

FACTORS INFLUENCING PERCEPTION OF MEDIA CREDIBILITY IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract

The media credibility construct is a complex and multidimensional concept. Source, receiver and message – they all interact in the assessment of credibility of media. It is clear that information providers should pay attention to aspects of the source of the information if they want to ensure that users see their information as credible and therefore useful. It is also evident that the medium of delivery has an impact on credibility assessment. Audience characteristics are also important: audiences that are already receptive to a message will be more likely to view the information as credible.

In this study, we are shifting away from the properties of the source and the message and focusing on the properties of the audience.

A survey with 560 respondents was conducted to determine the factors influencing media credibility in Slovakia in terms of gender, income, age and education. The results suggest general moderate credibility of the media in all key demographic and socioeconomic groups. Slovaks viewed media as unfair with relatively low level of trustworthiness and easy to be manipulated. The strongest attributes of media are the presentation and ability to act fast. Perception of credibility varies somewhat by age, education, and gender. Older consumers have the most confidence in media across all the age groups, Slovaks with higher education have lower confidence in media compared to those with less education and women in general perceive higher trust in media.

Communication professionals have been facing various challenges and one of them is how to win the audience. Past studies suggest that credibility could be the key. Therefore, credibility can be suggested as one of the key factors driving the traffic of individuals to certain media.

Keywords: Media, Credibility, Demographic Factors.

1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of media credibility has been studied in various academic disciplines like media science, psychology, sociology, marketing or business studies. According to Wathen and Burkell (2002, pp. 134-144), media credibility is generally an interaction of source characteristics (e.g., expertise, trustworthiness), message characteristics (related to message content, encompassing factors such as plausibility, internal consistency, and quality), and receiver characteristics (e.g., cultural background, previous beliefs).

O'Keefe (1990, pp. 133) defined credibility as "judgments made by a perceiver (e.g., a message recipient) concerning the believability of a communicator". Wathen and Burkell (2002, pp. 134-144) define credibility as believability. Hilligoss and Rieh (2008, pp. 1467-1484) identified multiple constructs of credibility that characterize conceptualizations or definitions of credibility: truthfulness, believability, trustworthiness, objectivity, and reliability. Trustworthiness captures perceived "goodness and morality of the source" (Tseng

and Fogg, 1999, pp. 39-44). Believability refers to people's confidence in the truth of information without having some form of absolute proof, whereas reliability, and truthfulness are related concepts influencing believability (Hilligoss and Rieh, 2008, pp. 1467-1484). Objectivity is a standard that promotes the truth (Boudana, 2011, pp. 385-398).

The concept of credibility is not new and has been present since the ancient Greece when it was studied how the speakers could persuade audience members. However, studies of the credibility of mass media started when radio became a competitor to newspapers. Another change of media consumption occurred after television was introduced and recently, the rise of the Internet has led to credibility studies comparing traditional sources with this emerging medium (Merabi, Ali, and Hassan, 2010). Today, the scope of credibility research has expanded to studying social media such as Twitter, Youtube, blogs or Wikipedia.

Media credibility research traditionally follows either the medium or the source approach. Medium credibility research focuses on the medium through which a message is delivered as a key predictor of audience evaluation. The source credibility approach focuses on the actual source of the message (Golan and Baker, 2012, pp. 31-43). Gunther (1992, pp. 147-167) identified an alternative approach to the study of media credibility, shifting away from the properties of the source and focusing on the properties of the audience. Eveland and Shah (2003, pp. 101-117) added that research of individual level predictors of media credibility is now emerging as a prominent subfield within media credibility.

Researchers point to a variety of demographic and psychographic variables that may account for media credibility evaluations, including income, race, age, political ideology, religion and gender. According to a Gallup survey (www.naturalnews.com), two in 10 young Americans have higher confidence in television news, compared to seniors. Young adults have the most confidence in newspapers across all the age groups. In addition, Americans with more education have lower confidence in TV news compared to those with less education. Women in general have higher confidence. Golan and Kioussis (2010, pp. 84-98) found a correlation between religiosity and perception of media credibility. People with higher religiosity found the news media more credible than those with lower religiosity. On the other hand, according to Gallup findings (www.naturalnews.com), Mormons did not agree that the news media were credible, trustworthy or got their facts straight. Based on a research from Bucy (2003, pp. 247-264) college students found television news and online news more credible than older media consumers. Older participants, however, found online news to be more credible than television news. Past studies from Mulder (1981, pp. 635-638) suggest that males and those with high levels of education, income, and media use tend to be the most critical of the media in general.

2. METHODOLOGY

The primary emphasis of this study is to understand how the media credibility is tied to individual factors such as age, income of education. This study proposes that one's demographic features can affect credibility.

The sample of this study consists of 560 Slovak respondents and they were chosen on principles of convenience sampling. It is non-probability sampling technique where subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher. It is fast, inexpensive and easy technique. Data were collected from January to March 2015 in Slovakia and the instrument for data collection was a questionnaire.

To determine the overall attitude towards Slovak media, respondents were presented an open-ended question "How would you describe Slovak media in terms of credibility?" To examine if demographic factors do have an influence on media perception, gender, age, income and education data were collected. Likert scale, as a very common and easy tool for measuring attitudes, was used to determine the individual media credibility perception and the statement was "I trust Slovak media". The scale ranged from -2 (absolutely disagree) to +2 (absolutely agree). A series of chi-square tests were performed to examine the relationship between credibility and demographic factors. We used an alpha level of .05 to test the null hypothesis that the variables are independent. The data were evaluated in SPSS.

3. RESULTS

Slovaks have shown overall moderate trust in media ($\mu = 0.6$). They described media as unfair (21%), with relatively low level of trustworthiness (18%), easy to be manipulated (11%), corrupt (8%), not telling the truth (5%). The strongest attributes of media are the presentation (13%) and ability to act fast (16%), believability (18%) and professionalism (14%).

Both negative and positive attitudes were noticed and to have further insights into credibility perception we examined if these attitudes differ across various demographic features.

Table 1. I trust Slovak media vs. gender

	absolutely disagree	disagree	do not know	agree	absolutely agree	
female	65	44	26	103	51	289
male	62	91	15	52	51	271
Chi-square 35.62 df 4 P <.0001						

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between perception of media credibility and gender. The relation between these variables was significant, $X^2(4, N = 560) = 35.62$, $p <.0001$. Women are more likely to trust Slovak media than men.

Table 2. I trust Slovak media vs. income

	absolutely disagree	disagree	do not know	agree	absolutely agree	
less than 500	21	68	31	79	22	221
501-1000	15	66	32	59	25	197
1001-2000	11	27	19	19	16	92
more than 2000	6	11	15	12	6	50
Chi-square 18.82 df 12 P 0.093						

When examining the income and perception of media credibility, the overall attitudes were rather neutral. We can see that the rate of disagreement and agreement is similar. The chi-square test performed on a 5 percent significance level found no differences between the income groups and their attitudes. The relation between the variables was not significant, $X^2(12, N = 560) = 18.82$, $p=0.093$. Since one of the expected frequencies in this test is smaller than 5, the results must be interpreted with caution.

Table 3. I trust Slovak media vs. age

	absolutely disagree	disagree	do not know	agree	absolutely agree	
18-29	31	85	22	52	7	197
30-45	52	67	23	31	30	203
46-59	15	17	8	36	18	94
> 60	7	15	3	24	17	66
Chi-square 68.98 df 12 P <.0001						

Majority of the youngest respondents clearly do not trust Slovak media and we can see the same attitudes in the group of 30-45 years of age, where more than 50 percent do not think media in Slovakia are credible. More trust is shown in the older respondents where the attitudes shift to trusting the media. To examine if the various attitudes are significantly different across the given age groups a chi-square test of independence was performed. The relation between these variables was significant, $X^2(12, N = 560) = 68.98$, $p <.0001$. Slovaks older than 45 years trust media more than the younger age groups.

Table 4. I trust Slovak media vs. education

	absolutely disagree	disagree	do not know	agree	absolutely agree	
elementary	5	10	0	31	13	59
secondary	25	96	51	103	27	302
university	41	69	26	33	30	199
Chi-square 62.44 df 8 P <.0001						

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between perception of media credibility and education. The relation between these variables was significant, $X^2(8, N = 560) = 62.44$, $p <.0001$. Slovaks with elementary education have relatively high level of trust in media whereas those with secondary education have shown overall neutral level of trust. Slovaks with university degree have lower confidence in media compared to those with less education.

4. DISCUSSION

Media credibility is a complex and multidimensional concept. Source, receiver and message – they all have an influence in the process of media credibility assessment. It is undoubtful that the source of the message

has an impact on credibility assessment. Furthermore, the message itself is critical for information credibility. Its message should be consistent and clearly presented. Audience characteristics are also important: people who are already receptive to a message have higher probability to view the information as credible. For all media marketers it is crucial to know their audience in order to offer them the right content. Audiences differ across various demographic features and so do their attitudes toward specific media. We tried to examine if demographic factors do have an influence on media credibility perception. Based on the research results, the demography plays an important role in media trust. Perception of credibility varies by age, education, and gender. The only factor with no differences in credibility perception was the income. Slovaks with the highest level of trust in Slovak media are more likely women, older than 45 years of age and with elementary education. Slovaks who do not find Slovak media credible are most likely men, younger than 45 years of age with university education.

Slovaks viewed media as unfair with relatively low level of trustworthiness and easy to be manipulated. The strongest attributes of media are the presentation and ability to act fast. The results suggest general moderate credibility of the media overall, but the key is to look at the differences in the key demographic and socioeconomic groups.

The presented study makes contributions to perception of media credibility in Slovak audience. However, a number of important limitations need to be considered. First, the current research was not specifically designed to evaluate all the factors related media credibility. More research is required to determine the how factors such as the source or the message itself lead to the final credibility perception. Second, the research is not representative because of the sampling method and clearly; the sample may not represent any definable population larger than itself. Non-probability sampling is a good method to use when conducting a pilot study therefore; further research is required to obtain representative results. Thirdly, the generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations. A number of possible future studies using the same experimental set up would be a contribution to this topic.

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