design and layout to see if it’s attractive and up to date. Is there contact information to demonstrate that the company is real and reachable? If the site is located in a neat, cool city, and if that city is in the US, then you feel more positively about the company in terms of being able to contact and how cool they are. If there are ways to join their

newsletter, Facebook following, Twitter, etc then you think they are real and other people also like them. Outside reinforcement again helps you determine whether the company is real, cool, worth your time, etc.

Large and well-known companies have great brand recognition and credibility off the bat, as well as deep pockets. The internet is also an intangible place that you don't know much about so you have to be careful with who you trust, especially if you're giving up your credit card number or personal information. It would appear that larger companies are more credible because it makes sense: they're large and well-known for a reason. Also, because they're well-known people are monitoring what they say and do carefully and will call them out quickly if they lie or misrepresent something compared to a smaller and lesser known company's website that people may not be closely monitoring. Big companies just inherently have a "leg up."

Buick.com is the website that was not well-received. The participant stated that lots of car websites are that way: lots of flash and minimal content. Have to wait for images and graphics to load which can be very slow. There's a teaser at the bottom that says a specific car gets 30 mpg but then when you click on the link it takes you to a page that doesn't have that information on it anywhere. That's a pain and seems like the company behind the site should be able to afford web help so the links are accurate and work. Tons of flash throughout the site; pages take a long time to load; there are lots of films and clips they want to show that take a lot of memory. The navigation categories are strange and hard to understand so you have to drill down in the site to determine what each category header is talking about. This of course involves more flash, etc. The participant requested information on a form previously and was never sent information.

Interested in features and inside view of cars but the site wants to focus on 360 exterior views, that also take a long time to load. Hard to find content on the benefits and features of the car, and can't always find that compares the cars to others in the same class. There is a small scrolling bullet point list on the side but there is not clear start or end to the list. Some of the features included are more flash and less critical (XM radio versus type of engine, mpg, etc). Site is good for pictures but bad for content. Just a glorified advertisement that's lean on information. Every time you go back to the "home page" for a car type it reloads the same flash and videos so you have to wait. There's a link that says click for more info and it's just a PDF that's not formatted in any way that looks like something written in house and sent to a reporter. Base navigation across the top is ok but too much flash, especially compared to others that don't do that. Design is distracting. Also the layout for different car models are not the same so you have to "re-learn" how to navigate through the site when you switch to other models. Layout appears logical and makes sense but then when you start going through it you can't find what you want (have to really dig through the site) and some of the links don't take you where they say they're going to. Other sites allow you to choose to watch videos versus Buick automatically loading the videos without an easy option for skipping. Sometimes the site returns information not wanted, if there are no deals for a particular area or for a car that hasn't been released yet.

Especially for big companies, websites with incorrect or broken links hurts a lot. If a company has that much money why can't they get a link right, or fix it in a timely manner? Can give people who don't want to like a particular brand, a poor website can reinforce that perception. For high-involvement products especially, if you can't get a

website right, what does that say about your ability to build a great car? If you can't find information easily, makes you feel like a company is trying to hide information from you or purposefully make it hard to find. In terms of the site's credibility and trustworthiness, the brand has a lot to do with that. There is still credibility in the Buick brand because it's been around for so long, people know it, but the site is doing nothing to reinforce that brand. The participant's relatives have build Buicks and he trusts the brand. Independent of the brand, the website is not adding anything to that credibility and certainly isn't enhancing it.

Credibility is defined as how likely a claim made by a person or site is true. Website credibility is determined in part by the brand/product behind it. Also has to do with transparency of the site and how well designed it is and comprehensive, and its willingness to compare to others. Credibility online and in a website is very important because the internet is used for everything and non-credible sites are a problem and won't be used or viewed anymore.

Participant 3

The third subject interviewed was a 32-year old female named Melissa who works as an auditor for the State of California. She indicated that she uses the internet on a daily basis for work, e-mail and social purposes, as well as information gathering, research and online shopping. The participant chose the following two websites for discussion:

www.newegg.com and www.epinions.com.

Newegg.com was the first website reviewed. The participant likes the breadth of tech-based products they offer and that she can purchase, and the consumer rating system they use for evaluating products. The site has good search capabilities so you can quickly find what you're looking for. Items can be added to her shopping cart and, once inside, compared on price and other specifics. A lot of buyers on the site are IT experts so you can trust their reviews and the expertise they bring to the table. Cheap shipping as well.

Layout is functional but not overly utilitarian. The site has changed recently and feels less neutral than in the past. There's a scrolling window in the middle of the page promoting various brands and products which seems less un-biased.

The site is very logical with navigation tabs across the top describing various items and categories. Participant likes that the site follows the "bread crumb navigation" style and the same layout as most websites today. The layout is more vertically oriented so the site isn't limited by screen size. The participant was surprised by some of the website changes that had been made and feels that it looks more "salesy" than in the past due to the color scheme and content being promoted.

Participant likes the reviews from purchasers on the site, and the reviews seem trustworthy because you can tell how long the user has had the item and their "level of technical savvy" with the item. Pros and cons are also listed. The site has attracted a dedicated user base of IT professionals and fans. Recommendations are listed based on what other customers have purchased and she appreciates the customized content and seeing what others have done. The reviews from other customers are almost very Wikipedia like in the sense that users are creating the content on the site and driving

some of its development. There are also manufactures responses to reviews which makes an interesting feedback loop compared to other sites.

Credible because it has been around for a long time. It's an online resource without a bricks and mortar presence and they haven't felt the need to do that to establish credibility. Tech-savvy friends recommend the site and are likely to use the site. Validation from them is important and establishes credibility.

Elements the participant expects to see on websites include intuitive navigation built into the site, the look and feel of the site, a distinct separation of elements on the page, nice look and design, no flashing or distracting elements, pages that aren't too long. Sites that don't incorporate elements like that can be less credible but it depends in part on what's being sold and the industry. There is a line between information sharing and being overly salesy.

Participant doesn't know that much about the brand except that they've been around for a long time, validated by IT expert friends and they put their awards on the website. Website credibility is something that "you know when you see it." Based on the website itself, credibility would be determined from testimonials and awards on the site and the aggregation of sites. That means that they care about selling products that people like and that work. Free shipping on the site means they stand by their products and are big enough to absorb the price and the restocking fees.

Websites for brands or companies that were unknown: the key expert on the website establishes her credibility up front in terms of her personal experiences in the past. They offer free samples and customized product finders. Customized tools that help you find what you're looking for quickly and easily, and that are useful too. You may not

know what you're looking for but they help you find it. Lots of supplemental information too in addition to just product information. Very willing to contrast her products to others so she's confident in them. Site has a nice, professional look as well.

Large and more well-known sites versus smaller, lesser-known ones: depends on the industry. Participant feels that consumer reports or other review forum sites are more credible than a company or brand's website. Sites that allow users to review them have the most credibility – a checks and balances system.

Epinions.com was chosen as the site that is not liked or used very much. Epinions is paid for by ads but it's a site that reviews products so there is a clear conflict of interest and a compromise in the credibility. Don't understand how items are sorted when searches or category results are returned. Not ranked by price or review so no logical order to the results, and they aren't sortable by anything other than price. Not great functionality if the site is supposed to help determine the best price. The site also has "most helpful reviews" on the home page but that aren't necessarily helpful if you're not looking for that specific product. Hard to tell why those are the "most helpful." Hard to determine who the reviewers are what their credentials are, and what their possible affiliations are with particular brands, companies or outside websites.

Tabs across the top and down the side are good. Most helpful reviews are not targeted in any way. Problem also is that if you want a "most helpful review" on a specific product you're looking for, there usually aren't any. Dimensions for rating products are good – many dimensions. Some of the reviews seem good based on how much they write and if they compare to other things, but don't know how they are evaluating. Buttons to correct a review but not to nominate one to a "most helpful

review” or say you like it. Site is run by shopping.com so the site’s goal is to drive purchases, not necessarily just provide you with unbiased and comprehensive information. Hard to know if the products or brands on the site are only affiliated with shopping.com or not.

Site has a dated look. Top ten items listed which is nice but not customized to what she’s looking for.

Conflict of interest makes believability and trustworthiness hard to believe. The amount of information offered on the items being sold that may or may not be positive helps to determine whether the site is credible or not. This is a review site that doesn’t seem to be selling reviews so it’s questionable. Site’s credibility is hard to determine and varies by product type and whether there are reviews for those products or not, and how good those reviews seem. Number of contributors makes this site seem thin and uncredible. No way to verify credentials of the people and whether they are “real” or just shells for other companies or websites.

Look and feel of the site is cheap. The navigation bar looks dated, the stock photos are too staged and trying to hard to be culturally diverse. There’s too much content on the page and it’s so varied so it’s hard to understand why it’s there and why it’s laid out in a particular way. There is no tech-savvy elements on the site to make it look current and fresh. A scrolling bar in the middle of the page would highlight categories or items and make it look technologically advanced.

Shopping.com brand affiliation negatively impacts thoughts on the website’s credibility. No unbiased reviews when you sell ads and drive people to buy. More offering price comparisons versus reviews of products. The fact that the site isn’t present

in her everyday life and that she doesn't know much about them doesn't impact her thoughts from an outside influencer kind of way. If they were a twitter company endorsed by millions that might be different and improve her perception of them.

The site alone seems credible if you look very quickly because there are reviews, if you like the reviews and think they've been written by normal people. So credibility starts high and then decreases as you learn of shopping.com's affiliation and see that not all products have very many reviews.

Credibility is defined by Melissa as an absence of or effort to minimize conflict of interest; experience, knowledge, time in the space, good public opinion. Website credibility is similar but also what is the website trying to do to be credible? Proving information to users that they came for, navigation, structure, look and feel all tend to have a certain essence that implies the site compares about usability and accessibility. Also whether you can get "under the hood" of the site with help, faq's or a site search. (read: transparency). Rewards also show that a site is legit and credible. Also how you purchase products from a website in terms of affiliations with PayPal or Bill Me Later, encryption, verisign, etc.

Credibility online and in a website is important.

Participant 4

The fourth subject interviewed was a 38-year old female named Jill who works as a psychologist. She indicated that she uses the internet on a daily basis for work, e-mail and social purposes, as well as information gathering, research and online shopping. The

participant chose the following two websites for discussion: www.yahoo.com and www.hamiltonwatch.com.

Yahoo.com is user-friendly with tabs that are clear. Tabs include mail, news, etc. Main page has the headlines for the day's news so she can quickly glance through the news. When you click in further you can see the news broken down by top stories, entertainment, sports, popular stories, weather, etc. Lots of helpful visuals and good pictures along with the stories. The site is updated regularly so the stories are updated as they happen, not old. Many are from AP so they're sourced well and that's a reputable source.

Site is logical with a good flow. Top stories and headlines are featured and then you click to drill down on particular stories or categories. You can also go to favorites quickly (Facebook, shopping, movies, mail and you can also customize by adding new ones). News is logically laid out because top stories are first and then you go into more popular stories and world stories from there and then more specifically into US news like politics, health, science, entertainment. Logically narrows down from top stories to opinions.

This site compared to others has to do with the layout. Can find what you want quickly and easily with minimal searching. Very logical and easy to use. Very current as well and updated quickly and frequently. Also has a good mix of different types of news, including popular stories and entertainment. Nice and well-rounded in various categories. Content, layout and currency is all good on the site.

Believable and trustworthy because a lot of the news comes from the AP and she knows and trusts that site. By breaking the news into various sections (science,

technology, health, etc) experts are present in each of the sections and they contribute. The visuals on the site are dynamic and appealing, nice pictures and videos, helps in conveying the news.

The site is credible because you can see where the stories are coming from and there are different sources that she knows such as AP. Also local sources like The Sacramento Bee. The categories are split up so you think they are very thorough and really able to dedicate time and resources to each category.

Looking for relevant and up to date information on any website she goes to. Also if the site is visually stimulating in terms of pictures, graphics, images. Want to see who the people are contributing to the site if looking for information to determine expertise and reliability of the sources. Want there to be enough content on the site that she can sort through it herself and determine what is and is not important. Like the “at a glance” feature of stories on Yahoo so you can see quickly what the story may be and see pictures associated with. Translation: like sites with lots of information and punchy headlines that are easy to weed through. Get all the news you need by skimming the site but more in depth information is available if desired. Websites that don’t incorporate those items would make her bored and annoyed if she has to sift through lots of information to find what she’s looking for and boring if there are no pictures and if not logically laid out.

Don’t know much about the Yahoo brand and it doesn’t influence her thoughts on the site in general. Would be more likely to use a website if associated with a brand or company that’s reputable or that she liked. But if not a good website, still wouldn’t use it that much. Brand affiliation might make her gravitate towards it originally but then she won’t continue using it.

Outside sources and influencers do make a difference in using Yahoo and thinking it's credible. It helps that others speak of a site and ads that you see get you to the site and help you already have a positive association.

If you don't know anything about the brand of the website: what are the sources of the information and are they reputable and experts in what they're saying? Need to understand where the information comes from. The content itself also in terms of what she's looking for and if it's the type of information she's looking to find on that site and does it make sense. Ease of maneuvering through the site as well, and comprehensiveness of information. Larger and more well-known sites may be better known with publicity, etc but aren't necessarily more credible. All depends on the source of the information and how well the website is set up. Depends on the formatting of the site and where the content comes from.

A website can help you form an opinion of a company or brand based on how they present their products. If it's hard to find info on the product and hard to get a feel for what it's like, that can sway me in the wrong direction. If you can't see an image very well or find good information on something, reflects poorly on a company and the product. If they can't do that well, then it doesn't bode well for the product or company as a whole.

The website that is not well-liked or used is hamiltonwatch.com. You have to press a button to enter the site since it takes you to a splash page. The categories at the top are confusing and it's hard to tell what they mean just by looking so you have to click through each to see what each means. There was an Adobe Flash install that was rejected so some of the pictures on the site are blank with an X in them. Confused by the site and

didn't know what to do and didn't know anything about the collections listed to searched for women's watches and no search results come back. Frustrating since on a watch site and know there are women's watches and nothing comes back so have to click through each collection. Tons of information down the side of each collection. Mini scroll over pictures are a useful feature or visual. Find ladies watches finally but it's confusing when you click on something because there's a lot of information that comes up with arrows to click on. Can't quickly tell which ones are ladies watches and not. Not very intuitive so feels like a lot of time is being wasted looking for something that may or may not be there.

Store locator is complicated. Everything seems more complicated than necessary. Asked about the Adobe Player again. Have to select world region, country, state, city just to find a store locator. Seems like there should be a more efficient way to get the information. There is a section called Star Watches where you can see what movie star wore what watch in what movie. Kind of a neat additional feature. The Communications section is confusing in terms of what it means. Says they are press releases but they don't seem to be so you have to click around and feel like you're wasting time and searching around. Want it to be more user friendly. Feel like she has to navigat a lot on the site.

The site is not very user friendly and so also not very logical. Don't like having to think so hard about how to do things. Even though the site is frustrating, doesn't negatively impact her thoughts on the product itself, she just won't use the website again. She's bought the product before and likes it. If she hadn't bought the product and didn't know the brand then the site would make her mad and she wouldn't pursue the brand

further. The website is a poor reflection of the brand but she already knows the brand so she's ok with the brand. The website has too many bells and whistles.

The site is trying to be dynamic but it's too dynamic and trying to do too much stuff and a lot of it she's not interested in. The visuals are good and some of the information is interesting, but not necessarily what she's looking for. There is information in the history and press release sections that makes you feel like they have a long history and expertise in the industry. Makes you think they are a good product with a long history. Movie stars wear the product too which also reinforces the credibility. Have to sift through a lot to find the credibility information so you have to take the time to look. The information makes you think it's credible along with outside reinforcement, not anything associated with the website itself in terms of its functionality. The product determines the credibility, not the website. The amount of information on the site can make you think the site is credible because there's a lot of it, but the formatting is confusing and there is too much going on.

If you didn't know anything about Hamilton, she would be turned off of the product due to the difficulty navigating the site. Hard to find information on women's watches, not easy to use and formatted poorly. Negative perception of the website and product.

Definition of credibility by Jill is believability, having confidence in what you're looking at, do you feel like the people know what they're talking about and are experts in an area, is it a credible source, does it instill confidence. Website credibility – does it instill confidence that the people know what they're talking about, are they experts in what they're doing and presenting to you, does the site have knowledge in what they're

doing. Online and website credibility is important, depending on what type of site you're looking at. News sites are very important, product sites you want to believe in. Often your first glimpse of a product or brand since we get information and do research that way. That's how you hook consumers and get them to come back. So many people rely on online resources and they are selling credibility or people won't use your site.

Participant 5

The fifth subject interviewed was a 63-year old female named Susan who is an educational administrator. She indicated that she uses the internet on a daily basis for work, e-mail and social purposes, as well as information gathering, research and online shopping. The participant chose the following two websites for discussion:

www.sierratradingpost.com and www.barriePace.com.

Likes the organization of the site so it's easy to use. Good category breakdowns and a bargain and clearance sections so easy to find products, brands and good prices. Breaks things down in various ways; easy to sort in different ways. Womens and mens clothes broken down separately and in different categories. Navigation is similar to most sites in terms of tabs across top and bottom. Likes that the website knows who she is when she logs into it again in the future and keeps her secure information.

Sierra Trading Post has physical stores as well. Actual stores are nice with friendly staff and "out west" vibe. Send catalogs in the mail as well. Like the catalogs as well. Pique interest for looking online. Small company with only a few bricks and mortar places. Logically laid out and similar to most websites so intuitive. Breaks categories

down into very high detail so you can drill down quickly and accurately and sort results various ways. Specific descriptions of items, including length and measurements and type of fit (classic, relaxed, etc). Customer reviews are helpful; seeing what “real people” think about the product. Can easily sort many ways, including by your size and what’s in stock.

Very dynamic because you can sort in so many ways. Trustworthy because of the reviews and stars. Privacy policy helps as well.

Susan uses the site compared to others because she likes the products they sell, has used it before and had a good experience, the company is easy to work with.

The site’s credibility: the user reviews. Also, she knows and likes the company and you trust the way they do business. You can still send back things that are on sale because the company cares about your satisfaction.

All websites are similar so want to see that the site is the same as others. Like for sites to be information rich and have lots of content. Want to have the option to sift through the information on her own. Tells you what other people liked who bought what you’re looking at. If a site has too much white space and not enough information, would like it less but depends on the product and why she’s there.

The Sierra Trading Post brand does influence her thoughts on the website’s credibility. She likes the company so she likes the website. The company is credible, so the website is also. If she didn’t know anything about Sierra Trading Post, she’d still think the site was credible because of the user reviews and the very comprehensive and precise information. If you don’t know anything about the company: she tends to think websites are credible so would be looking for information to the contrary, such as a faulty

claim or product reviews that were all positive. Would think a site is less credible if unwanted unsolicited emails came after visiting or purchasing from a site.

If you stumble across a website you don't know very well and need to determine the credibility of the parent brand or company: if links don't work or slow response times for moving around then you might form a negative impression of the website and not care about the company. Feel frustrated and distracted, and have a negative impression of the company.

Large versus small: all websites can be credible. Size doesn't make much difference.

www.barriePace.com – has the same look as most websites. Navigation across the top and categories down the side, stuff at the bottom you can click on. Don't like the lack of product reviews and that the descriptions of the products aren't very specific. They don't talk about the type of fit or how long the actual garment is. Final clearance items are non-returnable. Like the white space and how attractive it is. Don't know much about the company but it does have multiple brands listed and many Susan likes. Site is logical and makes sense. Same layout as most shopping websites. Compared to others, don't like the weak product reviews and descriptions and don't know much about the company. Also don't like the final sale aspect.

The site is less believable because lacks detail and doesn't have any reviews. Doesn't seem very trustworthy when you can't return and doesn't know much about the company. Not much expertise conveyed. Fit guides and other things that are similar are on the site but aren't very useful. The site is likeable because of the white background

and lack of clutter, upscale look. Dynamic because you can sort in different ways and choose how many results per page.

Don't know much about the company and feel concerned with the way they describe things and their policies. In general, the site is credible but still weary about using it because don't know much about the history of the company, back story, etc.

The site does a good job of incorporating the key elements that Susan likes to see. Layout, search, sort, all expected info is included. Don't know much about the brand and so does influence Susan's thoughts on the site's credibility. Along with the lack of info on products and inability to return sale items. If you knew nothing about the brand and had never bought anything from there, you would think the site is somewhat credible. The outside influence of buying an item that didn't fit and couldn't be returned has negatively impacted thoughts on company and therefore website. If the site were talked about by others Susan knew and if she heard the brand mentioned more frequently in daily life, she might feel more positively about the company and website.

Credibility: the perception that what something represents is true and accurate. Website credibility is when you believe that your interactions with a website will be positive and that what the website represents is accurate. Credibility online and in a website is very important. There is a general standard so we don't have to worry as much about things being credible; we can assume that most are fairly credible and accurate.

Participant 6

The sixth subject interviewed was a 33-year old female named Terry who is a lawyer. She indicated that she uses the internet on a daily basis for work, e-mail and social purposes, as well as information gathering, research and online shopping. The participant chose the following two websites for discussion: www.overstock.com and www.dir.ca.gov.

www.overstock.com – like the pictures on the site, easy to search for items, good navigation bar across the top that you can easily narrow down when you click on a main topic. Then you can narrow down from there quickly by price, size, etc. Shopping cart totals your order for you as you add. Hard to get back to where you were before after you add something to a cart. That's a common problem with shopping sites. Often takes you back to home page and then start search over. Like to add lots to the cart and then sift through later. Easy to order, ok with them having her info. Log in and it pulls up all information. Pictures show different views of items, accurate descriptions of products. Sometimes there are reviews on items which are helpful. Try to only buy items if there are reviews because they are helpful. They send a survey later so you can add your own review which is nice.

Yes the site is logical in terms of the main categories and sub categories. Logical order and pattern. She chooses this site compared to others because it is very easy to use and shipping is \$2.95 or free so great deal. You can add items to a wishlist and then they send you e-mail reminders and sales for those items and let you know if they are about to go out of stock. Fast delivery.

Security sign at the bottom (verisign) makes her feel secure. Yes trustworthy and believable because they give good pictures and descriptions and reviews also. Factual

descriptions. Reviews help with expertise because those people have experienced the item and can share their thoughts. Reviews have steered her right in the past on items she has bought. Open feedback. Yes it's dynamic because it shows you what others have looked at in relation to a certain item you're looking at. Easy to sort based on various criteria. Different views, you can zoom in/out, see different angles. People who viewed this also liked this is off to the side and unobtrusive, but if you click on those you mess up your main search and have to start over.

Thinks the site is credible because she sees commercials on tv for overstock and it has a good reputation. Something like craigslist is more questionable because you don't hear much about it and there's no one monitoring as closely. Overstock is a large company behind the site. The verisign symbol and reviews also make it seem credible.

One question: where does the compare at price come from? Is it real and reliable?

In websites in general, she wants to see decent graphics and design to reinforce the website. Shows that some money was spent on the website and its maintenance. Contact information – want to be able to find it quickly and have a phone number be listed. Sites that don't have these make her frustrated and she doesn't want to use them; no accountability if there's no way to get in touch with a human being.

Overstock brand has been around for awhile but she doesn't know much about it. After they had been around for awhile she was ok with using them. Outside reinforcement also helps her feel comfortable with them (other peoples' endorsements and tv ads). These all influence her thoughts regarding the website's credibility. If she didn't know anything about the brand, she'd still like the website and feel comfortable with it because it's well done, comes up in search results, reviews, etc. Would feel less

comfortable at first if she didn't know the name but they do have a lot of products and brands so not a small operation; they have vendors and lots to offer.

If she doesn't know much about a company or brand, she would look for the verisign and easy to find contact information. Also a variety of products, good looking website, easy to search, etc.

Has had positive experiences with websites and also been reinforced from what other friends say so thought the company behind the site was good. Was nervous the first time she used it but then she got over it. Website was easy to use. All these made her feel positive about the brand.

Yes, she thinks larger and more well-known companies are more credible. They have an IT department and better security software to store her information. Smaller websites/companies probably have less money and fewer resources.

www.dir.ca.gov – doesn't like this site. Looks nice enough at first but it's very hard to find things on the site. Has to bookmark everything or else she can't find again. Not easy to navigate and the search box is useless. Can't contact anyone if you have questions or problems. Everything is more difficult than it needs to be. PDFs instead of links. Too much information on the site and poorly organized. There is a "I want to..." section on the side but all topics aren't listed, and sometimes when you click on links they don't take you to where they say they will. There has been an attempt to organize the information but it didn't work. No logic as to how the information is organized.

This site compared to others – too cluttered, too much information, too hard to use, disorganized. The main categories can only be narrowed down so far. Have to dig around.

They don't put all the info on that should be available. The site isn't updated as often as it should be. Certain portions of the website are more reliable than others. She knows the people on the EAMS section team so feels like that information is trustworthy and believable. The site as a whole is believable and trustworthy but it's hard to get to that information that makes you feel it's believable/trustworthy. No expertise is conveyed by the website in general but there are pictures of the director and of Arnold Schwarzenegger which makes you feel like they're involved somehow. The site is fairly dynamic for a government website – decent graphics and links. Looks good but not very functional once you start using it.

In general, the site is pretty credible because it references people in the government in power who are behind the site, and there's lots of information.

The elements you like to see on sites – this website incorporates some. She knows the brand and the governor. Lots of information, links, some pictures but information is hard to find. Her knowledge on the government and departments associated with the site influences her thoughts on the site's credibility negatively because she knows what she's looking for and needs and knows what they're missing and don't have on the site. She's a more critical consumer than the average public.

If she didn't know any background, she'd think the site looked nice at first and then wouldn't be impressed once she started looking around. Seems organized but then is hard once you start poking around and looking for things. Too much information and poorly conveyed.

There is contact information but it's very hard to find. The contact numbers aren't necessarily that great or helpful when you call them.

Credibility definition – sense of believability and being able to trust in the information and services being provided.

Website credibility – similar to above. I can believe in you and your products, they make sense, I can trust your website and what you're saying.

Online and website credibility are very important if they want me to “touch their website.” Also very important if you want me to order anything from you online.

Participant 7

The seventh subject interviewed was a 33-year old male named Mark who works as a civil engineer. He indicated that he uses the internet on a regular basis for work, e-mail and social purposes, as well as information gathering, research and online shopping. The participant chose the following two websites for discussion: www.rei.com and www.reimerseeds.com.

www.rei.com – likes the site because of the layout. Easy to navigate and good breakdowns from main categories to sub categories. Good search engine for finding things. Can easily find what he wants and choose quickly. Coupons are often displayed on the site. Lots of product reviews as well and the people who use the site are the people who will write a review and mean it and have similar interests. Very logical in the site's layout in terms of starting broad and narrowing down. Good job displaying results of items you're looking for once you find them. Doesn't try and side sell you other items.

Likes the ease of navigation and product descriptions and reviews versus other sites. Also REI tests gear better before they sell items to others. They don't sell things that aren't good, only things they would use.

Site is trustworthy because they're tested by REI people; user comments are usually positive and if not, REI sometimes quits selling the item. REI puts the backpacker magazine ratings on the site. Believeable too, and transparent since anyone can review and they don't bad reviews down. Backpacker magazine award winners convey expertise in certain items. Site is dynamic in terms of the pictures you can see of items, various views, videos with in-store people, zoom in and out. Size guides also for items that are helpful.

The site is credible for reasons above and because connected to a store he can walk into. Can order online and pick up in the store. REI has a very generous return policy and things can be easily returned at the store instead of being shipped back.

Expect to see user reviews on all sites, search box with search results that work, navigation across the top with ability to drill down and this site has all of those.

Knows enough about REI to feel comfortable of the website's credibility. Has called the phone number and didn't have to look for it on this site because it's at the top of the home page. The people were helpful. These things influence his perception's on the site's credibility. Other people talk about REI too and they send catalogs in the mail, all which help reinforce too.

Yes, perception of the website would be different if he didn't know anything about REI because weary of sites he doesn't know, especially for paying for things online. If he didn't know anything about the company behind the site, he'd call the phone

number and look for contact information. See that you can go to the store and see that they have stores makes him feel better. Also easy to navigate. Can research them too and see their long history.

For other sites and determining credibility, wants them to be in English. Looks for a physical address and contact info. Based in the US. If they accept Paypal then feels better about purchasing online.

Yes, larger and more well-known companies are more credible because they have more to lose. Have physical addresses and stores more often. Often times you've heard of them before and you know them. They have history.

www.reimerseeds.com – doesn't like that there is no navigation drill down menu across the type. Doesn't know the company very well, just stumbled across the site. Some of the items don't have pictures associated with them. The site does take PAYpal which is good, but sometimes links are broken or you try and add items to your cart and they don't go. You have to pay for expedited packing if you want your package to get shipped out quickly, or not, which is confusing and doesn't make you feel confident. Ordered something and some of the order wasn't included. Had to e-mail for customer service and they never responded.

Not logical and doesn't make sense in terms of navigation. Also because of broken links. This compared to other sites is bad because of the broken links – doesn't inspire confidence.

Not trustworthy or believable; expertise seems to be off the box versus real. Due to broken links, not many user reviews and not detailed. Descriptions are canned. Lack of

history and information on the company. Not likeable, and not very dynamic since pictures are minimal and descriptions are stock. Can't really sort items.

Site is not credible because of the broken links, lack of photos, lack of user reviews, stock descriptions. Lack of history on the company and familiarity with the company. Multiple clicks to find contact information and there is no phone number, and only a PO Box.

If there were outside sources reinforcing the company's credibility, that would influence his thoughts. Ads, reviews from friends, etc.

Yes, it's possible to formulate an idea of the brand behind an unknown website. Looks for a history or about us link. Can sometimes include links to outside articles or reinforcement.

Credibility – there's a feeling of trust that what you say you're going to deliver, you do. I believe I'm getting what you said you were going to deliver.

Website credibility – same definition as above, plus you attempt to explain to me why on the website this will happen using a company history or other similar information. Also need to see a way to contact the people running the site/company.

Online and website credibility is very important if you want me to read what you have and be influenced. If you want me to buy something, do something or believe something. I need to believe you're legit and honest or will think the opposite if you're not credible.

Participant 8

The eighth subject interviewed was a 40-year old male named John who works as a chemist. He indicated that he uses the internet on a regular basis for work, e-mail and social purposes, as well as information gathering, research and online shopping. The participant chose the following two websites for discussion: www.orbitz.com and www.news.google.com.

www.orbitz.com – easy to get to a place on the site where you can input information. Easy to search for lots of different things such as hotel, flights, cars, cruises. There are ads as well. Easy to search for flights – there are quick links with airport codes, calendars for inputting dates, buttons for choosing one way or round trip. Matrix with search results are easy to read based on airline, number of stops and price. Comparisons among airlines are easy to understand at a glance. On the side you can quickly and easily update your search terms. Good design and layout, including navigation across the top.

Difficult to compare prices on other similar websites as well as other variables such as number of stops and airlines. Orbitz summarizes in a more easily understood way. Don't have to click around to get the information on Orbitz. Site is easy to use and logical, and makes sense.

The site is believable because it shows a lot of different information upfront. It shows many different airlines instead of just a few. Appears to convey expertise and he believes what information is listed, although he doesn't know if these are the actual prices and flights if he went to the actual airline websites. Seems believable and trustworthy because it's showing comparison data and because it's showing the actual logo pictures of the airlines versus text only so looks convincing. He's used the site successfully to purchase flights and has cross-checked other flights in the past and seen

that Orbitz had the best prices and flight selection. The site is dynamic enough without being annoying. You can click on different things and easily modify search terms. Can click on search results to see specifics of the flights being chosen.

The site is credible because the breadth of different information being provided. Orbitz is a comprehensive clearing house for the information and it's available all at once from various sources. Highly credible for information gathering but less convenient for purchasing so he usually purchases tickets on the actual airline sites. Doesn't see a conflict of interest in airlines advertising on the site that also return in the search results. Southwest flights aren't listed on this site but that doesn't necessarily impact thoughts on the site's credibility.

In general when going to websites: likes to see a link to contact information with an easy-to-find phone number. Sometimes it's hard to get a quick e-mail response so wants to be able to call as an additional option. Websites without phone numbers seem like they may be hiding from you. Expects to see ads but doesn't miss them if they're not there. Expects navigation to be across the top. Doesn't like to scroll to the bottom to find all the links for a website. Links should be visible and easy to find. Doesn't like to see ads that pop up and are hard to get rid of. Ads that don't obscure content are less obtrusive.

Sites that don't include lots of search results and various options seem suspicious and less credible. Ads can be dealt with if the site is likeable enough. Sometimes ads just seem less convenient versus less credible. Same with scrolling and navigating through too much information: can be very inconvenient.

Don't know much about Orbitz but have heard others refer to it in the past. Knows other people who use the site and he trusts their opinion which made him see the site as more credible. Orbitz branded themselves effectively which makes him want to use the website by making a product people wanted to use.

If he's never heard of the Orbitz name before, he would have done a lot of outside searching to confirm the information being brought up on the website to see if the information on Orbitz was accurate. If this checked out he would have felt ok with the credibility as long as outside sources could confirm the information.

The credibility of the website isn't important until he has to make a decision such as purchasing or other actions. Isn't very concerned in general with the face value of a website's credibility. Doesn't normally check into the background of a website in terms of its credibility. For companies he doesn't know he checks the information and sources listed and determines if those sources are credible. Wants to know who is behind the site, probe deeper.

Branding is an effective means of motivating consumers so probably is influenced by larger and more well-known companies compared to smaller and lesser known companies in terms of their credibility. Tends to trust more well-known sites more because they've often been around longer and have outside factors that add to their credibility.

Google News – the site is laid out in a user-friendly way. Color coded based on different types of news (world news, science/technology, etc). Pictures pull over from the article but the photos aren't always very relevant or useful. Sometimes the photos seem incorrect. Content is drawn from many different sources so they are unbiased and

comprehensive. Problem is that many of the sources are not recognizable so he doesn't know if they're credible. Some of the sources are international as well. Problem is the credibility of the sites. Under some of the stories there are links that are somewhat confusing in terms of where they lead to and what they say. Some of the teasers for the stories are a bit short so hard to determine what the stories are about.

Site is logical but the credibility of the sources and the content itself that makes him want to use another site. The site is modestly trustworthy because he doesn't recognize all the sources used, and the story teasers are short so can't always skim as much as he wants to. Some expertise conveyed depending on the source cited. Visuals aren't always believable or trustworthy because photos seem random and like they aren't always related to the stories. Not terribly dynamic because it's just a collection of links versus lots of interactive information. More like a portal compared to other news sites that have ads, scrolling stories and headlines, videos, carefully selected photos, polls and a navigation bar.

The Google brand is very credible but Google News lacks credibility because sources he doesn't recognize sources he doesn't know. Expects that from a search on Google but not their news site. This site doesn't necessarily include the elements he likes to see on websites including contact information, navigation across the top, etc.

He is familiar with the Google brand but it doesn't influence his thoughts on the Google News site. Goes back to the sources associated with the information on the site. Would find the site even less credible if the Google name was not attached to it because he trusts the Google search engine and thinks that translates over in part to the news that they find.

Credibility – his propensity to believe information being presented to him; the extent to which you are convinced something's true.

Website credibility – the extent to which you believe the information on a website is true based in part on the way it looks and is laid out. Has to do with the believability of the sources behind the site also.

Importance online and on a website – very important if he's making a decision based on the information he's seeing or gathering compared to just being entertained.