ADVERTISING CREDIBILITY: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT
In a world of fierce competition and emergence internet as a powerful media, gaining the attention of the customer and persuading them to buy products and services is becoming difficult and important. Although, advertising has been proved to be effective in providing information, yet its credibility had been questioned consistently. Thus, it is important for the marketers to understand the concept of advertising credibility and the factors that enhance it. The paper reviews, synthesizes and integrates the substantial literature on advertising credibility, source credibility and media credibility and addresses the issues relating to their conceptualization and measurement. The paper finds the two gaps in the literature. First, the relationship between credibility and skepticism towards advertising has never been established. Second, the dimensions of advertising credibility along with the multidimensional scale needs to be developed.

KEY WORDS: Advertising, Credibility, Media, Source.

Everyday people encounter information from friends, colleagues, books, newspapers, television, websites, etc. But all information is not equally useful/valuable. Some information is more trustworthy and better than others. Therefore, people have to decide which information is more credible. The concept of credibility has received considerable attention since the late 1990s when the internet began providing a new information interaction environment that allowed users to seek for information and communicate with others in ways never been possible. As a consequence the researchers and practitioners in diverse fields including information science, marketing, management information systems, communication studies and psychology have examined credibility from a variety of different perspectives (Riehand Danielson, 2007). Credibility as an area of research became popular amongst researchers for its role in persuasion process. In information science, credibility has been understood as one of the criteria of relevance judgment used when making the decision to accept or reject retrieved information (Riehand Danielson, 2007). Communication researchers have, on the other hand, been examining credibility as the research agenda distinguishing message credibility, source credibility and media credibility (Metzger et al., 2003). Credibility has been defined as believability, trust, reliability, accuracy, fairness, objectivity, and dozens of other concepts and combination thereof (Self, 1996). It refers to a person’s perception of the truth of a piece of information (Eisend, 2006). It also has been defined in terms of characteristics of persuasive sources, characteristics of the message structure and content, and perceptions of media (Metzger et al., 2003). Some studies focus on the characteristics that make sources or information worthy of being believed, while others examine the characteristics that make sources or information likely to be believed (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007).
Hilligoss and Rieh (2007) gave a unifying framework of credibility assessment which included three levels of credibility judgments: construct, heuristics and interaction. The construct level pertains to how a person constructs, conceptualizes or defines credibility. It is the most abstract level and as such involves brand notions of credibility that influence the person’s judgments. The heuristics level involves general rules of thumb used to make judgments of credibility. This level is fairly general, being broad enough to apply to a variety of situations rather specific to any particular situation. The interaction level refers to credibility judgments based on specific source or cues.

Table 1
Three levels of credibility assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Influence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construct</td>
<td>Conceptualizations of credibility</td>
<td>• Truthfulness</td>
<td>Provides a particular point of view for judgment credibility</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Believability</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Trustworthiness</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Objectivity</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reliability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heuristics</td>
<td>General rules of thumb that are broadly applicable to a variety of situations</td>
<td>• Media related</td>
<td>Provides useful ways of finding information conveniently and making credibility judgment quickly</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Source-related</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Endorsement-based</td>
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<td>• Aesthetics-based</td>
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<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Specific attributes associated with particular information objects and sources for credibility judgments</td>
<td>• Content cues</td>
<td>Provides useful ways of finding information source or object characteristics on which to base a judgment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Peripheral source cues</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Peripheral information objet cues</td>
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(Hilligoss and Rieh (2007))

CREDIBILITY AND RELATED TERMS

Credibility and Authority: Wilson’s (1983) theory of cognitive authority is closely related to the concept of credibility. Both feature trustworthiness and competence as their main components. Wilson argues that what people know of the world, beyond the narrow range of their own lives, is only what others have told them. People do not, however, count all hearsay as equally reliable. Only those who are deemed to “know what they are talking about” are recognized as cognitive authorities. Wilson claims that people do not attribute cognitive authority exclusively to individuals. Credibility differs from cognitive authority and information quality, while being closely related to these two concepts. Cognitive authorities are those people who actually exert influence on other people’s thoughts by being recognized as proper (Wilson, 1983). According to Wilson, an authority’s influence is thought proper because “he is thought credible, worthy of belief”. Cognitive authorities are clearly among those who are considered to be credible sources. A person may be recognized as credible in an area even if not exerting influence on other people’s thoughts. In Wilson’s words, “those we think credible constitute the potential pool of cognitive authorities on which we might draw” (Wilson, 1983). Wilson claims that people do not attribute cognitive authority
Credibility and Trust: It can be difficult to discuss credibility without referring to trust or trusting behaviours and vice versa. Historically, trust has been a core construct in many conceptualizations of credibility (Hovland et al., 1953). Tseng and Fogg (1999) point out that, although credibility and trust have sometimes been used interchangeably, they should not be considered synonymous. Trust is different from credibility because “trust indicates a positive belief about the perceived reliability of, dependability of, and confidence in a person, object, or process”. Tseng and Fogg further distinguish between the general concept of trust and “trust in information” (p. 41). Trust frequently refers to a set of beliefs, dispositions, and behaviors associated with the acceptance of risk and vulnerability. Credibility refers to a perceived quality of a source, which may or may not result in associated trusting behaviours.

Credibility and Reputation: Reputation is a closely related but differentiable term to credibility, especially in the context of a firm. Herbig and Milewicz (1995), explained reputation as the estimation of the consistency overtime of an attribute of an entity. The authors summarized the distinction between reputation and credibility of a firm. They stated that credibility is the believability of the current intensions, whereas, reputation is a historical notion based on the sum of the past behaviours. They posited that if a firm enjoys good reputation for its quality products and services, it can achieve high advertisement credibility.

ADVERTISING CREDIBILITY
In Literature, rare attempts have been made to define and measure advertising credibility and generally have been considered to be closely related to the believability of the ad- claims. MacKenzie and Lutz (1989), defined advertising credibility as “consumer’s perceptions of the truthfulness and believability of advertising in general.” Their conceptualization and measurement of advertising credibility suggest that the construct refers to consumer’s generalized beliefs in the integrity of advertising claims (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Herbig and Milewicz (1995) suggested that credibility is related to the extend to which, what is said matches with what is done. In other words, if the product claims confirms with the performance, the credibility increases. Credibility exists when one can confidently use past actions to predict future behaviour (Herbig and Milewicz, 1995). This conceptualization is similar to one of the determinants of Ad credibility given by MacKenzie and Lutz (1989), i.e. ad-claim discrepancy (discussed below).

Distinguishing between advertising credibility and ad credibility, MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch (1986), posited credibility of Ad refers to how truthful or believable the audiences perceive the assertions made about the brand to be. The authors discussed the determinants of Ad Credibility: 1) the perceived claim discrepancy of the ad; 2) the credibility of the advertiser and; 3) the credibility of advertising in general.
Perceived Ad claim discrepancy is the degree to which the message recipient perceives a discrepancy between what is being claimed about the brand in the ad and the actual characteristics or benefits of the brand (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989). If the actual benefits fall short of the claimed benefits it results in damaging the credibility of the ad. This dimension is very close to the definition of credibility given by Herbig and Milewics (1996). The exaggerations in the ad may lead to consumer think that the ad is not credible. Message content is the evaluated by the customers keeping in mind the past experiences and/ or information with respect to the advertised brand.

Advertiser Credibility is the perceived truthfulness and honesty of the sponsor of the ad. “If the sponsor is credible, this ad is for the sponsor’s brand; therefore, the ad is credible. Advertising credibility represents consumer’s perception of the truthfulness and believability of advertising in general, not simply the particular Ad in question. It is one of the several perceptual dimensions along which consumers may assess advertising as institution.

Bae, Wright and Taylor (2001), gave the revised model of advertising credibility. They included the media credibility as a dimension of advertisement credibility. Their results also suggested that media credibility has positive impact on attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the brand and purchase intention. They concluded that advertisers can enhance the effectiveness of their advertisements by selecting a credible medium (Bae, Wright and Taylor, 2001)
With recognition of the influence of credibility on effective advertising, many researchers have attempted to conceptualize and measure the construct in a variety of contexts: source credibility, ad content credibility or message credibility and media credibility. More recently, Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) approached the construct of advertising credibility from an opposite direction, which they called “advertising skepticism.” They define skepticism toward advertising in general as “the tendency toward disbelief of advertising claims” and developed a 9-item Likert format scale to measure consumer skepticism toward advertising. Even though the authors did not explicitly mention the relationship between advertising skepticism and advertising credibility, the conceptual similarity to advertising credibility (i.e., belief or disbelief of advertising claims) and the similar items to the measures of advertising credibility (e.g., advertising is generally truthful, advertising is truth well told) suggest that advertising skepticism is not an unique construct from advertising credibility but the same construct which views advertising credibility from another way.

Measurement:
Amongst the earlier attempts to study the advertising credibility a technique was presented by Oehler to know how the public responds to advertising claims. Owing to the complexities of the measurement of advertising credibility, Oehler said “No foolproof means may ever be devised for measuring exactly the degree of credibility an advertising claim has attained or is likely to achieve”. The measuring technique he described did not produce the absolute information rather it tells the advertiser how his claim compares with others and whether the user of his brand thinks that the claim is valid in the sense of being particular valid for his product. His measurement included the responses of 600 housewives regarding three aspects of claims believability, validation and identification (Oehler, 1944). Rare have been attempts to measure advertising credibility with diagnostic, multi-item scales or to treat this construct as separate and distinct. In most cases, advertising credibility has been measured with a non-diagnostic single item (e.g., Calfee and Ringold, 1994) or with subscales of a measurement for attitude-toward -advertising-in-general (Muehling, 1987; Sandage and Leckenby, 1980; Shavitt, Lowrey and Haefner, 1998). The frequent items measuring advertising credibility include: most advertising is believable, ads usually present a true picture, and ads are reliable sources of information.
MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) measured this construct with three items: convincing-unconvincing, believable unbelievable, and biased-unbiased. The three scales were averaged.
to produce the advertising credibility index. Although this scale was the first attempt ever to measure advertising credibility objectively, but its validity is questionable as the author have used the same scale for measuring all the attitude and credibility constructs on a 7-point semantic differential scale (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989).

Greer (2003) measured credibility of ads using five items from Beltramini’s (1988) advertising believability scale: Unbelievable/ believable, not convincing/ convincing, not credible / credible, dishonest/honest, and untrustworthy/ trustworthy on a 5-point semantic differential scale.

**SOURCE CREDIBILITY**

Credibility of the source of product information has been an important concern among advertisers and advertising researchers. Source credibility has been defined as the judgements made by perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator. In other words, it is the degree of confidence the receiver of the message has in the source of the message. Ohanian (1990) defined source credibility in terms of communicator’s positive characteristics that affect the receiver’s acceptance of the message. McDougall and Fry (1975) discussed the nature of the construct and posited that source credibility may be situation specific in that the relevant elements of credibility are dependent on the type of source, the situation and the audiences goals. Most of the studies found two dimensions of source credibility, expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis and Kelly, 1953). Expertise is defined as the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions. It the communicator’s qualification or ability to know the truth about a topic (Hovland, Janis and Kelly, 1953). In other words, it is the ability to provide accurate information coming from the knowledge, experience, training or skills a source possesses (Erdogan, 1999). Trustworthiness refers to the consumer’s confidence or belief in the communicator for carrying messages in an unbiased and honest manner (Hovland et al., 1953; Ohanian, 1990). It is the degree of confidence in the communicator’s motivation to communicate the assertions he considers most valid.

Source credibility in advertising research has been studied in two contexts: endorser/celebrity credibility and advertiser/corporate credibility. Research on endorser credibility heavily depends ontwo general models: the source credibility model and the source attractiveness model. The source credibility model originally developed by Hovland and his colleagues (1953) includes trustworthiness and expertise to be the dimensions underlying the endorser credibility construct. The source attractiveness model has its origin in the social-psychological research and is a component of source valance model of McGuire (1985). The attractiveness model contents that the effectiveness of a message depends on source familiarity, likability, and attractiveness to the respondents. Combining these two models Ohanian (1990), developed a scale to measure source credibility with underlying three dimensions i.e. expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness.

Other research has examined advertiser credibility, where the advertiser who manufactured the advertised product is seen as a source of the communication (Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989; Newell and Goldsmith, 2001). Advertiser have the communicative responsibilities including commissioning the ad, paying for it, approving it and being held legally liable for what is in the text (Stern, 1994). Newell and Goldsmith (2001) defined corporate credibility as the extent to which consumers feel that the firm has the knowledge or ability to fulfil its claims and whether the firm can be trusted to tell truth or not. Keller (1998) explained corporate credibility as the extent to which consumers believe that a firm can design and deliver products and services that satisfy customer needs and wants. Similar to endorser credibility, advertiser credibility is considered composed of expertise and trustworthiness (Keller, 1998; Goldsmith, Lafferty and Newell, 2000; Newell
and Goldsmith, 2001). Expertise is understood as the extent to which consumers feel that
the firm has the knowledge or ability to fulfill its claims and trustworthiness as whether the firm
can be trusted to tell the truth or not (Newell and Goldsmith, 2001).

Source credibility had been measured as a multidimensional construct. However, the
dimensions given by different authors are different. Berlo, Lemert and Mertz (1969) gave
three dimensions: safety, qualifications and dynamism which are measured on various bi-
polar adjectives. Endorser credibility is often measured by the semantic differential items, for
instance: experienced/unexperienced, knowledgeable/unknowledgeable, and
qualified/unqualified for expertise; honest/dishonest, dependable/undependable, and
trustworthy/untrustworthy for trustworthiness; and attractive/unattractive, beautiful/ugly, and
plain/elegant for attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990; Lafferty and Goldsmith, 2000).

Newell and Goldsmith (2001), developed a two dimensional scale for measuring corporate credibility.
The expertise of the firm was measured by statements such as: XYZ corporation has a great
amount of experience, XYZ corporation is skilled in what they do, XYZ has great expertise,
XYZ does not have great experience. The trustworthiness dimension was measured by four
items: I can trust XYZ corporation, XYZ makes truthful claims, XYZ is honest, I do not
believe what XYZ tells me (Newell and Goldsmith, 2001).

MESSAGE CREDIBILITY
The literature are placed a lot of emphasis on conceptualization and measurement of source
credibility, but message credibility, despite of various attempts lacks a clear definition and
operationalization. There are a few scholars who have dealt with ad content credibility, ad
claim discrepancy and various theories related to information acceptance and processing. Ad
content credibility has been considered a key attribute of effective advertising because
consumers will not act in the desired manner unless they accept or believe ad claims.

MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) define ad content credibility as “the extent to which the
consumer perceives claims made about the brand in the ad to be truthful and believable.” It
involves acceptance of the statements and in part is related to the similarity between the
communicator and the audience’s position (McDougall and Fry, 1975). Advertiser credibility
and advertising claim discrepancy combine to affect the ad credibility (Lutz, 1985; Lutz,
Mackenzie and Belch 1983; Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989). Goldberg and Hartwick, presented a
study to extend Lutz’s work. They systematically manipulated the advertiser credibility and
advertising claim extremity to test the interactive effects of these factors on ad credibility and
product evaluation. The results showed that the relationship between claim extremity and ad
credibility being more strongly negative for those given the negative reputation description
than for those given the positive description of the firm (Goldberg and Hartwick, 1990).

Attribution theory, which posits that individuals attribute events in his environment to
underlying causes, has been relevant and mostly referred to while development of persuasive
messages in advertising. A persuasive message can be regarded as an event (effect) by the
audiences, the causes of which are attributed to advertiser’s motive to sell or the actual
characteristics of the products or services. When the advertisers consistently say establishes
superiority in their advertising claims, the audiences attribute these claims to advertiser’s
desire to sell the product. Whereas, when the advertiser’s claims superiority over a few
characteristics, the confidence rating by the audiences improves which inturn increases the
credibility (Roering and Paul, 1976).

The literature on message credibility indicates three categories of factors influencing message
credibility: message structure (how the various components of the message have been
arranged), message content (information quality, language intensity) and message delivery
(the way in which the message is presented by the source). Ambiguous information and
information that is unable to be validated, will be perceived as less credible (Cronkhite and
Liska, 1976). In terms of message characteristics researchers have examined the influence of message comprehensibility, number of arguments, incentives, fear appeals, repetition and presentation style on recipient’s attitude change. Many of these factors not only influence persuasion but also affect the credibility assessments (Slater and Rouner, 1997). Rare attempts have been made to measure the message credibility by the researchers. However, the impact of message credibility on source credibility or advertising effectiveness have been checked by manipulation various components of an advertisement. Smith (1978) gave the message measurement inventory (MMI) to evaluate receiver’s perceptions of message including message credibility. But, this included items such as confident, passive, uncooperative, which is more relevant in measuring source credibility rather than message credibility.

MEDIA CREDIBILITY

Media credibility was included in the Ad credibility model by Bae, Wright and Taylor (2001). Advertising medium credibility has been defined in terms of consumer’s perception of the average believability of a channel’s overall advertising content (Kiousis, 2001). The credibility of a medium will be influenced by the credibility of the surrounding programming or editorial environment (Chook, 1985) and in turn will affect the advertising effectiveness. Each medium has its own effectiveness and personality, so it is logical to suggest that different media will have different levels of intrinsic credibility Prendergast, Liu and Poon (2009). Some researchers argue that internet is the least credible advertising medium as anyone can put anything online and it is generally difficult to verify the message (Marshall and WoonBong, 2003).

Findings from previous studies reveal contradictory results regarding the credibility of different media. A few studies suggest that traditional media such as newspapers, television, radio are more credible medium than new forms of media i.e. internet and mobile. In their article, Prendergast, Liu and Poon (2009), applied the pairwise technique for testing the credibility scores of different media and found that radio, broadcast television and cable television are perceived to be most credible advertising medium by the interviewees and the internet and direct mail were perceived as least credible media. In another article authors examined the differences in consumer’s perception of advertising credibility for five media – newspapers, television, radio, magazines and the internet and the moderating role of persuasion knowledge in those perceptions. The results indicated that the advertising credibility was the highest for traditional media and lowest for the internet (Rodgers, 2005). Becker, Martino, and Towers (1976) found that newspapers were perceived as the most credible advertising medium and that advertising credibility varied as a function of two audience demographics: age and media use. Younger consumers perceived few differences across ad media; older consumers perceived large differences. Media use was also positively associated with credibility perceptions, and consumers perceived credibility differences across advertising media depending on their primary source of local information. Soh, Reid and King (2007), examined trust in different advertising media and the relationship of that trust to media credibility and found consumer trust in advertising media and media credibility are associated constructs, though trust in advertising is separate and different from credibility. Across five advertising media, media credibility was consistently associated with media specific trust, indicating that the credibility of the medium and trust in medium are directly related.

The dimensionality of media credibility has not been explored in past and its impact has been measured on various ad effectiveness factors by comparing the advertising credibility in different media. Kiousis (2001), measured media credibility by five indicators in the context of news information: factual, extent to which it is motivated by money, invades with people’s
privacy, concern for community and can be trusted. But this measure is not appropriate in the advertising context. Moore and Rodger (2005) measured advertising credibility by a three item scale: advertising generally tell the truth, you can generally believe what you read in ad, I usually find advertisement to be quite credible. Prendergast, Liu and Poon (2009), measured the construct by three statements: I think advertisement in XXX are credible, I think advertisement in XXX are exaggerated, I think advertisement in XXX are unbelievable.

Summary and Suggestions
The review of literature throws light on the model of ad credibility and identifies three contexts in which advertising credibility has been studied, i.e. message credibility, source credibility and media credibility. The literature also distinguishes between advertising credibility and ad credibility. Various researchers have studied the dimensions underlying ad credibility, but no such model has been developed for advertising credibility. The only domain described in literature is related to advertising perceptions which affects the consumer’s perception of advertising credibility. Although the literature on source credibility is very vast, the conceptualization of message credibility and media credibility needs to be explored. Also the causal relationship between advertising credibility, media credibility, ad content credibility and source credibility needs to be studied.

References


